

*Christ's Universal/Local Church**1 Corinthians 1:2 (b)**Jimmy Snowden**Introduction/Recap*

This week we will be finishing up what we started last week in verse 2. Last week you will remember that we began to consider the four ways in which Paul identifies the Corinthian church. You would think, in light of the rest of this letter, that Paul would identify them in light of their many failures. But what we saw was that Paul identified the Corinthians in the same way that he identified himself in vs. 1; he identified them most chiefly in terms of their relation with Jesus. Paul identifies himself as “an apostle **of Jesus Christ**” in vs. 1, and then identifies the Corinthian church in four ways in vs. 2: 1. as God’s possession (“To God’s church at Corinth”), 2. as “those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus”, 3. as “saints by calling” and 4. as one among many. Paul sees the believers in Corinth primarily in terms of their relation with Christ. This is why he can call them sanctified and saints and brethren in spite of their many sins. Paul saw them through the eyes of Christ.

*Implication of Sanctification*

Before moving on to the last part of 1:2 I want to lay forth one of the major implications of the fact of sanctification. Paul identifies the Corinthian church as ‘those who are sanctified.’ As discussed last week, to be sanctified in Christ means that we are ‘set apart for His redemptive purposes’. Paul is not here commanding the Corinthians to become sanctified nor is he speaking of sanctification as if it were a process; rather, he speaks of sanctification as a part of their very identity. That is why he refers to them as ‘saints.’ You will remember that a saint is merely a ‘sanctified one’. In Christ Jesus the Christians at Corinth have been set apart from the defilement of the world for God’s use.

I explained what it means to be ‘set apart’ (or sanctified) by using the illustration of expensive chinaware dishes. Women, if you were to walk into the kitchen to find your husband microwaving a plate of nachos on one of your expensive chinaware serving dishes would you not scold him? Of course you would! You would say, “What are you doing? You know that that our china is not to be used on just any occasion. These dishes are ‘set apart’; they are to be used only in the most specialist of occasions.” These are sanctified dishes, holy dishes; they are set apart for a special purpose. So are we. We have been set apart (sanctified or made holy) in Christ for His use.

You see, I am not my own. I am His, and He has set me apart for His use. So often we fall into this mindset that my life is mine to do what I want with. But this cuts at the very heart of what it means to be ‘sanctified in Christ Jesus.’ We are set apart for Him. Do you see yourself as a servant of Him and His glory, or do you see yourself primarily as a servant of yourself? Paul makes this implication of sanctification clear to the Corinthians in 6:19-20;

Do you not know that your body is a sanctuary of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought at a price, therefore glorify God in your body.

I am not my own; I am His. I have been bought by Him and He has set me apart for His use. We think that since we can make decisions that decisions are ours to make. But this just isn't true. Just because you are able to choose whatever you want does not mean that you have the moral right to choose whatever you want. I am afraid that many in America have unsuccessfully attempted to marry the Gospel with the values of the American dream—we have tried to wed the American dream with the call of discipleship. The American dream calls individuals to fulfill their own dreams no matter how selfish those dreams may be while the discipleship call of Jesus centers on self-denial (Luke 9:23); the American dream calls individuals to pursue health, wealth, and prosperity while Jesus' call to discipleship is a call to 'lose his life for Me' (Luke 9:24); the American dream is the ultimate pursuit of self-centered fulfillment while Jesus' call of discipleship is the ultimate pursuit of selfless and sacrificial service and unconditional love (Luke 9:23-26; Philippians 2:3-11).

The two cannot and must not be wed. This does not mean that we cannot enjoy the plenty that God has given us (see 1 Timothy 4:1-5) but it does mean that we must grow in our ability to distinguish the Gospel call from the American dream and reject those aspects of the American dream that cut at the heart of Jesus' call of discipleship. What American Christians generally do, though, is water down Jesus' radical statements in order to find some sort of compatibility between the two so that the two pursuits may be seen as one and the same. This only results in a domesticated Gospel that looks good but is powerless to save or transform.

This was exactly the problem with the Corinthian church; they were trying to wed their cultural values with the values of the Gospel. This is the root of their many problems as a church and as individuals. As David E. Garland says, "The problem was not that the church was in Corinth but that too much of Corinth was in the church."<sup>1</sup> They were not acting as those who had been set apart. They were holding two mutually contradictory systems together. This is why the church was in such disarray—they were not living as 'set apart' servants of Him. They had a selfish view of things. They had the mindset of; "How can I exploit Christ and His church to advance myself" instead of having the mindset of a servant; "What, Lord, can I give or do to make Jesus famous?" Am I (are you) a contributor to the cause of Christ or a hindrance. There is a time to be served (apart from our receiving Christ's service on our behalf we would still be in our sins—John 13:8), but there is a great deal of difference between exploiting Christ and His church for selfish ends and humbly benefiting from the ministry of others.

### *One Among Many*

Lastly, Paul identifies them in terms of their relationship to the body of Christ at large. Look at the text with me.

To God's church at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus and called as saints, with all those in every place who call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord—theirs and ours.

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<sup>1</sup> David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*; Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 8. Garland is citing Gordon D. Fee in this statement. Fee originally said, "Although they were the Christian church in Corinth, an inordinate amount of Corinth was yet in them." See Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*; The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 4.

Paul is here reminding the Corinthians that they are not alone. They are part of something much larger than themselves. Anthony C. Thisselton explains the Corinthian church's need to be reminded of their part in the larger body of Christ. He says, "the church in Corinth is not a self-contained autonomous entity: they are not a self-sufficient community; they are not the only pebble on the beach."<sup>2</sup> We must have an understanding of our place in God's world; Who are we as a unique expression of God's kingdom and where we fit into the grand scheme of God's redemptive purposes. As Derek Thomas said (at the NECEP 2010 conference in Hampstead, NH); "every Christian has two zip codes." We have a local zip code (our place in the local body of Christ) and a universal zip code (our place in the cosmic kingdom of God).

In other words there we need to have both a macro and a micro view of things. You can imagine the difference between telescopes (macro view) and microscopes (micro view): telescopes are built to view the great expanse of God's power displayed in the stars and galaxy's while microscopes are built to view the great intricacy of God's incomparable intellect displayed in atoms, molecules and microbes. So shall our view of ourselves in God's vast kingdom be. We must not dig our heads so far into the microscope that we forget to see where we are in the context of the vast kingdom of God. This, I believe, is something that the Corinthian church struggled with.

Theologians have thus made a distinction between the universal church and the local church, or between the invisible church and the visible church. These categories are both helpful and biblical. When either one is emphasized to the neglect of the other problems are bound to come. You see Paul refer to the local (or visible) church in the first part of vs. 2 when he says, "To God's church at Corinth"; and then he refers to universal (or invisible) church in the second half of the verse; "with all those in every place who call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord—theirs and ours." Let's consider both of these aspects of the church. We will discuss the universal church first and then the local church.

### *The Universal Church*

The universal church is the Kingdom of God at large. It is comprised of every single person who has 'called on the name of the Lord' (1 Corinthians 1:2; Romans 10:13; Joel 2:32). Jesus speaks about the universal/invisible church in Matthew 16:18.

"I will build My church and the forces of Hades will not overpower it."

Jesus neither has a specific local church nor any specific groups of churches in mind when He speaks of building His church. He is rather speaking of the church as the whole sum of those for whom He came to die and save. We see the universal/invisible church mentioned also in Ephesians 5:22-27.

Wives, submit to your own husbands as to the Lord, 23 for the husband is head of the wife as also Christ is head of the **church**. He is the Savior of the body. 24 Now as **the church** submits to Christ, so wives should submit to their husbands in everything. 25 Husbands, love your wives, just as also Christ loved **the church** and gave Himself for her, 26 to make her holy, cleansing her in the washing of water by the word. 27 He did this to present **the church** in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but holy

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<sup>2</sup> Anthony C. Thisselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*; The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 74.

and blameless. In the same way, husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hates his own flesh, but provides and cares for it, just as Christ does for **the church**.

When Paul speaks of the ‘church’ here in Ephesians 5 he is clearly referring to universal church. He is not speaking of any one particular local church or network of local churches. One could say that Paul defines the church in 5:25 as the collective whole of every person for whom Jesus has died and saved. Mark Driscoll and Gary Breshears identify the universal church as “all God’s people in all times and places.”<sup>3</sup> At the second coming, Jesus will gather His church and all of God’s blood-bought kids will sing His praises for an eternity. Sovereign Grace Fellowship is just one small localized reflection of this massive meeting of the people of God. This massive meeting can at least be imagined in Revelation 19:6-8.

Then I heard something like the voice of a vast multitude, like the sound of cascading waters, and like the rumbling of loud thunder, saying: “Hallelujah—because our Lord God, the Almighty, has begun to reign! Let us be glad, rejoice, and give Him glory, because the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has prepared herself. She was permitted to wear fine linen, bright and pure.” For the fine linen represents the righteous acts of the saints.

There has never been anything like it. This will be the gathering of God’s saints made perfect by the blood of Christ. It will be the whole lot of God’s people, numbering in the millions upon millions upon millions, from every “tribe and language and people and nation” (Revelation 5:9)—red, yellow, black, white, men, women, businessmen, construction workers, children, camel salesman, etc. The list goes on and on and on. Every single person for whom Jesus has died and saved will be there singing the praises of Jesus.

And it will not be like the chanting and cheering at the Super Bowl. There are opposing sides at the Super Bowl. At this celebration there will be no nay-sayers. When the Patriots and the Giants go head to head there is a conflict in the cheering. Some cheer and some boo! When King Jesus gets final victory over sin, Satan, and death (which does not happen until Revelation 20, but is clearly set in motion in the Revelation 19 passage quoted above) there will only be the shout of acclamation. It will be a crowd unlike never seen before, and the crowd will be in complete passionate agreement as to the infinite worth of the Christ. With one voice all of the redeemed will passionately shout, “Jesus Christ is Lord!” (Philippians 2:11) and the Father will look on with a smile the size of the Milky Way, nodding His head in complete agreement. Revelation 19 is the church service of all church services.

Really, this is what we look forward to. We look forward to the ultimate gathering of all those for whom Jesus died and saved. What we look forward to is this great church service. Our church is only a tiny representation of this larger reality. At this church service we will see Jesus in His glorified state, and we will be surrounded by all the redeemed from every tongue, tribe and nation, and by all of God’s angels.

We must never lose sight of the fact that our little local church is not the ultimate focal point. It is a representation of this eternal church service. We must not be like the Corinthians by thinking ourselves to be the only pebble on the beach. We certainly are part of something much

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Driscoll and Gary Breshears, *Doctrine: What Christians Should Believe* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 307.

larger than ourselves. We must keep ourselves connected to God's larger, cosmic redemptive activity. The ministry of our church must not be confined to our own local area. It is imperative that we partner with other churches, missionaries, and people so that we do not lose sight of God's universal (not in the sense of universalism) purposes in Christ. God's work in our area and in our lives is only one tiny piece of what God is up to.

Here are a few things that we can do to keep ourselves from losing sight of our place in the vast expanse of God's kingdom: 1. get in touch with organizations like the *Voice of the Martyrs* (a ministry which informs the people of God in regard to how we can support and pray for persecuted Christians throughout the world), 2. financially support and commit to be faithful in praying for and corresponding with (through mail, email, or phone) foreign missionaries and local church planters, 3. create and foster Christ-focused relationships with other Christians in other local churches, and 4. continue in prayer for God's global mission (do this by maintaining the emphasis of the Lord's prayer—"Our Father in heaven, Your name be honored as holy. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." (Matthew 6:9-10)). We must never lose sight of the fact that we, the local church here in Boscawen, are only one small representation of God's cosmic plan of redemption.

### *The Local Church*

The local church is a representation of the universal church. This is not to say the universal church is more important than the local church. To suggest such a thing is rather absurd. While it is imperative that the local church not turn in on herself so much that she become blind to God's ultimate, cosmic purposes, we must not go to the other extreme by dismissing the essential role that the local church plays in fulfilling God's redemptive purposes. After all, the local church plays an irreplaceable role in the progress of the Gospel as a representation of the transforming and reconciling power of the Gospel to an on-looking world. Paul clearly speaks of the localized body at Corinth as a 'church' in 1:2; "To God's church at Corinth." Interestingly, God's church at Corinth was a conglomeration of house churches. It is also noteworthy that Paul speaks of a church that meets in the home of Prisca and Aquila in Romans 16:5. He says,

"Greet also the church that meets in their home".<sup>4</sup>

In Revelation 2-4 we see Jesus' highly specific letters to seven different churches in Asia Minor. It is clear that each of the seven churches are completely different; they each represent a unique slice of the culture, and each have their own unique strengths and weaknesses. Jesus does not see them as being so completely connected that one generalized letter will do the trick. Each respective church needs a unique letter that speaks to their own unique set of struggles. I want to draw your attention to Driscoll's and Breshear's definition of the local church.

The local church is a community of regenerated believers who confess Jesus Christ as Lord. In obedience to the Scriptures they organize under qualified leadership, gather regularly for preaching and worship, observe the biblical sacraments of baptism and Communion, are unified by the Spirit, are disciplined for holiness, and scatter to fulfill

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<sup>4</sup> A similar statement to Romans 16:5 is made in 1 Corinthians 16:19

the Great Commandment and the Great Commission as missionaries to the world for God's glory and their joy.<sup>5</sup>

The local church is God's representative spiritual authority in the world. The local church does not rule and advance by force, but rather through prayer, preaching/proclamation, accountability, and discipline. However the church may advance, it is clear that the local church is the medium through which Jesus seeks to build His universal church. The local church is the hub and center of God's activity in the world. It was a local church, the church at Antioch, that sent (commissioned) Paul out on his missionary journeys (Acts 13:1-2). I am no way suggesting that the local church is infallible. However, I will say that the local church is essential. God certainly works outside of the context of the local church, but this does not mean that the local church is replaceable. Paul even communicates the fact that God set up the local church to be the "pillar and foundation of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:16).<sup>6</sup>

We live in a day and age where the biblical centrality of the local church is not taken seriously. I have been amazed over the last few years how many times I have heard Christians question the importance of the local church. I hear more and more Christians—even highly motivated, doctrinally-minded, evangelistic Christians—question the centrality of the local church in God's New Covenant era. I have seen many Christians so overemphasize their commitment to the universal church that they dismiss the biblical mandate to submit and commit to a local body of believers. Such believers think themselves to be the spiritual cream of the crop. They see the local church as an unnecessary weight; as something which holds them back from growing to their fullest spiritual potential. Anyone who sees the people of God as a speed bump to their growth in Christ will never experience true growth. A believer who holds the church at arm's length, jumping from church to church, letting convenience and selfish consumerism dictate, will never grow in true Christ-like character.

A solid commitment to the universal church at the expense of any sort of a commitment to the local church is generally born out of a desire to selfishly come and go undetected, as is pleasing to the flesh. It is called convenient, self-serving fellowship. It is an indication of a desire to be served with no desire to joyfully join in the oft-times grueling blessing of mutual ministry. Many in our culture have been questioning the biblical precedent of the authority of the local church (as is clearly laid out in the Pastoral Epistles); however, this is not a matter of debatable conjecture. The local church, as structured and managed according to the pattern set forth in the Scriptures, is essential to biblical Christianity.

Consider with me for a moment what sort of a place the local church plays in God's redemptive purposes from the bible: The local Church is 1. the believer's safeguard against heresy as is evidenced by 1 Timothy 3:15 (and the rest of the Pastoral Epistles), 2. God's ordained plan for accountability and discipline as is evidenced by Matthew 18:15-20, 1 Corinthians 5:1-5, and 2 Corinthians 2:5-11, 3. God's ordained plan for the final perseverance of

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<sup>5</sup> Driscoll and Breshears, *Doctrine*, 307.

<sup>6</sup> Although this should not cause one to discredit the proper place of seminaries in the training of men and women for Gospel ministry, it certainly should cause us to step back and reconsider the role of seminaries when it comes to being the hub and center of biblical/theological training. Seminaries are well and good so long as they are not treated as a replacement training facility for the church. Seminaries are only beneficial in so far as they are treated as a supplement, a servant, to the ministry of the local church. That means that pastors and parents, not seminary professors, should be the primary instruments that God uses in the training up of men and women for Gospel ministry.

the saints as is evidenced in Hebrews 3:12-13 and Hebrews 10:24-25, and 4. God's representative presence in the world as is evidenced by John 17:20-23 and 2 Corinthians 3:1-3.

You cannot walk the Christian walk alone. You must be connected. If you are here this morning and you are not sacrificially committed to serving and loving unconditionally the people of God and unequivocally submitting yourself under the authority of the local church, 'do not let the grass grow under your feet'; commit yourself today. To live a life that reflects a lack of commitment to God's local church is to live a life of disobedience.

### *Conclusion*

Paul identified the Corinthians both in terms of their local identity and in light of their identity in the kingdom of God at large. It is essential that we catch Paul's vision of God's new covenant work in the world. Paul saw the church in a two-tier sense: the universal church and the local church. Our passion for the local church should never keep us from connecting ourselves to God's cosmic redemptive purposes in the world and to other believers in our neighboring communities; however, our passion for the universal church should never cause us to have a loose commitment to the local church. After all, the local church is the localized representation of the universal church on this earth, and it is the God-ordained launch pad for God's cosmic Gospel mission. We must hold both without choking out the other. We, as a local church, must sacrifice for the sake of other kingdom communities, and yet we must maintain our own unique identity as a reflection of God's highly diverse universal church.

I will close by calling your attention to a portion of one of Derek Webb's songs, *The Church*.

#### *The Church*

I have come with one purpose  
to capture for myself a bride  
by My life she is lovely  
by My death she's justified

I have always been her husband  
though many lovers she has known  
so with water I will wash her  
and by My word alone

so when you hear the sound of the water  
you will know you're not alone

(chorus)

'cause I haven't come for only you  
but for My people to pursue  
you cannot care for Me with no regard for her  
if you love Me you will love the church

Jesus and His body, in both the local and universal sense, come as a packaged deal. You cannot have Jesus without His church. To reject the people of God is to reject Christ. After all, John, in 1 John 4:20, says, "If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For the person who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen."

