

The Church Defined Part 2

1 Corinthians 1:1-3

1. We are God's.

- 2 Timothy 2:13; 1 Peter 2:10

2. We are local.

- 1 John 4:20; John 13:35

3. We are sanctified.

- Galatians 2:20

4. We are together.

- Ephesians 4:11-13

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The Church Defined Unity

Mark Twain is quoted as saying that nobody likes change except a wet baby. I'm no literary scholar, but I just have one thing to say: did Mark Twain ever change a wet baby? When our boys were babies, they weren't happy when they were wet, and they weren't happy to be changed. They liked it *afterward*, but not during!

Truth is, change is a part of life; some of it is good, and some of it isn't. Even the good change can be uncomfortable – just ask a wet baby! But at least with good change, we are willing to work through the discomfort because we know there's something good waiting on the other side of it.

Well guess what, West Valley Church? We are just about to go through some good change! In three weeks we are going to move our worship into the gym temporarily! On February 9 we will gather in the gym while work is being done in this room. You might wonder why: the furniture in this room is 50 years old. The carpet in this room is 25 years old. If someone has 50-year-old furniture in their home, it's called vintage. Or a museum. Either way, it's well past time to update this space, to maximize the seating, and to make things so much more comfortable for you and all the new people who are joining us! So that move will begin on February 9, and will take us into mid-March. During those Sundays, we will worship in the gym. For those of you who are joining us online, we will *record* those services and post them on our usual platforms by Sunday afternoon, but we won't be able to livestream. It won't be as high a quality as you are used to, but that is because we won't have the same tech available in the gym. I'm sorry about that – I hope you'll bear with us for the month and a half or so.

But these are super exciting times for us. We've been working toward this for several years.

Right before the pandemic started, we planned to begin a three-year generosity effort to pay off a debt that our church had carried for over 20 years, and to raise funds for renovations. But before we even started giving, everything shut down. Even so, the church decided to give anyway, and during that first year – without meeting together in person – we raised all the money needed to pay off our debt – a total of one million dollars! It really was a God thing!

Then, we continued to give for renovations. With those funds, we finished The Quad and kitchenette, the foyer restrooms, and we consolidated the children's rooms into one area. Now, with the funds we have left, we are going to do all we can in this space. We can't do everything that needs to be done, but we will do everything we can – and that's carpet, paint, and seating.

During this change, we have planned a time, two weeks from today at 9am in The Quad to share more details and answer any questions you have.

This season of change also creates an opportunity for us to remember and celebrate what God has done in our church, and we'd love your help with that. We would like to hear your stories of something God has done in your life during your time at West Valley Church. There are two ways you can share your stories: one way you can share your story is by writing it down for us. The ushers are coming now with cards, and they are going to pass them down your row. If you'd like to write down a story of how God worked in your life through West Valley Church, take that card and fill it out, and then you can turn them in to us next week. Would you do that? We'd love to share those testimonies together as a church. It would help if you'd at least put your first name on it. As your pastors read some of these, we might find some that we'd like to follow up on and maybe do a video with you, so if you are okay with that, write some contact information on there as well.

The second way you can share your story is right outside these doors. You'll see a booth set up and you can walk in, sit down, and in just a couple of minutes, share your story. It won't take long, but we can't wait to show these stories together during worship and on socials (except for TikTok, I guess. Too soon?).

Thank you for taking the time to do that. God has done amazing things in our lives here at West Valley Church, and we really want to share those and celebrate them as a church. That's what this series is about: defining what it means to be the church and living into that.

Last week we looked at the main metaphors that the Bible uses to describe us. We realized we don't *go* to church – we *are* the church. We are a group of people who are passionately committed to Jesus Christ and his Kingdom in this world. We are filled with the very same Spirit that raised Christ from the dead, and together we are changing the destiny of West Valley and even the world! What better time to get aligned with what God is doing in and through our church!

The church is *not a building*; the church is the *people*. So even though we use phrases like, "I'm going to church," or "I was at church," those really are misleading because it sounds as if church is a place to go to. The church isn't about *location* it's about *relation* – our relationship to God and each other. It's not about this room or the gym, or pews or chairs or paint colors; it's about relation to God and each other.

We showed last week that the Bible uses several metaphors for the church, but whenever it actually uses the word "church," it is the Greek word "ekklesia." That was a common word in Greek language, normally used in public politics to describe an assembly of people. But the Bible takes it a step further to describe a group of people that are empowered and equipped by God. It means literally, "God's people gathered out together."

The Bible does not refer to church as a building; it means *people gathered together and going out into the world*. The Church is not a building, it's a community. So while we are and will be identified AT our beautiful building, we are not to be identified AS a beautiful building. This building is a tool – a facility – that helps facilitate what God does in and through us. This building is not a sacred place; it is a place where sacred things happen.

And so we want to make sure it is as beautiful and effective as possible in helping those sacred things happen!

We are to be identified AS a community of believers in Jesus. And that means that we look and act differently than any other gathering of people.

So what is the Church supposed to look like?

It looks like a group of people who are united in their love for God and love for each other; people who are seeking to put the needs of each other ahead of their own. They are servants. They watch out for one another, they care for one another, they encourage one another, and they share generously together.

That's exactly what we are and are becoming. Now I realize that in this church you can't get to know everyone equally, and that's okay—God doesn't expect that. But you can get to know *some people*. You can connect with a few people and make it your goal to build each other up, to pray for your church and each other. By the way, that's why small groups are so very important; the way that we can be “ekklesia” in intentional ways each week is in a small group, and then on the Lord's Day we all come together as the “ekklesia” in celebration and worship. God is calling us together to be something unique – something special. He is calling us into an uncommon unity, a community.

This is all over the New Testament, but today we are going to see that in just three verses. Would you please stand with me as I read, and look at what it says in 1 Corinthians 1:1-3:

“Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and from our brother Sosthenes, to the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ--their Lord and ours: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Corinthians 1:1-3, niv)

Thank you; you can be seated.

In verse 2 Paul gives us a four-part description of the church: To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ-- their Lord and ours...

Let's look at those, starting with how we are unified because...

1. We are *God's*.

Paul wrote this letter to “the church of God.” It is God's. It means our church is not great because *you* belong to it (as much as I think you are a great group of people, and I love spending time with you!). I mean, I tell everyone all the time: “We have really great people in our church.” But we are not a great church because of the people who attend. We're not a great church because of our level of education, our income, our wonderful personalities, or how good looking you are – and you *are* – you should see what I get to see every Sunday! Our church is valuable because *we are God's*; we belong to God. Church is His idea. He loves the church. He calls the church His Bride. The sad thing is many Christians don't feel the way God does about the church. Even though God created the church and loves the church, there are some Christians who don't really care about her.

Did you know that 30% of those who were regular church attenders *before covid have not attended in person or watched an online worship service even once since the outbreak?*¹ That seems so tragic. I know they probably have a lot of reasons. But imagine how painful it must be for God; to know that His children – the ones He sent His Son to die for – they just don't care about the bride of Christ. These people will say that they are all for *Jesus*, but they don't seem to prioritize being around His bride.

How does that make sense? I don't know about you, but if you don't like my wife, you're not going like me either! You can't separate the two of us. When you say something that hurts her, it hurts me.

When we got married, we made a commitment to put the needs of one another ahead of our own. We entered a covenant of self-sacrificial love. I say this at every wedding I perform, but marriage is not a contract. A contract says, "As long as you hold up your end of the bargain, I'll be faithful to you. The moment you don't do your part, I don't have to either." But marriage is a *covenant*, and a covenant says, "I don't care what you do or don't do—I will always remain faithful to you."

God has made a covenant with the church; it is not a contract. That's why the Bible says:

"If we are unfaithful, he remains faithful, for he cannot deny who he is."
(2 Timothy 2:13, nlt)

So the question is, are we being true to *our* covenant with God and toward each other? Church isn't about location; it's about relation.

The incredible thing is that, even though I'm far from perfect, and nobody knows that better than Shelly, that makes no difference to her – it might annoy her from time to time, but my wife does not love me because I am perfect. It took about 5 seconds after saying "I do" for her to realize that wasn't true. Actually, she knew it long before our wedding day and she *still* said, "I do"! But despite the fact that I am imperfect, she continues to love me. That's called *grace*!

God is the same way toward the church. The church is special not because of who we are but because of Who we belong to, and because of the covenant He made to us! We belong to God! There are a lot of unflattering things you can say about the church in general, and some of them maybe aren't wrong. But remember Who she belongs to – remember Who created her – remember Who loves her – remember Who died for her.

Is the church perfect? Of course not! Sometimes people say, "I don't go to church because the church is full of hypocrites." The answer to that is, "It's not full! There is always room for one more!" Of course we're not perfect; that's why we need God! As long as I am a pastor there will always be at least one church in town with a saved sinner in the pulpit. No, the church is not perfect, but it IS God's. He created it, He loves it. The church does not rise and fall with us. It's a God-community. That's why the Bible reminds us:

"Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have mercy." (1 Peter 2:10, niv)

¹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/03/28/how-the-pandemic-has-affected-attendance-at-u-s-religious-services/#:~:text=This%20longitudinal%20analysis%20finds%20a,%20to%2030%25%20in%202022.>

That means that our success doesn't come because of our ideas or our efforts; we are successful because we follow the Holy Spirit's leading, and we obey what he wants us to do – even if it is uncomfortable for us. In a very small way, it means we're going to worship in the gym together for about a month and a half. It will be inconvenient, but it will also be an adventure! Because God is calling us to keep this facility as attractive and functional as we can to facilitate how he wants to use it and for his glory.

The second thing that Paul tells us is that we are unified because...

2. We are *local*.

Paul writes to “the church of God IN CORINTH.” Corinth was a city where the church was located. This is the primary way the word “church” – “ekklesia” – is used in the New Testament: it is almost always used to describe a *local* gathering of believers in a local, geographical place. We talked about this last week.

When God created the Church, He gave the Church an address. He created the church to be something we can see, touch and experience. When Jesus rose from the dead, the Bible says that he ascended into heaven, and He remains there, praying for his church and preparing for His return. He sent us His Spirit to live in us and work through us.

But the physical presence of God, in the Person of Jesus, is not here until he returns. That's why God created the Church—we are Christ's physical presence in West Valley. God is Spirit, so He gathered together a group of His people to be His physical presence. We are here to show West Valley that God is real, that He's alive, that He's active, and that He's working among His people. The church is a visual aid to remind people that God is here.

God wants others to *see* our commitment, and the way we show it is how we love him, each other and others.

It is easy to *say*, “I love you” – what God wants to see is love in action. God wants to take our faith to the next level. So how does He help you do that? He places you in an environment where you can be tested. Guess where that is? He plugs you into a local community filled with imperfect people, people with rough edges and baggage.

There's that poem that says:

To dwell above with saints we love, oh won't that be glory!

To dwell below with those we know, well, that's another story!

We grow together as we learn to be the church together – warts and all. Because God expects us to grow and not just stand around. He will ask you to give of your time, your talents and your compassion for others.

God is always taking our faith to the next level. Our love must be visible. That's why we're told:

“For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.” (1 John 4:20, niv)

God is not impressed by our words, instead He applauds our action. He's looking for evidence. That's why the church exists. It is a physical, tangible place where your commitment to Christ becomes evident. It is a place where faith becomes visible, and we live out what we say we believe. If the world sees us, a bunch of imperfect people, caring for each other, supporting each other, giving to the church for each other, praying for each other, loving each other in spite of all our faults, then the world will know that Jesus is real. That's why He said:

"Everyone will know you are my disciples if you love one another." (John 13:35, niv)

The way we love each other in our local church is the singular proof.

Then Paul says in verse 2, "to those *sanctified* in Christ Jesus and called to be holy." We are unified because...

3. We are *sanctified*.

Let me explain what that means (more next week). We've already seen the church is called the Bride of Christ. Husbands, how did you look at your bride when she was coming down the aisle? Did you focus in on the one hair that was out of place, or the one area of her makeup that was uneven? No, you didn't see her imperfections – you saw all the reasons why you fell in love! You saw her beauty inside and out. Hopefully you *still* do!

When God looks at the Church, He doesn't see her flaws. He sees all the reasons He loves her. He sees a perfect reflection of His Son, Jesus Christ. And guess what: God looks at you personally the same way He looks at the church! When God looks at you... He sees His Son, Jesus Christ, who is holy.

Look at it this way: the Apostle Paul said:

"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me."
(Galatians 2:20, niv)

Listen to those last four words: CHRIST LIVES IN ME... That is where Christ is, right now! He is in you if you are a Christian, through His Spirit. He is in His church. And more importantly, you are in him, the church is in him.

When God looks at you, Christian, He sees His Son in you. When Jesus died for your sins, His holy character covers you if you accept it. Your life is hidden in Christ. Then, when you surrendered yourself to Him, His Holy Spirit moved into your life, and as a result you have been "sanctified," or made holy in the eyes of God. The Holy Spirit is at work in you to shape your character and nature – your actions – to be just like Christ. That's when God sanctifies you – He sets you apart to be like Jesus. To be sanctified means to be set apart.

But at the same time, when God sees you, He sees a work in progress. Just as my wife sees me! She tries not to focus on my mistakes though she is not content with them. If I stayed the same way I was when we got married, our marriage would have been in trouble a long time ago. Needless to say I had some rough edges that needed to be worked out. Good thing those are all gone now... I grew and I am growing because her love looks past my flaws to what I can be.

God sees our church the same way: we are a work in progress. *We have to live out what God has worked in. (repeat)* As Paul says, we are “called to be holy.” We must show on the outside what God has done and is doing on the inside. Our task is to remember Whose we are! We are set apart by Him and for Him.

We are sanctified in Christ – made holy, set apart for God’s Kingdom! *And* we are a work in progress. The church is set apart by Him and for Him to love each other and love the world in the power of the Spirit, and that’s unlike *anything* the world can offer.

The last truth is found at the end of verse 2: “together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ-- their Lord and ours.” We are unified because...

4. We are *together*.

We are in this TOGETHER. Would you stand again; I want you to hear what the Bible says in another place about the church being a together community from the Message translation of the Bible:

“You were all called to travel on the same road and in the same direction, so stay together, both outwardly and inwardly. You have one Master, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who rules over all, works through all, and is present in all. Everything you are and think and do is permeated with Oneness. But that doesn't mean you should all look and speak and act the same. Out of the generosity of Christ, each of us is given his own gift. . . It was he who "gave gifts to people"; he appointed some to be apostles, others to be prophets, others to be evangelists, others to be pastors and teachers. He did this to prepare all God's people for the work of Christian service, in order to build up the body of Christ. And so we shall all come together to that oneness in our faith (*repeat 2x*) and in our knowledge of the Son of God; we shall become mature people, reaching to the very height of Christ's full stature.” (Ephesians 4:11-13, tmt)

We are in this to grow together! Thank you.

We have this amazing facility to worship together in, to share meals together in (and to have them cooked here by our wonderful cooks!), we have this facility to fellowship in, to enjoy conversation over a cup of coffee, to play volleyball and basketball in. We have this facility with spaces designed specifically for our little ones to grow in and be safe, for our youth to gather and build relationships, for our young and older adults to meet in and pray together and learn together. In every way this facility helps us to be together; but it could do so even *better* if it were updated. We'll have updated colors and carpet, and much more comfortable seating that will allow for more people to be in this place at the same time. We can renovate this room in order to maximize the usability of this space and give us more flexibility in current and future technology that will help us worship in person and online even better.

I'm so grateful we have this amazing campus to teach over 700 children each year about Jesus while they play soccer on our great fields. We have over 100 junior and senior high students who worship Jesus in this room every Wednesday night! We have nearly 50 young adults who are connected to our church. We have this amazing facility to provide

Homework Club for the schoolchildren across the street, and to provide space for groups like the Union Gospel Mission, LOVE Inc, Birthright, Child Evangelism Fellowship, the high school and the junior high school and community groups like Kiwanis to have important meetings and fundraisers. We have all of this, because West Valley Church gathered together decades ago to make this happen for *us*. Now it is our turn to do this for each other and for the generations to come.

Let's pray: *Prayer*

Hebrews 13:15-16, 20-21

With Jesus' help we will continually offer our sacrifice of praise to God by telling others of the glory of his name. Don't forget to do good and to share what you have with those in need, for such sacrifices are very pleasing to him...And now may the God of peace, who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, equip you with all you need for doing his will. May he who became the great Shepherd of the sheep by an everlasting agreement between God and you, signed with his blood, produce in you through the power of Christ all that is pleasing to him. To him be glory forever and ever. Amen.