

Its Identity

Rediscovering Church:

1 Peter 2:9; John 15:14-19

September 19, 2004

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Did you know that there is actually an identity test for true Minnesotans? I'm not sure a high score means your native or have finally just adapted, but here it is:

1. *Your idea of a traffic jam is ten cars waiting to pass a tractor on the highway.*
2. *Vacation" means going up north past Brainerd for the weekend.*
3. *You often switch from "heat" to "A/C" in the same day and back again.*
4. *You see people wearing hunting clothes at social events.*
5. *You install security lights on your house and garage and leave both unlocked.*
6. *You design your kid's Halloween costume to fit over a snowsuit.*
7. *Driving is better in the winter because the potholes are filled with snow.*
8. *You consider Minneapolis exotic.*
9. *Your idea of creative landscaping is a statue of a deer next to your blue spruce.*
10. *Down South to you means Iowa.*

Well, even as that test for identifying yourself as a Minnesotan is suspect, so many of our ideas about what constitutes the church are suspect. The tragedy is that if we misidentify what the church actually is, we'll embrace a substitute that has some form of godliness, but lacks the actual power of God. Consequently, we won't witness the full extent of God's love and greatness as he works in lives. We won't accomplish the very things for which we were born.

Let's consider some errant notions about the church.

Myth #1 is that the church is some mystical, nonphysical grouping of people. Some people identify the church in such a manner so that they can justify their estrangement from the families of believers Christ has raised up. One young woman wanted her baby baptized but had

no plans to participate in one of those church families. Since she believed certain things about Jesus (most of which Satan probably believes as well), she reasoned that she is part of the mystical church; and that is the only kind of church she was committed to raise her child in. It was a painful exchange. I later thought, “If you believe in a mystical church, then have a mystical pastor perform a mystical baptism.” This error is not confined to this woman or those who denounce organized religion. It also poisons us.

We affirm with the Scriptures that the church is one. There is one church. We read in the New Testament of churches meeting in various homes, but we also read of churches associated with cities. Paul writes two letters to the “church of Corinth,” two to the “church of Thessalonica” and speaks of the “church in Cenchrae” and the “church of the Laodiceans.” Jesus in John’s vision (recorded in Revelation 2 and 3) addresses the churches of seven cities and their angels. Most of us affirm that we are part of the Church of Rochester; yet are we talking mystically? The Greek term for church means *assembly*. How can you be a church and not assemble? How can you be the church of the city and not assemble as the believers of the city? Are we not also in error? (Incidentally, the Sunday after Christmas, December 26th, many congregations in Rochester are assembling together for worship as the larger church.) The entire Jerusalem Church assembled together at the temple. Paul greeted the Romans on behalf of the whole Church at a city in which he was staying. Paul gave worship instructions for when the whole assembly of Corinth gathered.

Myth #2 is that the church is an organization or institution. How can an assembly of people be impersonal? By nature, it’s very personal. The church is not a structure. It is not a set of rules or beliefs. The church is not what it institutes. There is a danger when we identify a church with a system or structure. It dehumanizes Jesus; for he dwells with human beings and

works through human beings. He reveals himself through human beings. He leads human beings, who employ different systems and structures that must not be idolized or lifted to the stature of the church. Bethany is part of the United Methodist Church family. If we say this means we are this system or that structure, we become nothing more than a dried up, inflexible wineskin. Bethany and The United Methodist Church is not a system of any kind. It is believers God has assembled together.

Myth #3 is that the church is a building or parcel. It is not property. It is not bricks and mortar. These walls could collapse and Bethany Church would still stand. This property could be seized, and Bethany Church would continue. When we identify a church with some property, we tend to confine its activities and assemblies to that property. All too quickly the church becomes isolated from its mission field. It becomes a single group, of like-mind, experience and background. It doesn't multiply in locations and groupings among God's lost and hurting children. Bethany is not and has never been this place. We assemble wherever we choose.

Myth #4 is that the church is a tradition. When people call denominations traditions, they destroy the denomination's identity as a church. A church is not a heritage. It is not a custom. It is not led by its past. If it's a church, it's led by the Spirit of Jesus. Jesus is the **current** pastor.

Listen to what Peter writes:

You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. (1 Peter 2:9, NIV)

We are a people, priesthood, and nation. We have one mission: to declare the praises of God and his Christ, Jesus. There is no way to bring people to faith and freedom in Jesus Christ without declaring his praises. We can work in soup kitchens, organize clothing drives, repair and build homes for the poor and lobby for justice. Without declaring his praise, no one comes to

faith or freedom in Jesus Christ. We must not be silent. We are to declare the praises of God and his anointed one, Jesus. We have one common experience and testimony. We all have walked in darkness. We all have poisoned our world with sin. We all have been estranged from the love and person of God, wandering and heaping condemnation on ourselves, multiplying victims with our words and deeds. We all have been alienated from and hostile to our heavenly Father. (If you can't confess that whole-heartedly, you are still dominated by lies.) Through the compassion and mercy of God, we have been led into light, wonderful light, that reveals our sins and God's love for us. All this hinges on believing what Jesus said, what Jesus did and what Jesus promises. He is the stone over which we stumble, or he is the stone on which we build our lives. Receiving him in his Spirit and obeying his word is the faith.

Listen to what Jesus said:

You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. (John 15:14-15, NIV)

Do you hear the power of what Jesus said? Do you understand what Jesus is saying and hear its impact? If we do what Jesus commands, if we believe him and obey what he says, we are not merely servants; we are his friends, friends who are partners in the business, friends who share that special knowledge. Jesus doesn't hold anything back. What a relationship! The church consists of Jesus' personal friends who become that through obeying him. That's the faith.

There is one more element. In 1972 Richard Avery and Donald Marsh wrote a song that is quite famous: "I am the church! You are the church! We are the church together!" Two thirds of what I just sang is wrong. I am not the church! You are not the church! An assembly of one is not an assembly, nor is it the church. That's why Jesus said, "***For where two or three come***

together in my name, there am I with them” (Matthew 18:20). Listen again to Peter’s words: “You are a chosen **people**, a royal **priesthood**, a holy **nation**, a **people** belonging to God. Jesus said: “You are my **friends!**” We are a pack. We are a team. We are a family. We are not an army of one. We are an army of many with one Lord, one Spirit, one faith, one mission and one destiny. “I am not the church! You are not the church! But we are the church together!”

What is the identity of the church? What is the identity of Bethany? We are not something mystical. We are not an institution, a system, rules or an organization. We are not these bricks, and we are not a tradition. We are people that God has chosen. Through obeying Jesus’ command we are friends and partners with him and each other. We are chosen as a people, assembled together as a royal priesthood, connected with other believers as a holy nation, to declare the praise of our God and our King, Jesus. That’s who we are; and we celebrate because he is Lord! Amen.