Identity is a tricky thing to hold on to because it is comprised of many different parts—age, sexuality, religion, homeland, social class, just to name a few—, and each individual combines these parts in a distinct way. Sometimes, however, it can be difficult to reconcile certain parts of ones identity with each other. For example, I know several young women, myself included, who were raised in conservative Christian religions and then grew up to identify as feminists and became unsure of how to reconcile being a woman with belonging to a religion that require women to be subordinate to men. However, in the case of Christianity at least, the way it interacts with other identity components is far from straightforward because Christians disagree with one another on a multiplicity of issues. By gathering data on the gender, class, ethnicity, and role of all the characters mentioned in the New Testament, I have attempted to first identify the ways in which different facets of identity were present in the early church, and then, by comparing the official websites and commentaries of the two largest denominations present in the United States today, to look at how these three facets of identities intersect both in the Bible and in the divergent flavors of the contemporary Christian church.

Rather unsurprisingly, the demographics of the characters in the New Testament reflect the demographics of the people who wrote it. The New Testament was written by Jewish men; 75% of the characters are men and 43% of them are Jewish. The class of the writers is not as homogenous, and class is an attribute that was impossible to determine for more than half of the characters. In addition to analyzing the number of characters, I also analyzed how many times each character appears and further categorized appearances as being speeches, actions, descriptions of said characters, and uses of their names, in an attempt to see whether certain groups were disproportionately likely to be described than to actually perform actions. For the most part, the percentages were too similar to be statistically significant. The only really striking discrepancy is that the men have 86.9% of the speeches and the Jews 83.5%, but this is due in large part to the fact that Jesus, whose speeches encompass the majority of the text of the four gospels, is male and Jewish. Overall, the data on characters seems to indicate that the easiest identities to reconcile with Christianity are those of being Jewish and of being male. However, today, Judaism and Christianity are usually seen as being separate religious identities, and even in Biblical times, plenty of women belonged to the early church. Thus it proves more useful to look at secondary sources instead, such as the denominational viewpoints of modern Christian churches.

From the home page onwards, the differing focuses of the websites of the Southern Baptist Convention and the United Methodist Church are abundantly clear. The statement in the logo of the UMC is “Open Hearts. Open Minds. Open Doors.,” while the statement logo of the SBC is “Reaching the World for Christ.” Just from that simple introduction one can see that the SBC is more concrete while the UMC is more abstract. The SBS slogan is direct enough that without reading any further or knowing what those three letters stand for, a visitor to the site can determine that this is an evangelical Christian church. The UMC logo, on the other hand, could belong to many different kinds of social organization. As one delves further into the websites, this contrast becomes clearer. The first list of links on the SBC website are to daily devotionals and the latest church resolutions while the first list of links on the UMC website are updates on reading programs in urban schools and articles on humanitarian efforts to combat malaria and Ebola—again, not even clearly denoting that the UMC is in fact a religious organization. In fact, while overall the SBC website seems designed to lead visitors to direct, easily understandable instructions on becoming a Christian, the UMC website does not make this information readily accessible, requiring at least three clicks down a less than obvious path to access it.

This tendency towards directness can also be seen in the way that the content of the SBC website is written. On a page entitled “Basic Beliefs” they lay out what they feel to be their key doctrinal points in a few paragraphs that take just minutes to read, utilizing a large number of absolute statements such as “Christians should oppose racism, every form of greed, selfishness, and vice, and all forms of sexual immorality, including adultery, homosexuality, and pornography.” In contrast, the website of the UMC does not have a “basic beliefs” but rather places that information in a section of their website entitled “Our Christian Roots.” Overall, to get a full picture of what the UMC considers rudimentary doctrine, one must visit seven pages, each of which has a few paragraphs discussing the reasoning behind each belief, the Biblical passages supporting it, and any uncertainty or controversy surrounding it. Thus where the SBC simply states “He was conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary,” the UMC says “In Mark, Jesus seems to be adopted as God's Son at his baptism. In Matthew and Luke, Jesus is conceived by the Holy Spirit. In John, Jesus is God's pre-existing Word who "became flesh and lived among us" (1:14). However this mystery occurred, we affirm that God is wholly present in Jesus Christ.”

Beyond listing basic Christian doctrines, the SBC has very little to say. They have “Position Statements” in which they state how their stance on particular issues might differ from other Christian denominations, but the only social issues they feel the need to write are sexuality and the sanctity of life. One can understand fairly comprehensively how a SBC church member would vote, assuming they were voting in accordance with the official statements of their church, after about two minutes of reading. On the complete opposite end of this spectrum stands the “social principles and social creed” of the UMC, a set of webpages which takes at least half an hour to peruse containing opinions on everything from war in general to specifically space-based weapons, along with Biblical references to back those opinions up. Looking at the sheer number of opinions listed, it would seem like the UMC is telling its members what to do more so than the SBC, however the difference in phrasing prevents this from seeming entirely true. Where the SBC says “Christians must” or “Christians do,” the UMC says “we encourage” or “we regard,” allowing both for differences of opinion between United Methodist church members and for the fact that other Christian denominations may hold different opinions and still be Christians.

Turning to the identity issues at hand, the differences in framework are obvious even in realms where there is no real difference in opinion. Both the UMC and the SBC believe that helping those less fortunate is the duty of Christians, as per Jesus’ example. Nonetheless, as per the attitudes of brevity verses comprehensiveness seen earlier, the SBC simply states once that helping the needy is a thing which should be done, whereas one of the primary goals that pervades the UMC website is helping the impoverished and underprivileged worldwide, both on an immediate food and shelter basis and on a lasting systematic overhaul of the societies that allow poverty to thrive. When it comes to the viewpoints expressed in the printed commentaries on the passages relevant to a discussion of social class, it is difficult to make any kind of comprehensive statement of similarity and difference because the focus varied widely based upon the specific passages. One thing that is evident a more application-focused approached in the SBC commentary and a more context-based approach in the UMC commentary. For example, 2 Corinthians 8:1-15 describes the early church living in community with shared material resources. The UMC describes this passes as being an example of the way spiritual and material blessing were equated in the early church such that repaying a spiritual gift with a monetary one was common practice (Sampley 121-124) while the SBC makes sure readers know that this passage cannot be used in a modern context to condone socialism (Garland 365-380). In passages regarding slavery such as Titus 2:9-10, the UMC does not mince words and just lays out the fact that Paul was writing a household code in the way household codes were written, addressing slaves last (Dunn 870). Conversely, the SBC attempts to utilize this passage as an example of the early church being inclusive of oppressed groups due to the fact that the slaves are considered worthy of instruction at al (Lea 305-309). In a general sense, however, both the SBC and the UMC would agree that the church should pay attention to and attempt to improve the lot of humans who belong to oft-neglected social classes.

Conversely, in the area of gender, the contrast between the UMC and SBC is sharp, and the words on their websites can be easily predicted from the explanations in their commentaries. For all of the passages in the epistles providing instructions for the way women ought to behave both in church and at home, the UMC commentary explains the cultural context in which such instructions made sense while the SBC commentary defends them as being compatible with contemporary western culture. For example, 1 Timothy 1:11-12 forbids women from teaching and commands them to remain silent in church. From the UMC commentary a reader gathers that the churches Paul was writing to met in houses so ordinary household order in which men had the authority had to maintained within the church; furthermore, the early church had to be supportive of the ordinary household order because to do otherwise was to discourage converts and to draw persecution from both Roman and Jewish authorities (Dunn 800-802). The SBS commentary does not refute any part of it, but it adds that even today, if women had authority positions in the church, they would be too busy to devote sufficient energy to raising their children (Lea 94-105).

Extrapolating these sorts of interpretations into viewpoints, it would be reasonable to posit that the UMC website would regard gender in a way that makes the church palatable to modern western culture in a similar way that Paul did to his culture, and that the SBC would ask modern church members to follow the rules found in such passages. Indeed, this is what one finds. From the UMC website: “We therefore urge that every effort be made to eliminate sex-role stereotypes in activity and portrayal of family life and in all aspects of voluntary and compensatory participation in the Church and society.” From the SBC website: “While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture.”

The final aspect of identity, which I explored, ethnicity, was, like class, harder to pin down the two denominations viewpoints on, but, like gender, had a fairly evident contrast. Ethnicity, in a Biblical context, is always a reference to whether or not a person is of Jewish birth. Jesus himself was Jewish, as was Paul, but today, Christianity and Judaism are separate and very different religions. The controversy surrounding that split occupies much of the book of Romans, which Paul saying obfuscated and seemingly contradictory things regarding the entering of gentiles into the new faith and what this said about the status of Jews. In the time it was written, the debate Paul was playing to was whether or not gentiles needed to convert to Judaism before they could become Christians. This is no longer a question; the question today is almost the opposite: whether Jews automatically receive the salvation of Christ by virtue of being born into the Jewish nation, or whether they need to convert to Christianity. Neither the SBC nor the UMC has a clear official position on this, but if one searches the word “Israel” on each website, one will find that the UMC has accused the state of Israel of violating Palestinian civil rights while the SBC has repeatedly celebrated the founding of the state of Israel and defended its right to exist. These types of declarations alone do not necessarily indicate which side of the question these denominations fall on, but when combined with their commentaries on the book of Romans, it seems that the UMC leans more towards the conversion of Jews being necessary to their salvation while the SBC leans more towards Judaism itself leading to the same salvation as Christianity, but only through a still-future event that convinces the nation of Israel that Jesus was the Messiah.

The most telling interpretations were of Romans 11, in which Paul states in verses 25-27 “Israel has experiences a hardening in part until the full number of gentiles has come in, and in this way all Israel will be saved.” To the UMC, this verse is using the word Israel, in the phrase “all Israel will be saved,” to refer to the Christian church, as in people of any ethnicity who have chosen to accept that Jesus is the Messiah (Wright 687-694). The SBC, one the other hand, points out that because Paul has been referring to the Jews and the gentiles as distinct ethnic groups throughout the book and even the chapter in question, it would be strange for him to suddenly appropriate the word “Israel” to include some gentiles and exclude some Jews. Thus, the verse must be prophesying a complete salvation for the Jewish nation, probably through their acceptance of Jesus as Messiah at the second coming (Mounce 223-226).