

## Following Jesus Together

Belong

Ephesians 2:11-22

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*"Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called "the uncircumcision" by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands — remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit." (Ephesians 2:11–22, ESV)*

The need and desire to belong is a fundamental human desire. It lies at the very foundation of many of the passions that drive our life every single day. Just think back on the last week, or maybe the last few weeks, and consider how deeply this reality is woven into the fabric of our humanity.

- Perhaps you can think back to some childhood experience where you felt left out — the one not chosen for pick-up basketball or the one cut from the choir.
- As you stand before your wardrobe, just think how influential the choices of others are on your decision as to what you are going to wear.
- In the criminal justice system, if you want to severely punish someone, you put them in solitary confinement.
- Social media has become a powerful communication medium for shaping culture and the feeling of connectivity. Just think of how you felt the last time you lost your phone.
- Consider all the groups and sub-groups that are created within our culture in order to give people a place within our society. It never ceases to amaze me how many different sub-cultures there are, even with the city of Indianapolis.

But this is not just a cultural theme. It is a spiritual theme that has a foundation in what God is like, in creation, in the uniqueness of marriage, in the plan of redemption, and in the life of the church. A

fundamental doctrine of Christianity is the belief in the trinity — Father, Son, and the Spirit. The interdependence and belonging to one another is at the center of what God is like. One of the first statements from God in the garden of Eden appears in Genesis 2:18, as God says, “It is not good for man to be alone.” When the Bible talks about marriage between a man and a woman, it is called a one-flesh union (Gen. 2:24). At the end of the Bible, in the book of Revelation, these words mark the culmination of God’s plan: “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people” (Rev. 21:3). The theme of belonging is all over the Bible.

In fact, you might be able to summarize what is wrong with humanity as our relentless attempts to belong, but often in the wrong ways. We are a people with broken appetites for belonging. Augustine famously said, “You have made us for thyself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.” We need God, through the gospel, to redefine, reshape, and renew what it means to belong.

### **A Disciple-Making Culture**

We are taking four weeks in August to talk about what it means to make disciples. As I shared last week, our pastors have been talking about this for some time as we’ve tried to wrestle with how to lead our church forward to be on mission. This focus is not necessarily new. College Park has always been focused on making disciples, but the context has changed over the last ten years. There was a time, about 15 years ago, when disciple-making looked like helping people grow, while the church was walking through a very uncertain time period. Then we tried to figure out how to make disciples with inadequate space, gravel parking, and “the stairway of doom.” Then we worked hard to make disciples as we walked through a major expansion of the ministry.

Praise God, our church has grown; we’ve started thinking about how to reach our city, people from a broader church background have started coming, and we are now presented with even more opportunities than ever before. And that means that we need to think through what we do and why we are doing it. We are attempting to chart a course that will provide clarity so that we can work together in making disciples.

Last week we learned that the disciple-making mission of the church does not happen without people. And we saw that there is a bigger mission that God is trying to accomplish in that mission. He is shaping all of us — together — into the likeness of Jesus. That’s the goal. Now the question is how we get there in light of who we are as a church, the culture that we are in, and the people, like you, who could join us in that mission.

The purpose of this conversation is so that you can help us to create a disciple-making culture at our church. When you meet someone new, and they wonder how to take the next step in their walk with Christ, this series should help you answer that question. But it should also become a moment for each of us to consider our individual role in helping to move people along in their relationship with Jesus.

### **What to Remember About Our “Belonging” in the Gospel**

Having set the context of the word “belong,” both in the culture and in the Scripture, let’s turn to Ephesians 2 to see what we can learn about this concept. When we use the word “belong,” we mean

that believers in Jesus were never meant to grow alone. Rather, we are meant to do life together, to be part of something bigger than ourselves, and to belong to a people — God’s people. This text helps us to see what that looks like.

In Ephesians 2, Paul is making the case for the beauty of the church. He’s trying to help them understand and to unify some factions in the church that were connected to the historical ethnic divisions between Jews and Gentiles. Therefore, he calls them to remember some things about themselves, their union with Christ, and this new community called the church. In each of these areas, they are part of something bigger than themselves.

### **1. Shared Brokenness**

In order to understand the beauty of what it means to belong in the gospel, you have to start with what our identity is outside of the gospel. Paul gives a laundry list of powerful statements that are designed to remind this Gentile audience about their former identity. In other words, to what did they belong before? It is quite a list.

They were outsiders. There was even a name for them: “the uncircumcision” (v. 11). They were the kind of people who were looking into spiritual things but were not a part of the community. Some of you may feel like that today. You need to know that we all started there too, and we’d like you to learn how to take the next step in learning about the gospel.

They were also spiritually lost. Verse 12 makes five stunning statements:

- Separated from Christ
- Alienated from the commonwealth of Israel
- Strangers to the covenants of promise
- No hope
- Without God in the world

The point should be obvious. This picture is quite clear. From a spiritual standpoint, they were bankrupt. This involved both a problem with their souls, their minds, and their actions. In Ephesians 4:18 Paul summarized their condition with these words:

*“They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.”* (Ephesians 4:18–19, ESV)

This is the condition of every human being apart from Christ. The Bible tells us that we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rom. 6:23), that there is none righteous (Rom. 3:10), and that we are all under the sentence of death (Rom. 6:23). Every human being belongs to this group. We all share in the brokenness that is in the world. Every one of us has sinned, and we all deal with the effects of this brokenness.

The beauty of the gospel is that Jesus rescues us from this “broken belonging.” We’ll talk more about that in a moment, but there are two things that I want you to see here.

First, a broken belonging is part of everyone’s story. The question is not whether or not you belong somewhere. Belonging has been built into the fabric of the created order. And our broken belonging is what it means to be human. In other words, our tendency toward rebellion and autonomy poisons every venue where any good belonging could happen. While we all have different chapters in our brokenness, the story-line is essentially the same.

Second, to understand the beauty of what comes next in Christ and in the church, we have to understand the “belonging realm” that Jesus liberates us from. Remembering this is not only important because of our tendency to forget, it is also crucial because it magnifies the glory of the new belonging. Our broken belonging is meant to point us outside of ourselves.

Therefore, a healthy disciple-making church is a place where people understand the fundamental reality of belonging. They realize that we all belong. The question is where and what does that mean. And as they look to their past and to the cross, they see the beauty of a new kind of belonging.

## **2. Union with Christ**

The second way that we have “belonging” in the gospel is in our union with Christ. The Good News of the Bible is that the people who used to belong to sin and, by implication, the devil, can now belong to Jesus. His death and resurrection purchased a spiritual reality where those who believe in Him are considered to be “in Christ.”

We see this very clearly in the stunning turn of words in verse 13 – “But now.” What a beautiful contrast! If you want to do a great study, just look for all the “but now” or “but God” statements in the Bible, especially in the New Testament. One of my favorites is found in Ephesians 5:8 – “*for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light . . .*” The “but now” statements indicate a radical change.

This shift in identity and belong is captured in the phrase “in Christ.” This is one of Paul’s favorite ways of summarizing both what it means to be in Christ and the new identity that is given to those who believe in Him. To be united with Christ essentially means that God treats you as he would treat Jesus. It means that all of the spiritual victory, all of the grace, all of the honor, and all of the blessing come to you because of your relationship with Jesus. His death is your death. His life is your life. His blessing is your blessing.

In this way, you can think of union with Christ as the sum total of salvation. To be saved is to be united with Christ. In Christ we are justified (Rom. 8:1), glorified (8:30), sanctified (1 Cor. 1:2), called (1:9), made alive (Eph. 2:5), created anew (2 Cor. 5:17), adopted (Gal. 3:26) and elected (Eph. 1:4-5).<sup>1</sup> It means that

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.crossway.org/articles/10-things-you-should-know-about-union-with-christ/><sup>2</sup>  
<https://www.crossway.org/articles/10-things-you-should-know-about-union-with-christ/>

we live “in Him” and He lives “in us.” To be united with Christ means that the life of Christ is now our life. He is our life, and we belong to Him.

This new belonging to Jesus has sweeping implications – a theological reality affects my life every single day. Consider what Paul said in Galatians 2:20 – *“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”*

Now in Ephesians 2, we see this union with Christ as something that results in:

- v. 13 - Being brought near by the blood of Christ. We are no longer estranged from God.
- v. 14 - Having peace with God. Jesus himself reconciled us to God and took our judgment.
- v. 4 - Creating unity with others. Union with Jesus creates a more foundational belonging.
- v. 15 - Fulfilling all the demands of obedience. Jesus fulfilled the just demands of the law.

When you put all of this together, the bottom line here is the simple truth that the gospel creates a new belonging for every believer. This change of dominion, status, and relationship is the essence of salvation, and it the foundation of our hope. Because we belong to Jesus, we can rest assured that all our sins are forgiven, that the devil’s assaults will not ultimately succeed, and that nothing can separate us from the love of God.

*“For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God **in Christ Jesus** our Lord.”* (Romans 8:38–39, ESV)

### **3. A New Community: The Church**

The point of this sermon is simply that “belonging” is the essence and the expression of the gospel. Hopefully you have seen this demonstrated already in the broken belonging of our past and the hope that is found in being “in Christ.”

The final reality that we need to look at is the expression of this “in Christ” belonging. This is where “belong” becomes very practical and real. This is where it begins to help us understand who we are as a church and what we do together in order to make disciples.

The second half of verse 15 is really important because it identifies the purpose of Christ’s redemptive work. Or you could think of this way: what happens to a people when they belong to Jesus? The answer is that they belong to one another. We see this as Paul says “that he might create in himself one new man.” Jesus created a new arena of belonging – the church.

In verse 16 Paul calls this “one body,” and he notes that this redemptive work of Christ removed the hostility between other groups within the church. Specifically, Paul means Jews and Gentiles. So, while they both still belonged to their various ethnicities, there was another “belonging” that brought unity between them. They belonged to something beyond the normal classifications of culture and society. They both are a part of the people of God – the church.

As Paul continues in verses 18-21, take note of the other ways that he communicates this:

- v. 18 – both groups have access to the Father in one Spirit
- v. 19 – rather than being strangers and aliens, they are fellow citizens and members of the household of God
- v. 20 – they are a part of something historic in God’s plan of redemption
- v. 21 – this church is alive and growing into something together
- v. 21 – this people is called a “holy temple” in the Lord
- v. 22 – together they are being built into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit

This is remarkable language! And it identifies that there is a beautiful and compelling expression of our union with Christ as we gather together as the church. The glory of the union of Christ is expressed in the assembly of God’s people.

Here is how Marcus Johnson, a professor at Moody Bible Institute, reflects on this:

*... to be united to Christ is what it means to be the church: the church, after all, is the body and bride of Christ. A distinction, therefore, between a doctrine of salvation and a doctrine of the church can only be but artificial. There is no salvation outside the church, historic evangelicals have always asserted, just exactly because there is no salvation outside of Christ. We are saved in Christ, and we are the church in Christ. It is the same wonderful gospel.<sup>2</sup>*

Now at one level, in a spiritual sense, every person who is “in Christ” is “in the church.” This is what is sometimes referred to as the universal church. There are believers who are part of Christ’s body all over this city today who are not worshipping with us at College Park Church. They are brothers and sisters in Christ.

However, it is important to realize that the expression of what it means to be “in the church” was intended, in the New Testament, to be lived out with a specific group of people. The normative pattern is a group of people who gather together for worship (Col. 3:16), submit to their spiritual leaders (Heb. 13:17), receive teaching in the Word (Acts 2:42), observe the Lord’s supper together (1 Cor. 11:17-31), and practice church discipline (Matt. 18:17-20). And all of this is done together.

That is one of the reasons for the prominence of the “one another commands” in the New Testament. In order to love one another, care for one another, comfort one another, exhort one another, etc., we need to be a part of the one-another dynamic.

And the New Testament consistently envisions living out this belonging to one another in the context of a local assembly of believers who are responsible for one another’s souls (1 Peter 5:1-4). The church is meant to be a place where you belong. It was never intended to be a place “you attend.”

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.crossway.org/articles/10-things-you-should-know-about-union-with-christ/>

But that vision is not just about you and your spiritual growth. Part of the reason that the church is belonging to one another and live out that “belonging” is because of what it says to the world. Broken belonging is everywhere. And the biblical vision is a group of people who are counter-cultural and strangely attractive to a world that is desperate for true belonging. So, part of the reason we are talking about this is not only because we want to see you grow into maturity, but also because we, as a church filled with people who belong to each other and who live that out, speak loudly to the world.

### **How We Express “Belong”**

If belonging is the essence, then how do we practically express it in the context of our church? Let me give you four ways:

**Baptism** – You’ve witnessed today a physical expression of the spiritual reality of being united to Christ. You’ve heard the stories of people who have been “resurrected” by Jesus, and you have seen the clearest picture we have of what happened to them when they were united with Christ. Baptism is going public with your “belonging to Jesus.”

**Lord’s Supper** – Next week we’ll celebrate Communion, and we’ll be reminded about the union we have with Christ as we partake of the bread and the juice. We’ll take time to examine ourselves, to reconsider the cross, and to renew our affection for the gospel. We use the elements to preach the gospel to ourselves again.

**Covenant Membership** – As Elders, we believe that it is important for God’s people to solemnly identify themselves with a body of people. A church is a church (versus just a gathering of Christians) because they’ve agreed to express their union in Christ together. Covenant members answer three really important questions: 1) Has the church affirmed your understanding of the gospel? (Matthew 16:17-18), 2) Which church is going to care for your soul and be accountable before God to help you grow in grace? (Hebrews 13:17), and 3) Which church is holding you accountable for your walk with Christ? (Matthew 18:15-19).

Covenant membership is the way we answer those three questions at College Park Church, and we believe that it is a vital part of spiritual growth and maturity. Membership is an official step in belonging – in identifying with a people. It is to say, “I’m a part of this church.” But church membership is more than just a class you take or a covenant you sign. It means that there is fundamentally a different relationship that you have with the people of your church. And it is good to be reminded that being a church means that we belong to each other.

**Community** – Beyond being a part of a larger assembly, it is important for you to have a place where you find community, a primary place where you express your “belonging.” Now the main way that we experience this reality is through groups – both small and large groups.

There is something significant about the regular rhythm of meeting with the same people to talk about the Word, to speak into one another’s lives, and to pray for each other. It fills a very

important spiritual space in your life between the large group gathering and your individual quiet time. It reconnects you to the body of Christ in a personal and intimate way.

Group life puts you in contact with other believers who are trying to figure out how to belong as well. It is the “basecamp” for belonging.

By now I hope you understand the word “belong” very differently. I hope you see the landscape of broken belonging that is everywhere. Once you start looking for it, you’ll begin to see it in surprising ways.

But I also hope that you see this first step in our disciple-making strategy as important as it really is. God’s aim in the gospel is to unite us to His Son and to unite us to a people – to one another. And when this works, something spectacular happens.

Here’s what John Stott said:

*Jesus has succeeded in creating a new society, in fact a new humanity in which alienation has given way to reconciliation, and hostility to peace. And this new human unity in Christ is the pledge and foretaste of that final unity under Christ’s headship.<sup>3</sup>*

Our belonging now pictures a beautiful belonging in the future.

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<sup>3</sup> Clinton Arnold, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 164.