

CALLED TO BELONG MANUSCRIPT

INTRO

The moment you received Jesus Christ by believing on His Name, you became a child of God.

Did you know there's no biblical command to **join** the family of God? Huh? Yes, there are admonitions to stay **connected** to the family, but if you are born again you're IN the family. Now, there's good news and there's bad news here, which do you want first?
[allow for response]

you're not the *only* child. [repeat for the other news :)]

Even though it can sometimes be challenging, some of the greatest joy you can have as a child of God is found in relationships you have with your Christian brothers and sisters. Some of the greatest significance you can find in your life is found in using your gifts and sharing your resources to encourage your brothers and sisters, build up your church, and *the* Church.

So as I prayed about and studied some Bible passages about my place in the Church, I was reminded of some characteristics of the Church that I hope will be inspiring to you today. The Church I belong to is a union formed by Christ, a community of equality, the household of God, and a construction project.

I. THE CHURCH I BELONG TO IS...

A. A Union Formed by Jesus

“For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall” (Ephesians 2:14)

Whatever you and you and you and I were before, *we're family now*. The closest friendships Christina and I have are with friends from churches we've been part of. They are family. Many of you are looking for deep, meaningful attachments with people who share the same love for God and have similar values. Often, though, we find it easy to drift from church and try to have deep friendships with people we share the same activities with, but not the same love for God. The gauge for this is which direction is your life going because of those relationships: are these moving you toward Christ or away from Him?

THE CHURCH I BELONG TO IS...

B. A Community of Equality Before God

“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints...” (Ephesians 2:19)

You are *citizens with the saints*. (Ephesians 2:19) We are not outsiders... when we come to faith in Christ and give our lives to Him, we are accepted and included by God. Say, “I’m a citizen with the saints.” [respond]

Think of the most devout, Spirit-filled Christian you know. Did you know that you are their brother or sister? They don’t have some edge that you don’t have. They don’t have some special enlightened connection with the Holy One that you aren’t eligible for yourself.

THE CHURCH I BELONG TO IS...

C. A Household in which I am a Member.

“So then you...are of God’s household.” (Ephesians 2:19)

As it relates to God and my place in the family, I’m not waitstaff. I’m not a slave. I’m not an adviser. I am a child of God. Jesus taught us to be servants of all, yes. Romans 12:10 instructs us, as brothers and sisters, to give preference to each other. This goes back to being a community of equality. As a child of God, with all the other children of God I have equal rights, privileges, and responsibilities.

Belonging in this union formed by Jesus, belonging in this community of equality, belonging in this household, answers the question of who I am. I find my identity in God the Father, through the cross of Christ my Savior, by the illumination and power of the Holy Spirit. Who I am is who God says I am. I am a redeemed sinner and a child of God(!) and an heir to all the promises of God, which are YES to me in Christ Jesus.

THE CHURCH I BELONG TO IS...

D. A Construction Project.

“In whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.” (Ephesians 2:22)

This construction project is anchored in Jesus Christ, the Cornerstone. “Cornerstone” refers to the first and most important stone laid in a new building. Proper placement of

a cornerstone ensured a straight and level foundation. Applied to Christ, this metaphor shows Christ's central role in the Church.¹

This construction project is built on a firm foundation: apostles and prophets. The Cornerstone and the foundation provide for us one of the deep longings of our souls, stability.

Say this with me, from Hebrews 13:8,

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

The teachings of the apostles and prophets form the Holy Scriptures, which are the guidebook for faith and practice. The Bible is the playbook for everything that we do, from the songs and liturgies chosen for use in public worship, to private choices we make as individuals.

So, you may ask, What's my role in the construction project? I'm so glad you asked. First, the Architect, Designer, and General Contractor is God. You and I are NOT architect juniors or subcontractors or interior designers.

We are the materials God is using to build His Temple. Some of us are beams and skylights. Some of us are being used to make beautiful features. Some of us are the quarried stones God needs to make His building sturdy and strong, and some of us are sheetrock. *Hopefully no one here is asbestos.*

God is placing us where He wants us in this magnificent building that will be His dwelling place.

In addition to being anchored in Christ and stable, this construction project is also dynamic and growing. Ephesians 2:21 says that we are carefully fitted and joined, and we are growing into a holy temple in the Lord.

This isn't static... it's not a one and done: "I'm here and I ain't budging." No, as we grow up in the Lord we go from glory to glory. We may be in the same location, but as the temple grows we can't stay in the same place in the building... stories are being added on above us.

¹ John D. Barry et al., Faithlife Study Bible (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016)

Just like in a family... your positional relationship with your Mom and Dad never changes: you're their child. Your relationship with God the Father never changes: you're His child. But that doesn't mean you get to stay in infancy or another favorite spot in your childhood or adolescence. You grow up in the family.

Pretty soon you are contributing to the good of the household. You go from being cared for by the previous generation to caring for the next generation. ²

You move from dependency on the house to responsibility in the house, which includes your church home in particular, and also the Church everywhere. So if you ever move from this church to another, you don't go back to childhood and a place of no responsibility. You might have to wait as the leadership of that new church learns your gifts and discerns where you can best serve, but that's their concern. Your concern is growing and looking for places to serve within the Body of Christ.

The Church you and I belong to needs us to be active in it. This is the aspect of belonging to the church that is your call. What does belonging to the Church look like?

Today's Church looks wildly different from the Church described in Acts 2 where believers met together in the face of ostracism, marginalization, and persecution. Believers voluntarily held all things in common and spent extended periods of time in each other's homes sharing meals, burdens, and living quarters together.³

In the days of the early church, there was basically one church per town. If you were a Christian, the church in your town was YOUR church. We have no modern day model for this in the Western world, or most of the world, for that matter. Schisms, splits, reformations, the free church movement, the development of denominations, and a host of other factors have played into the scene we know today. And for the most part it's a good thing. It becomes a bad thing when we allow ourselves to think in terms of *going* to church that pleases us rather than *being* the church that pleases Christ.

² Edited, Even though God has no grandchildren, spiritually speaking, you can still be a parent by leading someone to Christ. Spiritually speaking, you're a mentor - maybe a close aunt or uncle to a younger member of the family as you nurture them.

³ Edited, In our day and age, we don't know the marginalization and persecution faced by the early church. Sometimes as I see religious liberty that 25 years ago was unquestioned being limited, I feel like we're on borrowed time, but I don't have time to discuss that with you today. As far as voluntarily holding all things in common, In our day and age we've added a verse to the Bible, I think it's found in 1st Benjamin Franklin, and it goes like this: God helps those who help themselves. The way we apply that verse today seems to fly in the face of the actual Scripture that says that you reap what you sow. But again, this is a complex issue that is easier to give a one-liner about than it is to examine biblically.

As I studied the passage from Ephesians 2 that Linda read for us earlier, I found a related passage in Romans 12 verses 6-13 that brings home what it looks like to belong in the Church. I'll be moving between these two passages as we proceed.

II. BELONGING TO THE CHURCH LOOKS LIKE...

A. Investing my gifts to serve God, my church family, and the Church.

“We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.” (Romans 12:6-8)

As many of you know, Steve Devers has been our project manager for the Fellowship Hall restrooms and other renovations and has been awesome! A couple days ago he came to do some measuring in Adams Fellowship Hall. He told me he wasn't feeling well Sunday so he joined us online.

Steve said he was “watching the kids” on Sunday and appreciating what they were doing as they played and sang and that they were doing what they were called to do. He said, “I can't do any of that.”

And I said, “that may be, but don't ask us to build anything, okay?”

Who's more important? The people who stand on stage or the ones who build the stage? NEITHER! They're equally important! If they're doing what God called them to do and they're seeking to be led and empowered by the Holy Spirit as they do it, then they are doing what they can do to build the Kingdom of God! That is the church! WE ARE THE CHURCH!

BELONGING TO THE CHURCH LOOKS LIKE...

B. Loving (Romans 12:9 & 10)

Loving God wholly, and loving others as I love myself.

Loving with a pure love... words that are backed up by actions, consistency, and constancy. The Message Bible puts Romans 12:9-10 like this: **“Love from the center of**

who you are; don't fake it... Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle."

Ephesians 2:14 says that Jesus is our Peace. I want you to say out loud, Jesus is my peace. [respond] Now turn to someone near you and say Jesus is *our* peace. [respond] Isaiah prophesied that Jesus would be the Prince of Peace. Doesn't the peace of Christ need to be reflected in the way we love each other?

BELONGING TO THE CHURCH LOOKS LIKE...

Investing my heart and time. Romans 12:11 says, "Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord."

BELONGING TO THE CHURCH LOOKS LIKE...

Investing my financial resources. (Romans 12:8, 13)

At the end of next week, the November newsletter will go out to everyone on the church mailing list. Inside it, you'll find a pledge card.

Here at First, we advocate tithing, that means 10% of your income, to the church. In the Old Testament, tithing is spoken of as a minimum and offerings were given over and above the 10%. 10% may be beyond your comprehension right now. If it is, then pick a number between 2 and 9 and start there. Then again, 10% may be easy to you and you could be giving a lot more. In Romans 12:8, the Apostle Paul simply says give generously, likely referring to amount and attitude.

III. IT'S MY CALL

A. Where do I belong?

You belong where God puts you.

Is it ever time to leave a church? That is a huge complicated topic and there are some reasons to leave a church based on what they teach or if there is a toxic culture.

But most of the time, I stay or don't stay, or I get involved or get disconnected from a church because my preferences aren't being met. I want the wall colors to be lavender; or I want to have Bingo on Tuesdays; or I want the worship service to feature only the music I like; or I want the Bible study to start at 5pm not 7pm or I want a young photogenic worship leader; or I want the leadership of the church to make decisions that I agree with 100% of the time.

When I make it about me, I miss my call. Sure, I'm making the calls... but the chances are very good that I'm falling out of alignment with the Cornerstone.

When we trust in Jesus, we are brought into God's family: we enjoy a vertical relationship with God through Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Because we belong to Jesus, we belong to the Church, which comes with many horizontal relationships.

We belong to a living organism that is the body of Christ in which we all have equal standing before God and unique gifts to use. We belong to a stable building and a dynamic construction project led by the Holy Spirit, centered in Christ, and over which God is the architect, designer, and general contractor. We avail ourselves to Him to be placed where He wants us, and to use our gifts to give Him glory, encourage our brothers and sisters, and advance the Kingdom of Heaven, in alignment with Christ, our Cornerstone.

B. Am I answering the call?

Am I available? Am I surrendered? Am I here as a consumer or so I can connect and be connected? Am I engaged in what's going on?

Am I invested? Am I serving? Am I attending? Am I giving? Am I praying?

Am I loving? Is my heart in this? Am I following through on my commitments?

Are you discouraged? This isn't something to gut out on your own. Through faith in the Son of God, rely on the Spirit of God to lead you as He places you in the family of God.

You belong to this union of Jesus. You belong in this community of equality. You belong in this household of God. You belong on this construction project. When you called on the Name of the Lord, you became an insider in the Kingdom of God.

As we close, let's pray. [Worship team comes up.]

As we begin this time of prayer I want to give an invitation. If you are here or have joined us online today and you have not yet reached out in faith to believe in Jesus and receive Him, don't put it off. Do it today. New life in Christ begins with simple faith expressed in a prayer like this:

Jesus Christ, I call on You as my Savior, and I give my life to You as my Leader. I believe that You died on the cross for my sin and rose again. I believe You are the Way to God the Father. Live in me and be my God.

If you prayed that prayer with me today, welcome to the family of God. You belong here.

Most of us in this room have already made the decision expressed in that prayer and many of us have been walking with God.

Heavenly Father, let us surrender to Your will, that it would be done in our lives and in our church and in the Church - on earth as it is in Heaven. You have united us in Christ. You have given us equal standing before You. We are Your children. We are Yours to place in Your Temple, Yours to direct in Your body, Yours to lead in victory in the triumph song of life. Amen!