

Belonging

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[0 : 00] Let's pray now and let's ask God for his help. Father, as we come together, please will you soften our hearts today to be receptive to your word.

Will you speak clearly to your body here in KEC that we might want to heed your voice, that we might wish to live for you as you want us to.

For all this we pray in the name of the Lord Jesus. Amen. Now my kids' current obsession is with dinosaurs. So over this past Christmas, my older sister got them a kid's book called *We Don't Eat Our Classmates*.

Now this charming little story is all about a dinosaur called Penelope Rex, who is quite nervous on her first day of school because she wants to make a good first impression. But upon arrival, she discovers that she's an outsider because she's the only dinosaur amongst many children.

And that's a big problem because, well, she likes to eat children. And so she can't help but chill and chomp them all up even when she tries not to.

[1 : 13] The teacher has to make her spit them out. And of course that doesn't make her popular. And so that makes Penelope Rex very sad. But as the story goes on, she eventually overcomes this with the help of a goldfish.

You have to read it yourself. And by the end, she started playing hide and seek and feeding her classmates brownies instead. She finally belongs.

Well, we're not dinosaurs, but we all have been Penelope Rex, haven't we? We all crave that sense of belonging. Research seems to consistently show that having a place to belong enhances our sense of well-being and security.

For example, one study in Japan showed that elderly Japanese women who felt a sense of belonging to their neighbourhood were more likely to live up to five years longer than those who didn't.

And belonging happens not just when we identify with a place, but more precisely, with a group of people. In other words, it's not just about geography, but community.

[2 : 23] But what does it mean to belong to a community? Well, it appears that we feel a sense of belonging when we have at the bare minimum the following qualities.

A sense of shared identity, in that we see this particular group as our people, as we and us, not me and them.

A sense of shared destiny, that is, a belief that what will happen to you will happen to me, or at the very least, affect me.

A sense of mutuality, that is, we are interdependent and rely on one another in some way, whether directly or indirectly. And finally, permission for vulnerability.

That is, we don't have to constantly feel that we are hiding ourselves. But of course, that's easier said than done. To find all those things, identity, destiny, mutuality, vulnerability, is definitely not easy.

[3 : 29] After all, even if you live in a neighborhood, and you happen to be on friendly terms with everyone in the neighborhood, those things still don't automatically appear.

You need most people in your neighborhood to also know each other, and to be willing to work on those relationships with one another, before they can potentially become a community whom you belong to.

And such community is hard to find. So what is God's answer to our ongoing search? This morning, we're starting a new series on church.

And the aim of this series is to reset and recalibrate our conception and expectations of church. And so we're going to consider afresh some questions that might have arisen during this pandemic,

such as, why do we have church?

what do we actually do when we are together? Do we even have to be together physically? And we'll tackle that over the next few weeks.

[4 : 43] But today, I simply want to concentrate on something even more fundamental. I simply want to show you what church is. And I want to show you that actually, one helpful way to think about church biblically speaking, is simply as a place of belonging.

A place of belonging. In other words, what is God's answer to our ongoing search? It's the church. Now, as soon as I say that, I can already feel the skepticism in the room.

And I don't begrudge you. The truth is, even before the pandemic, church can sometimes feel like anything but a place to belong. Can't it?

Over the past few years, at least two of you have shared with me what your experience of church was like when you were teenagers. Now, just to clarify, they were not talking about B-E-M-K-E-C. But both these people, independently of each other, mentioned how they were ignored and overlooked and even made to feel completely unwelcome.

[6 : 01] And I'm sure they're not the only ones. And this pandemic has further diminished that sense of belonging with many of us not having come together meaningfully with other believers for a while now.

And so, my prayer this morning is that we will put aside our past experiences, we will do a reset, and we will recapture what God says about His church.

For I believe that we see a church from God's point of view, our perspective will change. And just as importantly, so will our attitudes.

And so this morning, we'll be looking at Ephesians 2, verse 11-22 as our anchor text to see how we can be a people who belong.

And it won't be the only text we will consider, but it will provide the base. So make sure that's open in front of you. So, what is church from God's point of view?

[7 : 06] Now here's our first answer today. It's a people who belong to Jesus. A people who belong to Jesus. Now come with me to Ephesians 2 and let's consider verses 11-13.

Notice first of all, who Paul is addressing in verse 11 is those who are Gentiles by birth. Now that's basically anybody who isn't a Jew. And notice that he's not just addressing individuals, he's addressing an entire group of people.

In this case, Gentile Christians. And so that's people like you and me. And he gives us a command, the very first one in Ephesians.

Remember. But what are we to remember? Well, just this simple fact. We Gentiles are not Jewish. And so we have zero access to the promises that God made to the nation of Israel. And that's why he says verse 12, the Gentiles were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel, and foreigners to the covenants of the hope of promise.

[8 : 26] In other words, we had no promise of a Messiah who would come and restore us. And so we don't get to share in God's salvation and blessing.

After all, we're not Jews. We don't have the sign of the promise. We're uncircumcised, unlike the Jews. And therefore, verse 12 again, we are without hope and without God in this world.

By not being part of the people of God, we are cut off from God. And so Paul says, remember that, because that will help you appreciate what comes next.

Look at verse 13. But now in Christ Jesus, you who were once far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

So there is a dramatic reversal. Paul is saying, guess what? Gentiles now have access to these promises of salvation and restoration and blessing.

[9 : 42] In the words of verse 18, they now have access to God the Father. We have relationship with Him. But, how did that happen?

Is it by getting us Gentiles to become Jewish? No, not exactly, Paul says. That's not what God did. No, notice, it is through the atoning sacrifice of this Jewish Messiah, Jesus Christ.

That God now includes the Gentiles as part of His people. And that's what he's talking about when he says those who were brought far are now brought near.

Ethnicity no longer matters. In the language of verse 19, He has now made Gentiles fellow citizens and members of his household.

Or to use the words of Paul's contemporary Peter in 1 Peter 2 verse 10, once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God. Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

[11 : 03] And so this is what Paul is saying. through Jesus, we also become God's people and therefore become His possession.

And so let me pause here and let me ask, what are the implications of what we've just learned? Well, this morning I just want to draw out two implications of this.

First of all, recognize that to belong to Jesus is to belong to God's people. To belong to Jesus is to belong to God's people.

I hope it's clear from what we've just seen from Ephesians 2 that to be in relationship with Jesus is to become a member of God's household.

We can't separate the two. And that's something the Bible repeats over and over again. Let me just give you a few other examples. In John 10 verse 16 Jesus says, I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen.

[12 : 12] I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. And so notice that to listen to the voice of the shepherd is to be brought into his flock.

Again, you can't separate the two. Or take Romans 1 6-7 where Paul says to the Roman church, And you also are among the Gentiles who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people. So once again, notice that those called to belong to Jesus are also called to be his people.

Here's one more example from 1 Corinthians 12 verse 13 where Paul says to the Corinthian church, we were all baptized by one spirit. In other words, we are saved so as to form one body, whether Jew or Gentile, slave or free and so on.

And so once again, Paul is saying the result of salvation is to become part of Christ's body. And so seen this way, church, then, becomes part and parcel of what it means to be Christian.

[13 : 36] To belong to Jesus is to belong to God's people. Now today, we often stress quite rightly that church going doesn't make you a Christian.

After all, remember that the only way the Gentiles secured the blessing of those promises was by coming into a relationship with Jesus. That's how they became part of God's people.

Not just by being a regular at church meetings or by being born into a church going family. And so that's what we often stress today.

But in so stressing this, we might have unintentionally disconnected the Christian and the church in a way that is foreign to the New Testament.

According to God, if you repent and trust in Christ, you are not just born again. You are born into his new family.

[14 : 41] And so you can't have one without the other. You don't just believe and then decide separately later on to become part of a church.

rather, when you believe, you already become part of God's church. You can't belong to Jesus without also belonging to his people.

And so if you're a Christian today, the question is never, should I belong to a church? Should I be part of one? Rather, the question is, how can I show I belong to Jesus' family?

What can I do to express my newfound identity? Imagine that you say that you are a member of the local basketball team, but you never show up for the practices, you don't show up for the games, you ignore the coach, you don't even support your team from the stands, or keep up with how your teammates are going.

It would be legitimate to ask if you're even part of the team, wouldn't it? You've done nothing to express that you belong to it.

[16 : 01] But the New Testament pattern is that those who say they belong to Jesus will identify themselves visibly with his people, imperfect as they are.

they won't stay away. And that brings me to a second implication. Second of all, let the way Jesus treats the church shape the way we treat the church.

Let the way Jesus treats the church shape the way we treat the church. We've just seen that the church is the people who belong to Jesus.

But how much does Jesus care for his belongings? Does he treat them as disposable? Well, Ephesians 2 tells us, doesn't it?

He cares to the point of shedding his blood for them. As Ephesians 5 verse 25 will say a little later on, Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy.

[17 : 11] See, here's the astonishing truth of the gospel. Jesus came and not for a people who were warm and loving and easy to get along with.

Instead, he came for a people who were weak and sinful and half-hearted. And he loved them enough to give his very life for them.

and even more amazingly, he calls this dirty, adulterous, two-timing people his bride.

In Revelation 21 verse 2, the church is pictured as a bride beautifully prepared for her groom, Jesus himself. And that is the glorious destiny that Jesus has for his people.

Jesus didn't just come to rescue his church, he came to marry it, so to speak. He intends to make the church the most beautiful bride ever.

[18 : 21] And so, the extent of his commitment to ensure that we will be so loved so as to become the best possible version of ourselves.

Or if we want another glimpse into just how much he loves the church, well, consider this stunning sentence in Acts 9 verse 4. You see, when Jesus appeared to Paul, while he was still persecuting the church, what did Jesus say to him?

So, so, why do you persecute me? You see, Jesus so identifies with his church that he says to Paul that to persecute the church is to persecute him.

But that's how much he cares. He says, what happens to the church happens to him. What causes his church pain causes him pain.

And so, that's why Paul in places like Acts 20 verse 28, for example, while speaking to the Ephesian elders before he leaves them, says this, be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.

[19 : 38] And so, he's saying to the elders, you know, take care of these people, cherish them, love them, guide them, keep them from moves. Why?

Because Jesus loved the church enough to pay for it with his very own blood. You see, church is not a human hobby.

It's Jesus' property. And so, are you beginning to catch a glimpse of the church from Jesus' point of view?

You see, so often many of us view church as simply something we come to every Sunday or as a service provider of religious services or a show that is there to entertain us regularly.

And if that's our perspective, how will we naturally treat church as a tiresome obligation or as a demanding customer or simply as a paying audience?

[20 : 48] But what if we saw the people sitting next to you right now as the very people whom Jesus bought with his very own blood?

What if we begin to view the church as Christ's beloved bride? What if we remember that the church belongs to Jesus as his very treasured possession?

Well, surely that will impact the way we treat the church. no longer will it be just an afterthought? No longer will it be something we discard easily the moment it falls out of favour?

No, we will love the church because the one we love, Jesus, does. And seeing church from God's point of view has a wonderfully freeing effect.

God's love. Because if we recognise church as God's beloved, well that means you and I are God's beloved.

[21 : 53] You and I, if we trust in Jesus, can confidently say that we belong because God values us.

We belong not because we are Bible experts or we know all the insider lingo or we conform to every single cultural expectation. We belong simply because Christ has taken us in.

We are accepted by grace alone. And imagine if we remember that that is our shared identity. We would then be free to accept each other by grace alone.

we've been given permission for vulnerability. And if we all see this as our shared identity, then, you know what, we would want to help each other remember that we belong to Jesus, that you belong to Jesus, even when we stumble, and that we have a wedding day to look forward to, even if times are tough now.

And so that is the first perspective that we want to reset today. We want to see church as a people belonging to Jesus and therefore beloved by Jesus.

[23 : 23] But that's not where we want to stop. Because the Bible says more. For what else is church, from God's point of view? Well, here's our second answer for this morning.

It is a people who belong to one another. A people who belong to one another. Now, come back with me to Ephesians chapter 2, verse 14 to 22 for a moment.

And to see where Paul is going, we need to understand the relationships between Jews and Gentiles in general. In the Old Testament, God had set Israel some healthy boundaries to prevent them from falling into idolatry.

These included moral commandments and food regulations as a way of defining them as his chosen holy people and distinguishing them from the Gentile nations surrounding them.

sin has a way of hardening healthy boundaries into divisive wars. And that's what happened.

[24 : 36] By the time of Jesus, there was a very deep-seated hostility between the two groups as the Jews used those boundaries. I was just waiting for the motorcycle to pass by.

Right? Okay. So there was a deep-seated hostility between these two groups as the Jews used those boundaries to position themselves as morally superior.

You can spot one example in this very passage. In verse 11, Paul states matter-of-factly that it was common for the Jews to call Gentiles uncircumcised.

Or to put it more crudely, they were calling them foreskin. It was a derogatory term. And I'm sure you can imagine modern equivalence in various Chinese or dialects, can't you?

And the Gentiles returned the favour. the Roman historian Tacitus, in his writings, for example, called Jewish customs such as circumcision perverse and disgusting.

[25 : 46] And so there was a big rift between the two groups. It was so big that if a Jewish boy married a Gentile girl, then the funeral of the Jewish boy would be carried out. But notice what Jesus does, verse 14.

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one, and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with his commands and regulations.

And so Jesus, Paul says, has destroyed this barrier. He tears down this wall. For, beginning of verse 14, he comes as our peace.

Now notice that word our. Jesus isn't just for the Jews, neither is he just for the Gentiles. He's for both.

Both groups are equally sinners before God. The law shows that by exposing the shortcomings of Israel whenever they fail to keep it, and by exposing the ungodly practices of the Gentiles in the first place.

[27 : 00] And so the law brings condemnation. But Jesus brings to both groups what the law cannot. Reconciliation with God, as verse 16 makes clear.

But, that is not all that Jesus does. Look again at the second half of verse 15. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace.

Now, let that verse sink in for a moment. You see, we're so used to hearing that the purpose of the gospel is to reconcile humanity with God.

And that's absolutely true. But here in verse 15, God is saying that he has another purpose. He doesn't just want to reconcile humanity to God.

He wants to remake humanity in his image. And he does that not only by tearing down that wall of hostility, but by so joining the two together that they effectively become one new group.

[28 : 18] From now on, they are no longer to be known chiefly as Jew or Gentile. They are to be known as Christians. Or put another way, they are to be known as church.

And so that's what church is. A new humanity. A place where people who were once enemies are now joined together. And that's exactly how Paul puts it in verses 21 and 22.

In him, the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him, you two are being built together to become a dwelling place in which Christ lives by his spirit.

Or put it another way, because we're in Christ, we now belong to one another. And that's exactly how Paul describes it in our second reading today, in Romans 12, verse 5.

So in Christ, we though many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

[29 : 34] I wonder if that's how you think of church. You know, so often today we're often encouraged to think of ourselves in individualistic terms. I am my own.

My time, my energy, my gifts, all belong to me. I'm responsible for myself, and I can make it by myself. And of course, that often carries over even into our Christianity. It's just about me and Jesus, we say. Ephesians 2, verse 14 to 22, and Romans 12, verse 5, shows us that actually, this kind of thinking is not in line with the gospel. It's that the gospel of Jesus Christ says. Do you know that you've become one with others? Bobby, do you know you belong to David? Catherine, do you know you belong to Mary? Or to zoom in even more, we could think of it like this. Ronald, do you know that you are Raymond's eyes? [30 : 43] Alex, do you know that you are Sam's ears? Jesus? Does that sound weird? But this is what Romans 12, verse 5 is getting at.

It's saying when you belong to Jesus, you belong to Jesus' body. And if you and I are both part of that same body, then by implication, you and I belong to one another.

I am part of you and you are part of me. And that connection is permanent. You know, you don't take off your ear the way you take off your earrings.

Well, that's how transformative, how countercultural the gospel is. It tells us clearly that when you belong to Jesus, you belong to one another.

You are not your own. and so stop thinking as if you are. But instead of thinking of that as a liability or a hindrance, we can think of that as a strength.

[31 : 57] Because the Bible tells us that when we belong to one another, we bring benefit to one another. Because Ronald is the eye, Raymond can see.

Because Alex is the ear, Sam can hear. And because Raymond's mouth, Ronald can speak. Because Sam is the hand, Alex can grab things.

This week I came across a quote from Alexander McLaren, who is a 19th century Scottish preacher. So let me just share it with you. And this is what he says. In the Christian community, as in an organized body, the active cooperation of all the parts is the condition of health.

All the rays into which the spectrum breaks up, the pure white light must be gathered together again in order to produce it. Just as every instrument in the great orchestra contributes to the volume of sound.

In other words, he's saying, as we play our parts as members of one another, we can create something that is greater than the sum of our parts. We can not only bring glory to God together in a way that we can't do on our own, but we can help each other be spiritually healthy in a way that we can't do on our own.

[33 : 20] So, what are some action steps that we can take to express this truth? Let me just give you a few possible things that we can do. First of all, think and speak in terms of we and us, not as us and them.

in other words, don't think of yourselves as over here and the rest of church as over there. Think and speak instead of we, the church.

We are one body, not a disconnected mass of eyes and ears and mouths. Over the years that I've been here at KEC, I noticed that we sometimes still speak as if the church is a completely separate entity from us.

So, for example, I've heard us say things like this. Someone will ask, is the church giving any new Bible study material to my home group?

But wait a minute, isn't the home group part of church? And even our leaders can fall into this trap. Sometimes during an AGM, I've heard us in leadership say something along these lines in response to a query from a member of the congregation.

[34 : 39] The church has decided to do this and this. But wait a minute, does that mean we leaders are the church and the congregation member is not the church?

No, that's not right. Far more accurate to say the elders and the deacons thought that it was prudent to take this measure for the benefit of us. Church.

Or something along those lines. see, the Lord has made us members of one body, members of one another, and so let's make sure our language and our attitudes reflect that.

Second of all, get involved in the lives of others. Now, one of the ways that Satan has used this pandemic is to convince so many Christians that other Christians don't matter.

It's so easy, isn't it, just to sit back, listen to some songs, listen to the sermon in the comfort of your own living room without the inconvenience of having to interact with other Christians, especially

those whom we struggle to connect with.

[35 : 47] But, if we belong to one another, that means you have a claim on me and I have a claim on you.

And God says, that's what we are. A Christian, by definition, is not just someone who is only connected to other Christians, but also has a responsibility towards other Christians.

We are part of his body, after all. And so that means that if we fail to love and care and serve the other members of the body, we are actually failing to love and care and serve Jesus.

And we don't have to wait to be officially invited into a ministry or be put on a roster to love and care and serve others. Occasionally, we might think that that's what it means to get involved.

And of course, having those kind of official structures are useful, even necessary, so that we can make sure that things run smoothly. But we don't need to wait for that to express our belonging to each other.

[37 : 00] Now, for example, in Romans 12, verse 7, later on, there's mention of the gift of encouragement. Now, do we need an official roster for encouragement?

You know, this week, Hompat will be the one encouraging, and next week, Sharon will do it. No. We just need to spend time with people, chat with them, and get on with encouraging.

So, get involved, and don't feel like you need to wait to be put on a roster. And third of all, be willing to depend on one another.

Again, this goes against our culture. Our culture preaches self-sufficiency and independence, and our pride agrees with the message of our culture.

is why the idea of depending on one another sits so uncomfortably with us. But remember one of the things that encourages a sense of belonging?

[38 : 03] To have that sense of belonging, we need mutuality. We need the encouragement, the teaching, the hospitality, the gifts of others.

And they need ours. Let me tell you a story I heard. A teacher was teaching a vacation Bible school class when a new boy was brought in.

The boy has a handicap. He was missing one arm. And as the class was coming to an end, she began to ask the class to join her in their usual closing routine, where the children would both use both their hands to do some actions and pretend to make a church.

I'm not exactly sure what it looks like. But as she started the routine, here's the church, here's the staple, it suddenly hit her that the new boy wouldn't be able to join him because he has only one arm.

And as she was wondering how to include him, suddenly the little girl next to this boy reached out with her left hand, placed it on his right hand, and said, David, let's make the church together.

[39 : 21] That is a beautiful picture of how the church is meant to function. We are meant to look at each other, recognize what each of us can and can't do, and hold our hands to one another, saying, let's make the church together.

So my brothers and sisters, we belong to one another. That is the spiritual reality if we are in Christ. Now maybe that feels scary, even threatening. The novelist Jhumpa Lahiri once wrote, the essential dilemma of my life is my deep desire to belong and my suspicion of belonging.

And I think we get that. We want all the privileges of belonging, but none of the responsibilities of belonging, because we're worried that it will overwhelm us.

But I want to finish by getting us to look at Ephesians 2 one last time. We saw at the end of Ephesians 2 that we are a building who are being joined and built together.

[40 : 36] But what are we being built? Upon. Verse 20 tells us, upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.

In other words, why can we be sure that this building project, if we get involved, won't fail? Because it's built upon the most secure thing you could ever build your lives upon.

The Lord Jesus and his grace, his word. So that's why you can join in this building project and give yourselves wholeheartedly to one another as members of each other.

we have a shared identity and shared destiny in Christ. And because of him, we can begin to exercise mutuality and vulnerability.

vulnerability. When we know we belong to Jesus and we belong to one another, we can together make the church a place to belong.

[41 : 50] let's pray now. Let's pray now. Well, Father, as we hear your word today, we just pray, Lord, that we would see church as you see it.

Thank you for reminding us from your word that your church belongs to your son, that he loves it, that he has bought it with his very own blood. And so help us to see each other through those very same eyes.

And help us to remember that we are one body, members of each other, that we belong to one another and that we can bring benefit to one another.

So, Father, I just pray that indeed that would help us today to make KEC a place of belonging, a building that is being joined and built together, a place where you, our God, will be pleased to dwell in.

All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.