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A PLACE WHERE WE BELONG

You also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

1 Peter 2:5

In the movie *Castaway* Fed Ex executive Chuck Noland, played by actor Tom Hanks, finds himself on a deserted island, the lone survivor of a plane crash. Washed up on shore along with him is a volleyball that soon takes on the name “Wilson.” As the days drag on and the loneliness closes in, Wilson is invited to join in on some badly needed conversation. The eventual good news, of course, is that Chuck Noland leaves the island, taking Wilson along with him.

What I find most compelling about *Castaway* is that it reminds us we were not meant to live a solitary existence, and Chuck Noland’s anguish when Wilson drifts out to the open sea lost forever highlights this — The seventeenth century English poet John Donne observed, “No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent.” Across the sands of time, Donne’s poetic verse whispers

a profound and enduring truth regarding the human experience. We were not only created to be, but also to belong. Not just to exist, but to exist with others. Made in the image of the Triune God, we the crown of creation were created with belonging in mind (Gen 1:27-28). In our self-absorbed age, how easy it is to forget that once, long ago in a pristine and perfect garden, God said, “It is not good for man to be alone” (Gen 2:18).

Blown by the gale force winds of individualism,¹ bandwagon Christians seem eager to ride the current wave of a privatized spirituality severed from local church life. It is a wave that I fear will carry many to a place of spiritual shipwreck and an isolated castaway faith. Even Christians whose faith is tethered to the biblical text seem all too eager to disconnect from local church life. What is so tragic about a privatized spirituality is not only its loss of place, but also its loss of belonging. It truly is a castaway faith. A biblical faith, on the other hand, not only leads us to a Person to believe in, but also a people to belong to. The biblical description of the local church as “God’s household” means we have a place we fondly call home, and a place where we belong.

What Does Belonging Mean?

What does belonging mean? *The New World Dictionary* defines the word “belong” this way: “To have a proper or suitable place, to be part of; to be related or connected.” Inherent in this idea of belonging are the symbiotic categories of places and persons, the individual as well as the collective. With this in mind, how then should we see the local church? We should see it not merely as a place we attend now and then, but as a place where we belong.

The Local Church as God’s Household –A Place to Belong

The New Testament often speaks of the church with building imagery. Jesus said, “I will build my church” (Matt 16:18). The Apostle Paul said, “For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, God’s building” (1 Cor 3:9). The Apostle Peter declared, “You also, like living

stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood...” (1 Pet 2:5). Even a cursory reading of the New Testament causes us to wonder what the big deal is with the building imagery. Metaphors are not just nice sounding words. Metaphorical language, though figurative, makes a statement about reality, a compelling reality behind the imagery. So what do the building metaphors convey about the local church?

- ▶ The local church has an intelligent design
- ▶ The local church has an enduring stability
- ▶ The local church has an aesthetic beauty
- ▶ The local church has a functional purpose
- ▶ The local church is a place to belong

Ah, but there is so much more in this building metaphor we dare not miss! So let’s probe a bit deeper. As we look closer, what we see is that, as God’s household, the local church is designed to be a place where being and belonging meet.

A Place Where Being and Belonging Meet

The Apostle Peter pens these inspired words:

And coming to Him as to a living stone which has been rejected by men, but is choice and precious in the sight of God, you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For this is contained in Scripture: “Behold, I Lay in Zion a choice stone, a precious cornerstone, and he who believes in Him will not be disappointed. 1 Pet 2:4-6

In these verses, the Apostle Peter utilizes building imagery to describe Christ’s called-out ones. Peter is portraying the church as a spiritual house. Foremost in Peter’s mind is that Jesus is the focus and foundation of the church. Jesus Himself is the cornerstone, the foundational reality upon which the rest of the building is constructed (Eph 2:20). Without Jesus as the cornerstone, there is no true church.

Though Peter focuses on the cornerstone, we must not overlook the fact that the metaphorical imagery of the church as a building also focuses on us. Peter says, “You also, as living stones, are being built up

as a spiritual house” (1 Pet 2:5). Stones are not living things, yet here Peter metaphorically asserts their living status. And yes, Peter’s focus is clearly on the whole, the collective group, the called-out ones. Of course, we should not in any way diminish the importance of each individual part. The truth that each of us is a living stone is important in its own right.

As a called-out one, each of us has a particular and unique individuality, as well as a calling that contributes to the whole. In our unique giftedness, we add colors and textures to the beauty and functionality of the local church to which we are called. Yet our unique individuality is not to be seen in isolation, but rather as a distinct and essential part of the whole. We were created not only as human beings, but also as human belongings.

The phrase “sweet spot” is often associated with athletics. A tennis player, for example, pays close attention to that particularly leveraged part of her racket that maximizes the power and accuracy of her serve. Sweet spots are places of great importance. For Peter, the church is God’s specially designed sweet spot, that place of transformation where being and belonging meet.

Made in the image of the Trinitarian God, we reflect in our intrinsic nature both the essences of being and belonging.² This is why solitary confinement is such a torturous and maddening experience. Solitary confinement slowly erodes away the building blocks of our humanity.

One of the most riveting and disturbing books I have ever read was by an Alabama Senator and former American POW. It is aptly entitled *When Hell Was In Session*. In it, Jeremiah Denton describes his seven-and-one-half-year experience in a North Vietnamese prison camp. Besides the brutal physical torture, his most hellish experience was suffering through four endless years of solitary confinement.³

Solitary confinement in any setting is clearly not a recipe for human flourishing. But are we not promoting a kind of self-imposed spiritual solitary confinement when we advocate—either by bold proclamation or cynical default—an individual faith severed from local church life? In light of our creation design, isn’t this drift perilous? We were created

to belong not only to Christ, but also to one another, in both spiritual and geographic proximity.

One of Jesus' most riveting stories in the New Testament describes two individuals with two contrasting eternal destinies. After death, a man by the name of Lazarus goes to a place of intimate belonging—Abraham's bosom. In our cultural context, we most likely would describe that place as heaven. The other man, whose name is not given, is simply described by Jesus as a very rich man. The rich man dies and goes to a place Jesus refers to as Hades (Luke 16:19-31). Hades is portrayed as a place of torment and agony, but it is not the physical imagery of torment that chills us to the soul. It is the picture of alienation, disconnection, a kind of eternal solitary confinement. We can't fully grasp the meaning of hell, but we do comprehend that it is eternal separation from God and others. At its dreadful core, hell is a reality where belonging is severed from being.

When the topic of eternal destiny comes up, people who reject Christ's offer of eternal life will sometimes flippantly say, "I might end up in hell, but at least that's where my friends will be." I try to be respectful in my response, but often I answer, "I don't know what hell will be like, but from what I read in Holy Scripture, I wouldn't count on being with your friends." Eternal separation from God might well mean eternal separation from others—the ultimate solitary confinement. I shudder to think of the possibility.

Here in 1 Peter 2, we are powerfully reminded of a vastly different reality than eternal separation from God and others. As followers of Jesus, we are a part of God's household, members of God's family—a place of intimacy and security. God's household of faith is where we belong now and for all eternity. What an awesome truth!

It is not incidental that the two foundational ordinances of the church, baptism and Holy Communion, join the concepts of *redeemed being* and *redeemed belonging* into an integral whole. Baptism and Holy Communion both are celebrations of new being and new belonging made possible in Christ, centered in local church life. The two ordinances bridge our new creation individual being and our new creation corporate belonging. Both ordinances remind us of our

reconciliation with God and our calling to be agents of reconciliation with others (2 Cor 5:17-21). The local church is that unique redemptive place where being and belonging intersect. Nothing can surpass it! Nothing can replace it! A rich and enduring theological truth is that each of us has a church home. How tragic when we settle for rootlessness. How myopic when we embrace a misguided and self-imposed spiritual solitary confinement. The local church is designed to be a place where being and belonging meet and where redemption and reconciliation matter.

A Place Where Redemption and Reconciliation Matter

In Paul's brilliant and inspired letter to the local church at Ephesus, both redemption and reconciliation are main themes. In chapter two, Paul describes the glorious news of the redemption available to each of us who embrace Messiah Jesus by faith (Eph 2:1-10). Paul's good news boldly declares the availability of deliverance from sin, death, and despair. What is stunning in this historical context is that new creation life is available even to those outside the covenant community of Israel. Messiah Jesus' death on the cross makes it possible for us to experience new kingdom life. At the foot of the cross of Jesus, paradise once lost is now regained.

As wonderful as this good news is, we must not miss what Paul says later in chapter two. This good news of the gospel encompasses both our upward reconciliation with God and our outward reconciliation with others (Eph 2:11-18).

In Christ, both Jew and Gentile find new creation life. The "already but not fully yet" Kingdom of God is now available to all. Jew and Gentile, once alienated from God and each other, are now brought together in the *ekklesia*, the local church, where redemption and reconciliation meet. The Apostle Paul says this is the stunning mystery that has been hidden from time past and is now revealed. Regardless of our ethnicity or gender or economic status, we are invited to be a part of God's family. We find equal footing at the foot of the cross.

Paul declares to the Galatians, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female,

for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28). Rabbi Paul is in no way diminishing original creation design or in any way blurring creation differences or role distinctions; rather, he is affirming that both redemption and reconciliation are at the very heart of the gospel message. Human differences that often divide people and make some outsiders—ethnicity, economic status, and gender—are not to be barriers of fellowship any longer. The true gospel, the gospel of redemption and reconciliation, welcomes all ethnicities, both genders, and all economic classes to God’s family, to his *ekklesia*, the church.

A fellow pastor of mine who works in the urban core regularly reminds me that the most racially segregated time in America is eleven o’clock on Sunday morning. How sad but true this is in many of our communities and cities. It is my prayerful hope that we will see significant changes in the future as we seek to be a church that truly reflects both the heart of God and the diversity of our communities.⁴

While a privatized spirituality may embrace a gospel of personal redemption with God, it cannot fully embrace reconciliation with others. Is it not then a faulty, non-integral gospel?

Instead of seeking reconciliation with others who are different than us or who we have hurt in some way or whom may have hurt us, we often just punt church altogether— or change churches to avoid having to do the humbling and hard work that the ministry of reconciliation requires.

I am reminded of another story of a man marooned on a desert island. After a couple of years, the man was rescued. When the search party arrived on the island, they noticed that this man had built three makeshift huts. They asked him, “Do you mind telling us why the three buildings?” He said, “Oh, that one is my house and the one over there is my church.” Then they asked him, “So what’s the third one?” Without blinking an eye, he replied, “That’s simple. That’s the church I used to go to!” This apocryphal story hits all too close to home for many of us.

Jesus’ teaching on the kingdom of God embraced both redemption and reconciliation. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declared:

Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering. (Mt 5:23-24)

As God's household, the local church is designed to be a place where being and belonging meet, where redemption and reconciliation matter, and where individual and corporate spirituality mature.

A Place Where Individual and Corporate Spirituality Mature

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul emphasizes this very thing:

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit. Eph 2:19-22

Paul's line of thought here begins with a strong statement of logical conclusion. The opening words "so then" beg the question "so then what?" What's the point we dare not miss? If the gospel embraces both personal redemption and interpersonal reconciliation with those who had been viewed as outside the scope of God's covenantal community, then God's family is open to all who embrace Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. As Paul says in Galatians: both Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free. In fact, all are invited to be a part of God's new redeemed family, God's household—God's building. Like the Triune Godhead, in whose image the church is created, we as a local church are to exude unity in diversity within community.

Jesus is the cornerstone of that building. The foundation is core doctrinal truth, taught by Jesus' apostles and transferred to the local church at Ephesus. Ephesians 2:21-22 are overflowing with building imagery. Here we encounter a building that is not yet completed, but one that continues to grow and expand. This growth and expansion occurs because of Jesus, the wise and masterful builder, who promised

He would build his church. Look with me a bit closer at verse 21. Speaking of Jesus, Paul notes, “In whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord.” Notice this little phrase “being fitted together.” Paul’s choice of passive grammar drives the point home, since proper fitting is not our own doing. It is Jesus who calls us to a local church and it is Jesus who fits us in to that church. The idea of our own self-selection of a church based on an individual consumer notion or on sociological comfort levels is foreign to the New Testament. Yet self-selection and extensive church shopping is the norm in our day.

Like Jesus calls us to Himself, He also calls us to a local church family. He fits us in, based upon His design and desire for us and for that local church. We are not only called to Jesus, we are called to a local church. A biblical understanding of local church calling dramatically changes our perspective of “finding the right church” or “finding the right fit.”

Notice also the parallel phrase “being built together” found in verse 22. The language suggests that we are not the cause of growth, but God is. And notice how Paul finishes his thought on local church spiritual growth with an emphasis on the Spirit. The local church as God designed it is a greenhouse for spiritual growth. Nothing can surpass it! Nothing can match it! Nothing can replace it!

We also must not miss the strong Trinitarian emphasis here, the kind of greenhouse effect that promotes rich and vibrant local church spiritual growth. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all contribute and make full the richness of both personal and congregational spiritual growth. Not only are our individual bodies temples of the Holy Spirit where God dwells, but our congregational gathering is also a temple, a place where God dwells (1 Cor 6:10-20). The local *ekklesia* is a temple of the Holy Spirit, a collective of many mini-temples fitted together—living stones in a beautiful building!

So when advocates of an individual spirituality put distance between being and belonging by asserting that we are not called to join a church but to be the church, are they offering timeless wisdom or short-sighted gibberish?

Coming Home to a Place Where We Truly Belong

The success story of Starbucks is truly remarkable. What is driving its meteoric growth around the globe? Is it merely driven by good coffee or something else? On the television show *60 Minutes*, CEO Howard Schultz, interviewed by Scott Pelley, emphasized that Starbucks is much more than coffee. Howard Schultz reminded us that Starbucks, “...wasn’t in the business of filling stomachs, but rather filling souls... We’re about being the third place... bridging home and work.”⁵

As enjoyable as this new third place is, what does this tell us about our culture’s insatiable longing for belonging? And will this third place satisfactorily answer the desperate cry for connection with others?

Sociologist Robert Putnam has done a lot of thinking about being and belonging in our contemporary culture, particularly emphasizing the demise of belonging. One example he cites to support the loss of true community in our culture is the empirical evidence of the decrease of bowling leagues around the country.⁶ In calling us back together, to a deeper sense of community and connectivity, Robert Putnam makes this concluding point:

...reweaving social webs will depend in part on the efforts of dedicated local leaders who choose to pursue their goals through the sometimes slow, frequently fractious, and profoundly transformative route of social-capital building. But it will also depend on our ability to create new spaces for reconnection, conversation and debate.⁷

When I read Putnam’s words, I want to go out on the street corner and cry out, “Hey, Church of Jesus Christ, wake up!” When our culture is crying out for deeper connection, why are some of us, in the name of revolutionary Christianity, advocating a disconnected spirituality? From my perspective, this approach is sheer madness! Will our culture’s new third place—whether it is a coffee shop, a book store, or a health club—actually deliver a flourishing humanity? I don’t think so. Like the family, the local church was designed to be and to do what it alone can be and do in the world. It’s time for us to wise up and once again see the local church as vitally important and irreplaceable. The local church is a place where we truly belong!

Recently, I received a written note from one of our newer local church members whose family had relocated from Boston to the Kansas City area. It is the kind of note that puts a shout in a pastor's soul. In her warm and affirming letter, this follower of Jesus describes the sense of belonging and care they found in our local congregation. She writes:

I wanted to write this note to share with you how much I appreciate the family of believers at Christ Community Church... We moved here from Boston, leaving family and friends... Christ Community has been one of the best things about our move.... Just one year ago, my very fit and healthy mother was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. Throughout her illness and now after her death, I have experienced God's love and care expressed through the body of Christ Community.

The local church is designed to give us a deep sense of belonging.

Three Strong Strands of Belonging

The writer of Ecclesiastes dispenses timeless as well as timely wisdom. "A cord of three strands is not easily broken" (Eccl 4:12b). With this imagery in mind, I like to think of the local church as a place where people get really tight, a place where lives intersect and are knit together in love and mission. The local church has three strong strands of belonging that are important to each of us who long to experience true community.

Our Relational Belonging – Whom Do We Truly Know?

The local church is designed to be a place of strong relational belonging. It's to be like a womb where family and life-long friends are formed, who stick with us through thick and thin.

In a heart-stopping *Wall Street Journal* article, journalist Peggy Noonan penned a moving piece appropriately entitled, "The Sounds That Still Echo From 9/11." Peggy describes the final phone calls of those on the hijacked planes on September 11, 2001. Shortly before United flight 93 crashed, attendant Ceecee Lyles pulled out her cell phone and left on her home answering machine a final message to

her husband. “Please tell my children that I love them very much. I’m sorry, baby. I wish I could see your face again.”⁸

Facing the pain of death itself is not as fearful as the prospect of being separated from loved ones, the severing of belonging. If you knew you were facing death today or tomorrow, who are a handful of people you would call to say goodbye? Would any of those people be a part of your local church family? Who would attend your memorial service?

As a pastor who participates in many memorial services, I’ve found that the evidence of a deep belonging with others in spiritual community cannot be hidden. A memorial service takes on a whole different texture and beauty when the deceased is deeply loved and known by a caring local church community. Both joy and grief are shared in the celebration of a life well lived—a life deeply connected spiritually with others in close geographic proximity.

Colleen was a vital part of our congregation for many years, serving in many capacities. Colleen loved the Holy Scriptures and was a competent and passionate Bible teacher. A woman of strong faith in Christ, Colleen battled cancer for several years. I always loved being with Colleen. She taught me much about life and walking with God. In all her years of battling cancer, I never heard Colleen complain. Though her body struggled to the very end, Colleen’s faith remained rock solid, her soul buoyant with hope.

Colleen’s memorial service was one of the most memorable I have ever experienced. Our sanctuary was filled with a myriad of Colleen’s friends, plus much joy and hope. People spoke of Colleen’s love for them and for Christ’s church. The number of people whose lives had been deeply touched by Colleen was truly staggering. I left the memorial service contemplating the truth that a life well lived is not lived alone; it is lived out in the context of a local church.

The local church was designed to be a place of close relational belonging. Our sense of belonging is anchored in relational connection and in deeply shared theological truth. True belonging is cemented both in Whom we know and in what we believe. Shared belief and belonging go hand in hand.

Our Theological Belonging – What Do We Really Believe?

German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer offered us clarity in his classic work *Life Together* when he distinguished mere human sociological community with true spiritual community. While human community is knit together by desire or relational sentiment, Bonhoeffer says, “The basis of the community of the Spirit is truth.”⁹

In the broader church circles I frequent, I find that Christian doctrine seems to matter less and less. Yet doctrinal truth ought to matter a whole lot. Our theological belonging is at the very heart of our true local church community. At our local church, we have a doctrinal statement that anchors us and reflects a strong evangelical tradition. When God call us to a local church, He calls us within that truth tradition, a tradition that needs to be enthusiastically supported and affirmed. Our specific Christian truth tradition is a vital component of our true belonging.

Our Missional Belonging –What Are We Actually All About?

In local church community, we belong relationally, theologically, and also missionally. Our missional belonging is the third strand of local church belonging. Missional belonging is what we are actually about, what we are doing together to accomplish God’s redemptive mission in our fallen and needy world. The local church I am privileged to be a part of has a mission statement. It is included in our printed literature, posted on our website, articulated on Sunday mornings when we gather for corporate worship, and woven into our day-to-day conversations. The mission statement of our local church is both memorable and meaningful: “We desire to be a caring family of multiplying disciples influencing our community and world for Jesus Christ.” This is what the local church is designed to be: A missional enterprise with a deep sense of human connection and cooperation. Are we mere Sunday morning spectators or have we moved onto the playing field? Do we clearly understand the mission of the local church to which we are called? Are we thoughtfully, prayerfully, passionately embracing this mission? Are our time, talents, and treasures aligned with that mission? God’s beautiful local church design invites us to be a part of a team.

The local church is about belonging, about accomplishing something beautiful and enduring together.

The Navy's Blue Angels regularly come to our city, but observing these skilled pilots maneuver so close together always takes my breath away. Though each one of these top gun pilots could choose to fly alone, they fly as a team. Training together, these pilots embrace a common mission and become a family. Together they accomplish what none could do alone. Every time the Blue Angels fly, they draw thousands and thousands of people to watch in awe and wonder.

When I think of the local church as God designed it to be, I think of the Blue Angels. At the end of the day, it's not about individuals doing their own thing; it's about a group of individuals doing God's thing. And when this beautiful symmetry and synergy mesh, people watch in awe and wonder.

To their peril, proponents of a privatized spirituality seem to miss this very important connection. Oh, the shipwrecking of faith that inevitably occurs when *being* is severed from *belonging*—when faith is divorced from local church life. In his book, *Revolution Within*, Dwight Edwards tells a moving story that occurred at the Seattle Special Olympics. Edwards writes:

The hundred-yard dash had nine entrants. The gun sounded and the runners started out as fast as they were able. Then one little boy tripped, fell on the track and began to sob. The other eight heard his cry and all stopped to turn and look. Seeing him on the ground, they walked back to him—everyone of them. One little girl with Down syndrome bent down, kissed his leg, and said, "This will make it better." Then all nine put their arms around one another and walked together to the finish line. Everyone in the stadium stood and their cheers continued for several minutes.

Edwards then asks, "What is it about this story that touches something deep within me, something that brought an entire stadium to their feet? Maybe it awakens our intuitive sense that there's something of greater importance in life than individual success. It reminds us that

we were created to be interdependent, and that life was never intended to be lived solo.”¹⁰

What’s the big deal about the local church? It’s a place where we truly belong.

A Heartfelt Prayer

Heavenly Father, for many of us, our experience with the local church has been less than we hoped. Sometimes, we have felt a lingering disappointment or a stinging hurt. Grant us the grace to embrace your creation design once again. May we discover that deep sense of belonging that flows from our immersion in God’s redeemed local fellowship. Amen.