

BELONG

Over the next three weeks, we are doing a mini-series titled 'Belong' and, more specifically, about the benefits and responsibilities that go with committing to a local church community. As individuals, we make a commitment to follow Christ. However, Scripture is clear that we live out that commitment in a corporate setting. In Eph 5:25, we read that "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." Jesus had no illusions that Christians or churches are perfect. However, he was and continues to be committed to us.

ICEBREAKER: We all have different 'connections' and membership of groups in our community. Some of those involve formal membership and involvement or some sort of regular commitment (eg a community service organization, a sporting team or book club). Others may be more 'loose' connections and more informal (eg getting together for occasional meals out or camping trips). Go around the group and complete the sentence: "I belong to and something I appreciate about that group is". Then think about: what were the common things about the answers people gave?

READ: Ephesians 2:11-22

In 1 Pet 2:9-10, Peter wrote "you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."

- What are the 'collective nouns' that Peter used in this verse, to describe the Christian church? What is unique about each one? What is our (collective) calling?
- What does it mean – for you - to 'belong' to God / Jesus Christ? (1 Pet 2:9; Rom 1:6)
- Is it possible to 'belong' to God and not 'belong' to the local expression of the people of God? Why?

The word 'holy' has several meanings. One meaning is to be "set apart for God, to be, as it were, exclusively his." In a moral sense, it means to be "pure, sinless, upright."¹

- What do you think Peter meant by the phrase "you are a ... holy nation"?
- Is it possible for a group of Christians to (collectively) be 'holy'? If so, what does that look like? (eg does it require morality police and cult-like rules/ regulations to ensure everyone conforms)?

The context of today's passage, written to the Ephesian church, is about the unity that Jewish and Greek Christians have in Christ. From a Jewish perspective, Gentiles would never really 'belong', because they were at best, only 'residing' in the land or they were complete outsiders. Jews tried to keep themselves 'separate' with good intentions, because Jews were supposed to be 'holy people' and not, intentionally or unintentionally, become defiled. However, contrary to forcing Gentiles to comply with Jewish law to make them acceptable to himself, Jesus did the opposite. He "abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two." (Eph 2:15 NRSV)

- Many of us work, study and/ or socialise with people from different ethnic backgrounds. Some of us have moved to Australia from other countries. Think of a specific issue. (eg language, personal hygiene, driving etiquette, professional qualifications & competencies, etc). To what extent do we expect people to 'assimilate' to Australian culture? What things are negotiable and not negotiable?
- Jews in the early church had to get used to worshipping alongside Gentiles with different dietary habits. This issue caused much grief in that first 30+ years of the church. What attitudes did they need, for them to deal with their differences and get on with the priority of spreading the gospel?

In Eph 2:19, Paul writes that Jewish and Gentile Christians are '*sym-politei*', or fellow citizens of this new "holy nation". Paul possibly had in mind something akin to Roman citizenship, with a wide range of privileges. Paul writes that, 'in Christ', Gentiles have full citizenship. It wasn't a privilege kept just for Jews.

- It is one thing to have equal citizenship status. It is another thing to treat others as equals. In our church, what words, attitudes and behaviours make people feel like 'second class citizens' and/ or that they don't belong?

¹ <http://biblehub.com/greek/39.htm>

- In Rom 15:5-7, Paul called the church to unity and harmony: “Accept one another, just as Christ accepted you.” What actions, attitudes and words create an environment of inclusive community?

In Eph 2:19b-22, Paul jumps between ‘family’ and ‘building’ images, to highlight that we now ‘belong’ to both a family and be part of something bigger, a spiritual ‘structure’ (for want of a better term) where God resides. Below is an alternative translation of Eph 2:18-22:

“It is through him (ie through Christ) that we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father. So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow-citizens (together) with the holy ones/ saints and members of the household of God; you have been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the keystone/ cornerstone, for it is in him (ie in Christ)) that the whole structure/ building is bonded/ joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; it is in him (ie in Christ) that you too are being built together into God’s dwelling-place in the Spirit.”

- What words or phrases are repeated? (circle or highlight them)
- What words/ phrases relate to buildings or the process of building?

When we become Christians, we become part of God’s family (Gal 1:2), the “family of faith” (Gal 6:10) and the “family of believers”. (1 Peter 2:17) In this passage we read that we are members of the “household of God” (Eph 2:19, 1 Tim 3:15, 1 Pet 4:17). In a number of places, the apostle Paul talks of us being adopted as children of God. (Rom 8:15,23; Gal 4:5; Eph 1:5)

- Read Rom 8:12-17. What benefits come from our adoption as children of God?
- Read Rom 12:9-12, Gal 6:10, Heb 10:24-25. What are some of the responsibilities that come with our familial relationship with other believers?

Ephesus was a city which had a massive pagan temple. But when Paul started writing to Jewish readers about ‘temple’ and temple building, he ‘hit on’ over a thousand years of Jewish history, including the building of Solomon’s temple, it’s destruction, then the building of the second temple. In 168BC, an invading king had sacrificed a pig on the altar in Jerusalem and desecrated the temple. Then, in 70AD, the Romans destroyed the second temple. Jesus had predicted that the temple (his body) would be destroyed, but that it would be raised again in three days. (John 2:18-22). People tend to think of ‘church’ as a physical structure such as a church building or cathedral. However, Jesus saw ‘temple’, less as ‘bricks and mortar’ and more as ‘flesh and blood’. Don Carson writes that:

“It is in Jesus’ death, in his destruction, and in his resurrection three days later, that Jesus meets our needs and reconciles us to God, becoming the temple, the supreme meeting-place between God and sinners.”²

- Read Matt 18:20. What does it take for God to be present among us? (How simple is that!)

In Eph 2:21-22, Paul writes that God builds us together and joins/ bonds us together. In our culture, building a structure involves bricks and cement. In the context of a church, that involves deep, caring relationships for each other, through the good and bad times.

- What things do you appreciate about doing life with people at SBC and particularly in your life group?

REFLECT & SHARE:

“We need to belong, to have some sense of fit in the world, and from a sense of belonging comes the ability to relate and accomplish things. Our own families are, of course, primary in giving us a sense of belonging. This text says we *do* belong. Christ brought us home to God. We live in God’s house as members of his family, and at the same time we are a house in which God lives (2:19–22). We belong with God and are involved in what he is doing. The other people in the house are family with us. This home defines us. Christ has given us place in his world, and from that sense of belonging comes a growing ability to relate and accomplish the tasks to which we are called. This text asks that we remember where home is: We are at home with God.”³

- How can we be family to each other, as part of the household of God? What commitment does that ask of us – to SBC? to our life groups? In other ways– eg serving and encouraging each other?

² Carson, D.A. (March 30, 2010) “The Temple Destroyed: Jesus Becomes the Meeting Place Between God and Sinners.” <https://www.crossway.org/articles/the-temple-destroyed-jesus-becomes-the-meeting-place-between-god-and-sinners/>

³ Snodgrass, K. (1996). *Ephesians*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. p149.