

Why We Belong

Upon This Rock, Part 2

Selected Scripture

As you may know, I've pushed the pause button on our study through Paul's letter to the Philippian church and have launched a series of messages on the church.

These are significant days for the church and we happen to live at the perfect time for the church to know who we are and why we're on the planet and where we're heading – not only long-term but in the short-term.

The elder team has worked over the past few years on updating our constitution and bylaws and this fall we will be rolling out the new documents as well as giving all our members an opportunity to reaffirm their membership according to the new constitution and the new bylaws.

By the way, when I use the word, "new", you might automatically wonder what we're changing. We're effectively changing nothing about what we believe and how we operate.

But we *are* changing the documents so that they reflect how we've been operating for the past decade under the leadership of elders as well as clarify our doctrinal position and our stand on sexual and moral issues.

So if there was ever a time you wanted to stay tuned, it's now.

In our last session, I covered the foundation of the church in a sermon I called, "Who We Are."

We are bought by, and we are built upon the rock of Jesus Christ; He is our Founder . . . and He is our Foundation.

So we as a church are mastered by our Master. We are messengers of His manifesto.

This is who we are!

Now today, I want to address the subject of Why We Belong.

And I want to address this vast subject – which I will only fly over at 35,000 feet – by breaking it down into five statements.

1. First, we belong because we're part of a resistance movement.

We're part of a resistance movement.

And when I say that you probably think I'm talking about resisting the government - and you're thinking in terms of the French resistance or German resistance movements during World War II.

I'm actually talking about resisting something far more dangerous.

I'm talking about how belonging to the church enables me to resist my pride and an innate desire to be unaccountable to any authority but me myself and I.

Chuck Colson, the founder of Prison Fellowship, now with the Lord, wrote – Many Christians have been infected with the most [dangerous] virus of modern American life; what sociologist Robert Bellah calls, "radical individualism." Christians [thus infected] act as if all that matters is "Jesus and me", and in doing so, miss the point altogether; Christianity was never a solitary belief system.¹

Somebody might say, but I'm a Christian, and I meet with two guys at Starbucks, and we talk about the Lord, so we're a church, right?

Another might say, I attend a Bible study, and we're all Christians, so we're effectively the church – and that's all the church I need.

A University student might say, “I attend a gathering of believers on Campus, and we study the Bible and somebody even preaches – and that’s all the church I need.”

The problem with this thinking is that it confuses the biblical definition of the church with people who make up the church.

Let me put it this way: every believer belongs to the universal church – that is, the Body of Christ which is composed of believers all around the world. Paul told the Corinthians that they were all baptized into one Body – the Body of Christ – which is the church universal.

And that One Body is composed of Christians today who are gathering under a tree in Kenya, in a block building with a tin roof in Bolivia and in a gymnasium in Cary. We are all part of one Body – the church universal.

But later on in that same chapter – in fact, turn to the passage in 1 Corinthians 12 – Paul also speaks in the language of a local church – notice how he shifts into the metaphor of a church being like a physical body – notice *verse 18. But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired. If they were all one member, where would the body be? 20. But now there are many members, but one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you”; or again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.”* Look down at the middle part of *verse 24. But God has so composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that member which lacked, so that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. 25. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it.*

Now you and I can’t play a weekly role in the church that is meeting in Kenya or Bolivia – we can’t care for them or suffer with them even though they are our brothers and sisters in the universal body of Christ; but you and I can play a role in the local body of Christ, here in Cary. We *can* serve each other, and we can suffer with each other.

And God intends us to . . . we’re not a hand who doesn’t need the rest of the body. We’re not random body parts just floating around – we are connected to the life and structure of the local manifestation of the Body of Christ.

But let me clarify an important distinction: although every Christian is a member of the universal church when Christians gather together, they are not necessarily a local church.

In other words, when my wife and I gathered together with several thousand Christians at a concert a few months ago, that gathering wasn’t a local church.

Those university students gathered and they even heard preaching, and they sang some songs – but that wasn’t a local church.

So to say the church is made up of the people of God, is not the same thing as saying, wherever there are people of God gathering together, you have a church.ⁱⁱ

And I say this because I’ve heard people say, “My Bible study is my church; or my nature hike in the woods is enough worship for me; or I’m a church all by myself.”

Not hardly. According to the New Testament:

- a church is a body of believers that has or plans to set aside qualified elders and deacons;
- a church gather around a doctrinal and ethical standard of truth;
- a church develops structure that disciplines and disciplines its members;
- a church is a body of believers accountable to its spiritual leaders;
- a church administers its ordinances of baptism and communion as a testimony to those outside the church and as acts of commitment to the Chief Shepherd and the highest authority in the church – who is Jesus Christ.

In other words, 3 guys studying at Starbucks or having Bible study in a home does not constitute a local church – although they may provide a function of the church in that they are encouraging one another in the word.

Here are some symptoms of this independence virus infecting our country – especially where the church is fast becoming nothing more than a one-hour event on Saturday or Sunday.

Jonathan Leeman cataloged the symptoms in his book I read recently – a book that caught my attention because it was endorsed by Mark Dever and Tim Keller – both pastors with wide influence: here are some of the symptoms Leeman cataloged that reveal confusion about the church and a spirit of independence:

- Christians can think its fine to attend a church indefinitely without joining (that’s obvious)

- Christians today think of getting baptized apart from joining a church (that's a little more subtle)
- Christians view the Lord's Supper as a private, mystical experience and not an activity of shared experience with the church body
- Christians assume they can be absent from the gathering of the church in worship without affecting their spiritual life (Hebrews 10, of course, would challenge that thinking)
- Here's another: Christians make major life decisions without considering the effects of that decision on the family of relationships in the local church
- One more: Christians buy homes or rent apartments with scant regard for how factors such as distance and cost will affect their ability to serve in their church and through their church.ⁱⁱⁱ

He gave many more symptoms, but I'll stop with those. And let me say that if reading these symptoms to you irritated you, you are more than likely under the influence of the virus.

Jesus Christ said that He would build His church (Matthew 16); that's the universal church. But then He commissioned His Apostles to gather disciples, which would effectively plant local churches.

In fact, when Paul the Apostle wrote his New Testament letters, keep in mind that more often than not he was either writing to local churches or he was writing to local church pastors – Timothy and Titus; and his letters were inspired direction from God's Spirit to encourage and define and structure these local churches.

God never intended us to be an appendage to the church; to be unaccountable to a local church; He didn't design the Christian life as a solitary pursuit – He didn't expect the New Testament Christian just to believe . . . but to belong.

The driving question in the heart of the believer isn't, "What can the church do for me?"

Beloved, we join a local church as a statement that we have joined the resistance movement – a movement to resist our own pride and our own consumer mentality and our own self-centeredness and a desire to remain unaccountable and exercise the radical individualism that our culture prizes so highly.

Secondly, we belong to the church:

2. Because we've been included in the family portrait

If you ransack the New Testament, you discover the church is referred to as a physical body (*1 Corinthians 12*); you find the church referred to as effectively the Bride of Christ – the beloved object of His sacrifice and devotion (*Ephesians 5*).

Listen, if you love Christ, how can you not love His bride?

But, you say, she messes up so often. And she does.

In fact, it occurs to me that the greatest problem in the church is that you and I are part of it!

But listen, if anybody has the right to disown and abandon His bride – it’s Christ the Bridegroom; instead He has chosen not only to redeem us His Bride but to faithfully love us and allow nothing ever to separate us from Him.

Aren’t you glad?

But we’re also told that the church is a family – in *I Thessalonians 4:10 and also in I Peter 2:17* where Peter says we are to love *the family of believers*.

Paul writes to *Timothy* and informs us that we are told to treat *older men as fathers, older women as mothers; younger men as brothers and younger women as sisters (I Timothy 5)*.

When you came to faith in Christ, listen, every one of us were effectively photo-shopped into the portrait of the church, by the Spirit of God. You belong in the picture. And the picture of the church is a family.

I fear that if I was to ask the average Christian today to draw a picture of the church as they perceive it:

- Many Christians would draw a picture of a gas station – you know, they run a little low once or twice a month and fill their tank up at their nearest church service;
- Other would draw a picture of a movie theater – because to them church is a place of entertainment where you can go for an escape, hopefully in comfortable seats;
- Others would draw a pharmacy – it’s a place where they go only if they’re ailing in some way and need something to help numb the pain;
- Others would draw a picture of the Mall – a one stop-place for everything you want – and the options for all ages are tremendous.^v

Now the church can be all of that, by the way, but it’s much more than that.

- The Bible gives us a picture of a **bride** – who learns to love and serve her faithful Bridegroom;
- The Bible gives us a picture of a **body** – where we learn to function and exercise

our role; we roll up our sleeves and play our part;

- The Bible also gives us a picture of a **family** – where we learn to get along and take care of this house and adjust to each other’s needs; where we sacrifice our individual desires and personal tastes for the sake of sweet unity in the family.

The church is a family portrait – not *many* families, by the way – in a very real way, *one* family; a new family – independent of race, status, rank, age . . . one family.

This is why we belong:

Because we’re a part of the resistance movement:

Because we’ve been included in the family portrait:

3. Thirdly, we belong to the church because we’ve exchanged observing for owning

We’re not just members . . . we’re owners.

Obviously, the church belongs to Christ. In fact, He clearly said, I will build *My* church.

But in a very real sense, we’ve been given a future co-reigning role with Christ in the Kingdom. Co-reigning can be understood as co-owning. We recognize that we did nothing to earn it or deserve our place as royalty in the Kingdom – our inheritance is simply a gift from God.

So also, in the church where we serve and lead, we are much more than participants – in Christ we own His work. In fact, pastors and teachers are considered gifts for the church to own (Ephesians 4:11).

We have more ownership and investment in the church than we might think.

But let’s start with the idea of membership and then we’ll talk about what it means to have ownership.

Someone might say, “Where in the Bible does it talk about church membership?”

Well if you understand the church correctly, you’ll find the idea everywhere.

In fact, what you’ll find is the amazing reality that Christians were so closely attached to the assembly that they were referred to as, simply, the church.

- We’re told that Paul – in his pre-conversion days – *began to persecute the church (Acts 8:3)*;
- We read in *Acts 11:22, news of this reached the ears of the church* – again,

the church is referred to as a physical body, and the people are all ears;

- In *Acts 14:27*, they gathered the church together;
- In *Acts 15:3*, the church sent them on their way;
- In *Acts 15:4*, they were welcomed by the church.
- We're told in *Acts 12:1* that **King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church.**

It's very clear that we belong to the church – and vice versa – the church belongs to us.

In fact, biblically speaking, you could say that the church *is* its members. *The church is its members.*

On a practical note, frankly, it is impossible for elders and deacons to serve the church unless they know who belongs.

Peter writes to the elders a serious command, **“Shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight.”** (*I Peter 5:2*); that isn't a suggestion – it is a command that every true shepherd loses sleep over – agonizes over – prays over.

Paul said effectively the same thing to the elders at the church at Ephesus – **Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God...** (*Acts 20:28*)

Obviously the elders were to accept the responsibility for real lives – not just some gathering.

There is a vast difference between a crowd and a church.

And the flock knew who their leaders were in their local church as well – they are equally commanded to **give double honor to the elders who worked hard at preaching and teaching** (*I Timothy 5:17*). Evidently you had to know who they were, and sit under their teaching, in order to know why they are worthy of being honored.

The Apostles wrote to local churches and commanded them – and us – with dynamic, personal commands that cannot be done at a distance: commands like:

- **be devoted to one another** (*Romans 12:5*)
- **rejoice with one another** (*Romans 12:15*)
- **serve one another** (*Galatians 5:13*)
- **carry one another's burdens** (*Galatians 6:2*)
- **forgive one another** (*Ephesians 4:32*)

- **encourage one another** (*I Thessalonians 5:11*);
- **offer hospitality to one another** (*I Peter 4:9*)
- **pray for one another** (*James 5:16*)

Observers will never engage in the commands – only those who sense ownership and responsibility will.

But let me add this . . . if anything, the church can become self-satisfied with membership rolls . . . and, in many churches, membership is sort of like joining a club.

You get your membership card, and you pay your membership dues and you get to play.

Joining the church is like joining the tennis club and the country club and the bird watchers club.

In our world today, especially in this country, the word “member” simply means that you've found something you're interested in, but not necessarily ready to sacrifice for.

I think we ought to exchange the mentality of a *member* for that of an *owner*.

This isn't a club, and you're a member; this is a church, and you're an owner.

If you're an owner, you'll think differently about the church.

And you'll talk differently too; these people will become your people; this house will become your house . . . this mortgage will become your mortgage. Let's not go that far!

Even the visitors who come here – they aren't visiting us, they're visiting you.

It won't be, “Let me tell you what the church is doing,” it'll be, “let me tell you what my church is doing.”

Everything's different if you're an owner, and not just a member.

One of the exciting things about the days in which we live is the fact that the days of casual Christianity might be coming to a close.

We're heading into a day when cultural Christianity and congregational Christianity – which means nothing more than an hour on Sunday and a nice reputation in the community and extra business contacts – all of that may very soon dissolve and make way for Convictional Christianity – where the only people willing to even be called by the name Christian will be those who are truly following Christ.

Can you imagine someone in North Korea or Turkey or Iraq saying, “I think I'll go by the name

Christian – I like those people; I think if I start hanging around them, and I’ll even adopt their name – it probably makes me feel good and possibly even take my business to a new level.”

Are you kidding?

Now, in our culture, with a growing antipathy toward the gospel; a growing list of examples where Christians are being marginalized, ignored, passed over, even despised – there simply isn’t any logical or self-serving reason for someone to associate with the true Christian church.

I can’t think of anything better for Christianity than the loss of popularity in an unbelieving culture. Frankly, it’s *time* that membership in the church shifted to a gut-level, all or nothing, self-committing, self-sacrificing, self-denying, cross-carrying, Christ exalting – ownership.

This isn’t a club . . . this is the living church of Jesus Christ.

And that’s why we must belong.

And when we truly belong;

- We’ve become a part of the resistance movement – resisting pride and self-serving attitudes:
- We’ve become a part of the family portrait – we’re in the family of God:
- We’ve exchanged observing in the church for owning the church . . . and the stakes are growing higher every day.

4. We belong because everybody’s watching

Can I tell you that one of the reasons I’m so grateful to belong to Christ’s church is because we have the opportunity to become a clear demonstration of the grace and gospel of God?

And if there was ever a day when people are watching the church – and listening to people who say they belong to the church – it is today.

The scandal of the church in Jerusalem, who by *Acts chapter 20* had begun meeting on Sunday – a day they referred to as the Lord’s Day – the weekly anniversary of His resurrection. The church’s shift to meeting on Sunday created quite a stir.

For nearly 2,000 years now, the church has dedicated this day to Christ. It’s His special day. That’s why you celebrate your wife’s birthday on her birthday. A day later and you’re in trouble; a day early . . . that’s okay . . . but you still need to celebrate the next day. Because that’s *the* day she was born; Sunday is the day He arose.

And for 300 years, our own country has been sympathetic to this observance – it has for years – even in my childhood – reserved Sunday as a day for religious focus – even laws – we call them blue laws – going all the way back to the founding days of our country where business on Sunday was limited in order to encourage the activity of the church.

That’s all changing.

In fact, a few months ago I needed work done on our air conditioner, and I called my provider; the receptionist answered and then she told me they’d be able to get someone out to my house, and she gave me the date and I looked it up and said to her, “Um, that’s a Sunday.” I assumed she’d just made a mistake. She hadn’t . . . in fact, I could tell from her voice that she thought I was rather odd to bring it up.

The early church called it the Lord’s Day – the Day belonging to the Lord.

Matthew Henry wrote a commentary on the entire Bible in the early 1700’s – a commentary Charles Spurgeon said every Christian should read through on his knees – Matthew Henry said that Sunday was the day to receive and embrace as our privilege and benefit.”^{vi}

Listen, the further along we go, what our world needs to see as they watch is not us making less of this Lord’s day, but more of it.

Around here you might notice, we stuff Sunday full of opportunities for spiritual growth, fellowship, discipleship, corporate worship – in fact, we bookend the Lord’s day with worship throughout much of the year.

We begin the Lord’s Day with worship together, and we end the day with worship together. We want to be like the early church and maximize the Lord’s Day, not minimize it.

It burdens me that I will preach to several thousand people this morning and several hundred people tonight. I fear what that says about our love for one another – and the Lord’s Day.

Now don’t misunderstand; you don’t have to go to church to be a Christian, but you don’t have to go home to be married either – and I recommend both – for obvious reasons.

As a church family, we want to follow in the perspective of the Puritans 400 years ago who called the Lord’s Day the “market day for the soul”.^{vii}

By that, they meant that Sunday was a day for stocking up spiritually for the week ahead.

This isn’t the day to just casually check in; this is the day to stock intentionally up.

And remember that the world around us is watching.

Let me quickly add this stunning fact that not only is the world watching, but the angelic hosts are watching.

We don't have time to explore this, but there's this stunning revelation from Paul to the *Ephesians in chapter 3* that God through the church is manifesting His wisdom to the angelic hosts who bend in to watch.

We are a spectacle to the world and the angelic hosts of the glory and grace and the gospel of God.

We are committed to belonging to the church because everyone's watching.

5. One more, we belong to the church because Jesus Christ isn't finished.

Aren't you glad about that?

Aren't you glad that Jesus didn't finish building His church before you became a part of it?

And He still isn't finished. He isn't finished here in this church – I'm presently teaching the second largest class of prospective new members in the

history of our church. And the largest class was last year's class – by seven people.

I've already told them that one of the most exciting things they communicate to me is that Jesus Christ is still building this church, and He has plans for this church and He has new disciples and new needs and new leaders and new participants to join with us in this church!

He's not finished . . . here and He's certainly not finished around the world.

- Today, in Indonesia there are so many Muslims coming to faith in Christ that the government will no longer publish statistics showing a religious association.
- Today, in China, it is estimated that there are now more Christians than members of the Communist Party.
- There will be, by conservative evangelical estimates, 510 churches officially formed around the world *today*.^{viii}

Jesus Christ is not finished . . . and neither are we.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 9/20/2015 by Stephen Davey.

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i Charles Colson, The Body (Word Publishing, 1992), p. 32

ii Adapted thoughts from Kevin DeYoung & Ted Kluck, Why We Love the Church (Moody Publishers, 2009), p. 166

iii Jonathan Leeman, Church Membership (Crossway, 2012), p. 23

iv Adapted from Joshua Harris, Stop Dating the Church (Multnomah, 2004), p. 16

v Adapted from Colin Smith, "The Church: Sharing the Passion of Jesus" www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2011/november/6112811.html

vi Quoted by Joshua Harris, p. 93

vii Harris, p. 105

viii Statistics provided by Daniel Meyer, Witness Essentials (InterVarsity Press, 2012), p. 32