



Foreword by Ray Ortlund



belong

LOVING YOUR CHURCH
BY REFLECTING CHRIST TO ONE ANOTHER

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1. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BELONG?

Let me set your mind at ease about this book, or maybe disabuse you of false notions. I neither want you to be intimidated by what you think is in these pages, nor do I want you to be disappointed by what you don't find.

In these pages you will not find a list of qualifications for church membership against which you can measure yourself. Nor will you find an explanation or defense of church membership as a system or structure. My aim is not to give a survey of how membership works in different denominations or traditions. I am writing about *belonging*, and while there is a close connection with formal membership, they are not the same. A person can be a member of a church without belonging, and a person can belong to a church that does not offer formal membership. The pressing question is not about processes or polity but about connection to and closeness within the body of Christ.

This is not a book primarily for pastors or church leaders either, except inasmuch as they are members of the body too. I'm not here to write about marks, measurements, or metrics of a healthy church. Nor will you find a manual on how to recruit or assimilate people into church membership. Rather, my hope is that any church leaders who read this will see themselves as one of the sheep, under Christ our Shepherd, part of this family of God.

Finally, I will not lance a boil of church bitterness in these pages. I have experience of being hurt by churchgoers and church leaders alike. You very well might too. Disillusionment with church comes easily. I've found that dwelling on it doesn't help me love Jesus or his church more. And make no mistake, it is *his* church.

I played football in high school, and the coaches would sometimes have us watch our own game film so we could review our performances and correct errors. Our team was exceptionally bad, so those film sessions were mostly an exercise in the coaches disgustingly yelling, "Look how much y'all suck; be better!" (Poor coaching may have contributed to our overall lack of success.) That's not my aim in this book, either. Yes, the church has some "bad film," with plenty of lowlights, and we can be better. But how to be better, rather than what sucks, is what I will focus on in these chapters.

AN INVITATION

When I say the church can be “better” I am not merely judging by my experiences or preferences. I am looking at it through the descriptions and prescriptions of the Bible. It doesn’t much matter what you or I want the church to be like if that differs from what God wants his church to be like. So that needs to be our standard, and then we need to consider how we fit into God’s design for the church.

This book is, more than anything else, an invitation. I’m inviting you to see the church, in its local expressions, as God sees it. It’s an invitation to see his plan and his heart’s desire for it, and to step into your place in that plan. The Bible offers a transcendent, beautiful, transformative portrait of the church, and we were designed by our Creator to be part of it.

You may have heard preachers refer to the church as “God’s design” or “God’s strategy” or something similar. While those descriptions are entirely true, they can feel mechanized and impersonal. Most of us don’t show up to church with a yearning to be part of a plan. We don’t go through the pains of searching for a new church in a new city after moving across the country because we want to fit into a grand strategy. We are looking for something personal, something deeply meaningful, something with which we can identify. God wants you to find that in a local church—so this book is an invitation to do just that. Yes, God’s plan for his church is strategic—but part

of his perfect strategy is offering hurting, tired, worn-out, needy sinners like you and me a place to belong. His plan for his church is that it be a place to encounter the profound, transformative, healing, restoring grace of Jesus Christ, together.

That is what I am inviting you into. Or rather, this is what the Bible invites you into, and I am doing my best to pass it along with clarity, hope, and beauty.

FINDING THAT FEELING

Pretty much everybody yearns to belong somewhere or to something, and life is a constant sliding scale of feeling a greater or lesser sense of belonging in whatever context. It's easy to recognize the power of belonging in social subcultures. In the 1960s people came together as hippies, a counter-culture for those who were pushing back against corporate and governmental sensibilities and expectations. In the 1990s something similar happened in the punk-rock scene as young people lashed out at "sell-out" pop culture. Today there is a massive subculture of gamers, complete with its own celebrities and vernacular. In each instance people who didn't feel as if they fit in mainstream society found something to be part of, a place to fit, a place of belonging.

We see the same draw in more mainstream parts of culture as well. I live in Tennessee, smack in the heart of the college football cult land (um, I mean, the

middle of college football's most dedicated fandom): the Southeastern United States. There is a whole culture of fandom—team colors, team slogans, tailgate parties, flags on trucks and houses (and on trucks as big as houses), trash talk, emotional roller-coasters, superiority (Alabama), inferiority (Auburn), detachment (Kentucky), and denial (Tennessee). If you are *in* it, you have a sense of belonging. If you, like me, don't care all that much about college football, that last sentence made you feel left on the outside, and if you live in this area of the US, you can sense you are something of an outsider on autumn Saturdays.

The same goes for popular-music fandom, Marvel-movie fandom, *Star Wars* fandom, and *Star Trek* fandom (complete with costumes). And it goes for those who mock these things too, especially as they connect on social media. People seek out the place or the group where they feel they *belong*. Why?

Belonging provides a sense of identity, a context where we think, "I can really be *me*." We fit. We feel safe. We find comfort alongside those who share our opinions, interests, proclivities, animosity, or preferences. We find peace of mind in the familiar.

Sometimes we find belonging not so much in common interests but in a common cause. People identify with political parties, sometimes (sadly) rabidly. They believe the party will bring about change they long for or fend off change they fear. People throw themselves into

efforts seeking to eradicate littering, climate change, homelessness, joblessness, or sex-trafficking—all worthy causes. Often such causes bring together people of varied backgrounds and yet the common cause offers a deep sense of belonging.

When we move to a new place, we often feel like we “don’t belong” because the culture, rhythms, and patterns of life are new. It’s unfamiliar. And sometimes, some long-time residents make it clear that they also think we “don’t belong.” Try being a Yankee in the American South. Or ask any immigrant.

A BROKEN SENSOR

So, although belonging is difficult to define, we know it when we feel it, even if the feeling is fleeting. Some nebulous combination of familiarity and shared experience makes us feel we belong. It is a delicious, easy, comfortable feeling—it is a little slice of heaven. This is why when we find it, we want to keep it, and we want to keep anything from changing in case it ruins it.

But then, almost inevitably, something shifts. Circumstances change. People come or go. Our sense of belonging begins to fade and we lose our grip on it. Now we find ourselves back searching for it again. For most of us, most of the time, this is not a desperate search or even a conscious one. It is more like a low-grade headache that we’ve learned to just live with. But sometimes the sense of “I don’t belong” reaches migraine level and becomes a

crisis. And for some people, this is how they live constantly: uncomfortable in their own skin or circumstances, dissatisfied with the life God has given them.

A fleeting sense of belonging, especially when it reaches that crisis point, will often lead us to question God. Is this really what he had in mind? Is this all he wants for my life? Frankly, those are good questions, and God has an answer for us: no. No, this is not all he has in mind or all he wants for us. Neither does he want us to keep searching for belonging in the same ways from the same sources.

When we feel that yearning for belonging it is because God created us to seek it and find it. Genesis 1 and 2 tell the story of how God created us to feel at home, to connect, to feel safe, to *belong* with him and in his creation. But Genesis 3 tells the story of Adam and Eve's rebellion against God, how sin entered the world through them, and how God rightly judged the world with a curse so that creation's relationship with him became broken. All of creation is affected by the curse. We no longer feel at home in this created world, and left to our own devices we can never find our way back to perfect belonging. Our sense of belonging is skewed. It's like a compass that doesn't point true north, so we end up searching for a good and God-designed thing in all the wrong places.

We were created for belonging. We yearn for belonging. But we find belonging to be, at least in any lasting way, elusive. So where does this leave us?

A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF BELONGING

What we need most is to understand belonging as God intends—to see it as he sees it. When we look for belonging in some vague coalescing of circumstances and people and feelings, we miss the mark because our hearts don't naturally turn to God's way. We want a good thing, a God-designed thing, but we instinctively look anywhere but to him. Instead of drifting from experience to place to social group, we need to understand belonging as part of God's design, as part of God's moral order, and as part of our identity, especially as Christians.

This is something you already understand, whether or not you realize it. If you have a loved one who has been in a serious car accident and suffered life-threatening injuries, they *belong* in the hospital. It's not where they want to be. They will be in a new and foreign place that is uncomfortable, surrounded by strangers. They will feel out of place and yearn to leave. But it is absolutely where they belong, so they can receive the care they need to survive and heal. It is *right* for them to be there.

And while they are there you *belong* at their side, at least as often as you are able. The hospital is just as uncomfortable and foreign to you. But it is *right* for you to be a comforting, stable presence in that environment where you feel out of place.

If you're a parent, you'll know that it's painfully common at some point of their childhood for our children to feel like they don't belong in our families, to feel like an

outsider in their own gene pool and home. This is one of the most subtle, painful effects of the fall, that children would feel disconnected from those they were designed to love and be loved by. What do we tell our children when they feel this way? We tell them we love them. We tell them we're so grateful God gave them to this family on purpose and that he doesn't make mistakes. We reassure them that they *belong* because of God's good design and plan, and because they are loved and accepted in our family. They are part of us.

Belonging, then, is not defined by where we feel most comfortable, most at ease, or by where we have the most in common with others. Belonging is defined by where God intends us to be, and therefore where he intends us to find true life and deepest satisfaction and joy. It is a moral reality, a matter of what is right in God's eyes and what he calls us to. And it is a comforting reality, because doing what God has called us to means walking with him, living in his promises, and being in close relationship to him.

WHERE DO WE BELONG?

Belonging is never, almost by definition, discovered in isolation. Even the most introverted among us yearns to belong with others. We may not love crowds, but no one loves constant isolation. This is the way God made us; it was his idea. From the beginning he intended us to be in unhindered relationship with him and in unhindered relationship with each other. Sin fouled all that up, and

continues to do so, but it is still God's intent that we *belong* with one another.

The Old Testament is essentially the story of God forming a people, a nation, for himself. It was supposed to be a community of people following God and walking closely with him. However, it's also the story of how they broke relationship with God and with one another, and the devastation that came each time they did this. And this is the story that sets up the coming of Jesus, that sets up the profound and undeniable need for a Savior, Redeemer, and Restorer.

As Christians, we know that Jesus came to die for our sins, to save us from judgment, and to restore our relationship with God. It is easy for us, especially in the West, to think of that individually—as in, Jesus saves *me* from *my* sins to restore *my* relationship with God. What we sometimes overlook is that Jesus also came to establish a kingdom, a community of believers who collectively follow him and represent him to the world. This is the kingdom to which all Christians *belong*. It is a kingdom of souls transformed from death to life, from bondage to sin to freedom in Christ. It is Christ's church, across the globe.

This is where we belong, to whom we belong. In fact, this is the truest reality of belonging: we belong to Christ as part of his church. And in his abundant care for us, as part of his plan to make himself known to the world, Christ designed his church to meet as local bodies of

believers. (We see this in the book of Acts and throughout the epistles. We'll look at it further in the next chapter.) These are local churches, like the one you are part of (or are considering joining) and like the one where I pastor.

I said a few paragraphs ago that true belonging is both a moral reality and a comforting reality. Then I walked you through God's design, as shown in his word, for where you belong: the church. So this means that belonging to a church is both a morally good thing—something that God smiles on—and something that ought to bring comfort and joy, because it draws us closer to the heart of God. How does this work?

First, it means belonging isn't just passive. If something is morally good, something that God desires for us to do, then we have an obligation to act in obedience. So part of belonging is being purposeful and committed. Our tendency is always toward inertia, toward ease and passivity, but Hebrews 10:23-25 says:

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

Here is a clear call to take intentional action as part of the church—to stir one another up to love and good deeds, to not neglect meeting, and to encourage one another.

But note that the tone is not one of heavy-handedness. It's not a "do this, or else" tone: that would make church a place not of belonging but of burden. Rather it is a warm urging to build one another up. It is a command to do the things that make belonging both easier and richer. God has given us a clear direction, and by following it we find a clear reward. By obeying this command we are participating in welcoming others into belonging and in finding belonging ourselves.

Just as belonging is defined by obedience to God's summons (moral reality), it is defined by the promise and heart of Jesus too (comforting reality). In John 17, Jesus prays what is often known as the "High Priestly Prayer," in which he speaks to his Father on behalf of his disciples and the church through the ages—all those who would one day believe in him through the preaching of the gospel. (That's right, Jesus prayed for you!) In verses 20-26 he lays out his desires for his people through the ages:

I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved

me. Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.

Did you see what Jesus wants—what his heart for his people is? He wants us to be *one*—that is, unified in him in the same way that he is unified with his Father. This isn't something we can just commit to and make happen by best intentions and good hustle. But Jesus wouldn't desire a thing for us that he doesn't also make available to us. So there is a built-in promise here. This is a supernatural kind of togetherness, given to believers by the Holy Spirit. It is the kind of togetherness that isn't defined by how we are similar to one another but rather that overcomes differences the world around us might see as insurmountable barriers. (Ephesians 2:11-22 explains and portrays this magnificently.) Jesus is promising that his Spirit will reside in his church and be our unifying, defining reality.

Jesus also makes clear that he wants us to know and show his love; he wants us to be with him. He is offering and promising a context of absolute, unhindered belonging in and through himself. And it is not the

kind of belonging that is self-serving and exists solely so that we as individuals can have our needs met and find a place of comfort. Yes, the church is to be that, but it is to be that “so that the world may know that [God] sent [Jesus].” Our togetherness, our belonging, is to be a public evidence and invitation to the transforming, freeing, life-giving, comforting presence of Jesus Christ.

To belong, as God created us to belong, is so much more than finding a place of commonality or a comfort zone with those who share interests or oddities. It is more than gaining a level of comfort and familiarity. Certainly, those are wonderful discoveries and can spark significant friendships. But God made you and me for something even more than that. He made us to be members of his kingdom—of his church. Specifically, he made you to be part of a local body of believers. This is where and with whom you are meant to find belonging.

So we are to belong to a church because we are commanded to. And we are to belong to a church because it is good to. In the coming chapters we will look at what belonging to church means. We’ll confront the challenges to belonging. Mostly, though, my hope is to help you see the beauty, life, and freedom of truly belonging to the body of Christ when it is truly exemplifying the character of Christ.

ACTION STEPS

- Consider your current perception or understanding of church membership. How does the reality of *belonging* fit with it? What might you need to reconsider or explore further?
- Where have you found a sense of belonging in the past or right now? What gave you that sense? Have you found it in a church?
- How has this chapter encouraged you to seek or deepen your belonging within your local church? What might you need to do, or change?
- If you struggle to grasp or accept the reality of belonging in a church, reflect on the lengths God went to to establish the church. Consider the way he established his people and kept his covenant with them in the Old Testament. Consider how he sent his Son to fulfill the covenant and establish the church in the New Testament. And consider the sacrifice Christ made to see his church formed.
- How are you going to think differently about church, or act differently toward your church, as a result of reading this chapter?