

“YOUR PLACE IN THE CHURCH”
(Ephesians 2:19-22)

One of our primary needs as human beings is to belong. The need to belong begins on the playground where you discover your place in the social hierarchy and what group you fit into. Throughout life there are any number of groups you can belong to – some groups are based on shared interests like a softball team or horseback riding club – some are focused on serving the community such as the hospital auxiliary or volunteer fire department – some groups are formed around a passionately held political or social cause. Other groups find a deep identity in shared experiences such as having served in the military or surviving cancer. There is just about any and every kind of group you can belong to. I knew a group one time where everyone in the group was named Becky – a pretty exclusive club. I also remember a group of ladies who met here in town called the Red Hat Club – all you had to do was wear a red hat and you’re in. Today with social media you can join a wide range of groups just by clicking on a button, and if you don’t like any of those groups, you can start your own group.

Of all the groups that you can join and belong to there is one group unlike any group in the world – a group formed by God Himself that transcends any other allegiance or affiliation – and that is the church. When most people think of the church, they usually think of a church building where people meet, but the church is actually the people who come to the church building. The word “church” comes from the Greek word *ekklesia* meaning “a called-out assembly or congregation” that God sets apart from the rest of the world. The church is both an exclusive group in that only those who have placed their faith in Christ and have been born again belong to the church – but also inclusive in that anyone is invited to become a part of the church by placing their trust in Christ.

In recent years the church has fallen on hard times. As our culture has grown increasingly secular, church attendance has fallen quite dramatically, and the Covid pandemic only made things worse. In addition to this, many people have simply given up on the church because of past negative experiences in church or dissatisfaction with what church has to offer. Today I want to lift the church up and paint a biblical, positive picture of what the church is and why, if you are a believer, belonging to a church is not an option, but a holy privilege and honor.

Several of you have commented on how great the book of Ephesians is, and part of that is because the Apostle Paul – by inspiration of the Holy Spirit – so eloquently reveals our spiritual blessings and privileges as Christians. In chapter one, and going through 2:10, Paul has talked about what it means to be a Christian *individually* – that God chose us before the creation of the world to be saved and adopted into His family – Christ redeemed and forgiven us through His blood – and the Holy Spirit sealed and secured our salvation. In chapter two he talks about our radical transformation from being spiritually dead and eternally doomed to being made alive in Christ and given eternal life.

Then beginning in 2:10 Paul switches gears a bit and talks about what it means to be a Christian *corporately* – once we are saved, we become part of God’s *ekklesia*. Jews and Gentiles, who were once alienated from each other have now been brought together to form the church. In Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, rich nor poor, male nor female – we are all one in Christ. Likewise, when we come together as a church have represented a wide variety of ages, generational differences, and various backgrounds and experiences – but all of our differences fade as we come together as a church united in Christ.

In verses 19-22 Paul wants all those who belong to the church to sense the full wonder of what it means to be part of God's called-out assembly. Here's what he writes... "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit."

As a reminder, Paul is writing to Gentiles in the church at Ephesus who were once far from God and alienated from God's covenant relationship with Israel, but now have a whole new relationship not only with God, but with fellow Jewish believers. Paul loves to use word pictures or metaphors to describe what he's talking about, and here he uses three metaphors to describe this brand-new group called the church – we are citizens of a new kingdom, we are members of a new family, and we are building blocks of a new temple. Each of these word pictures tells us something important about our place in the church.

First, Paul writes that Gentile believers are now **fellow citizens** alongside Jews. In the Roman culture of the first century being a citizen meant that you swore your allegiance to a city or state, and in return you were provided protection, along with certain rights and privileges. For centuries Gentiles had no part in God's covenant with Israel, and they were seen as strangers and aliens.

A *stranger* refers to someone who is in a foreign country as a tourist – they are temporarily passing through. An *alien* refers to someone who is living in a foreign land but not a citizen. Both a stranger and an alien have no rights or privileges, and therefore never feel like they are home. It's similar to the feeling you get when you go to a foreign country and you're suddenly dropped in a whole different culture – you don't know the language, you don't know their money system, and you don't know where things are located. You feel very, very different. That's how the Gentiles felt for centuries. Whereas the Jews had God's Word revealing His plan and purpose, and they had God's law revealing how they were to live, and they had God's promise of a coming Savior – the Gentiles were strangers and aliens – they were on the outside looking in.

But now, through Jesus' death on the cross, God has brought Jew and Gentile together to form a whole new people making up a new kingdom. Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36). Jesus brought to earth a new, spiritual kingdom – a rule and reign over the hearts of believers who belong to His kingdom. Those who don't know the Lord still belong to the kingdom of darkness – the kingdom of the world belonging to Satan. Colossians 1:13 says, "For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves."

Being citizens of this new spiritual kingdom, made up of the church, we have a new allegiance. Roman citizens in the first century were required to make an annual confession that "Caesar is Lord." If they did that, they would be granted protection by the Roman Empire and be allowed to do business and carry on their lives. But now, Paul says to these same Gentiles, you have a new allegiance – a higher allegiance – and that is to Jesus your Lord.

As Christians we have dual citizenship – we are citizens of the country we live in and the Bible commands us to be good, earthly citizens – to render unto Caesar the things that belong to Caesar. But more importantly, we are citizens of heaven – we're not physically in heaven yet, but spiritually-speaking, our hearts and minds are to be set on things above. As citizens of God's heavenly kingdom our values and priorities are focused not on the temporal things of this world, but on eternal things.

Along with being citizens of a new kingdom, in the same sentence Paul uses a second metaphor of the church – we are **members of a new family**. In verse 19 he says, “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.” It’s one thing to be a citizen of a vast kingdom, but being members of God’s family paints a more intimate, relational component of the church.

As you read about the early church in the book of Acts, you sense the family bond as believers met together, and worshipped together, and ate together, and shared what they had with one another. As individual members of the church we may not be blood relatives, but we are related to one another by the blood of Christ. We are bonded together in such a way that, according to Jesus, is stronger than the bond we have with our natural families.

In our new member’s class, I spend some time explaining how the New Testament the word *ekklesia* is used two ways. First, there is the *universal* church that is made up of all believers around the globe – made up of all races, languages, and cultures. We see quite a few believers traveling through our area come to church – just a few weeks ago we had a couple from Germany who said this was the first American church they had ever been to (I hope we did a good job reflecting the church!). It’s always fun to met fellow Christians when you’re traveling and instantly there is a bond because we are fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

But the New Testament also refers to what’s called the *local* church. In fact, 90 of the 114 times *ekklesia* is mentioned it is talking about the local church – meaning the individual churches that make up the global, universal church – like the churches that met locally at Ephesus and Colossi and Corinth. The local church is the visible, hands-on expression of the universal church. It’s easy to belong to the universal church: you don’t have to attend, you don’t have to give of your time or money or resources, and you don’t have to get along with other believers. Each local church is what makes the universal church come alive, and in the New Testament it is assumed that every believer is connected to a local body of believers.

God didn’t save us just to have a relationship with Him, but to have a relationship with other believers who are adopted into His family. We have an obligation to our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. God designed for us to live out our Christian faith in community, and through the local church He provides a spiritual family to give us the encouragement and accountability we need to grow in Christ. That’s why Hebrews 10:25 says, “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another.” We miss out of something very valuable when we choose not to belong and not meet together.

Many local churches, including ours, have a formal membership, and I explain in our new member’s class why formal membership is assumed in the New Testament, which I won’t get into now. But being a member of a local church is a way of saying, “Count me in.” You may say, “But I’m already in – I’m a member of the universal church by way of believing in Christ, so why am I not just accepted as a member of this local church?”

As you read through the New Testament epistles, you see that there was a structure and formality to each local church. It was important to have safeguards and accountability, and for each person in the church to understand the beliefs and values and goals of the church so that everyone was on the same page. That’s really what becoming a member is about – it’s a way to hear your testimony of faith and know that you are in agreement with what our church is about.

Formal membership also elevates commitment and participation so that you don't just attend church, but are a vital part of the church. If you're not yet a formal member of this local church, be sure to come to the next New Member's class and I think you'll view the church and your place in it in a whole new, exciting way.

In verses 20-22 we come to the third metaphor of the church – that of a building, specifically the temple building – we who make up the church are the **building blocks of a new temple**. Paul writes that we are members of God's household... “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.”

I was always taught not to mix your metaphors, but Paul was very fond of doing so, and the metaphor of the *ekklesia* being a building adds the nuance of believers being a dwelling place for God's presence. When I was a kid, one Sunday after a church potluck my friends and I got bored and started playing guns outside, and the gun battle eventually made its way into the church sanctuary. One of my friends hid behind the pulpit, another behind the organ, and the rest of us staked out our positions behind pews. At some point my mom found us playing in the sanctuary and was horrified... “You can't play in here – this is God's house!” Gulp. We didn't mean to offend God – we were just looking for a place to hide.

Part of the thinking that the church building is a sacred place comes from the fact that the Old Testament temple was known as a sanctuary – the holy place where God's glory and presence dwelled among His people. The temple was the focal point of Israel's identity and purpose – the place where God met man. When Jesus came to earth, He said that He Himself was the temple – meaning that the glory and presence of God was manifested in Him. The Old Testament temple was now obsolete because everything that it pictured was fulfilled in Christ.

Now that Jesus has gone back to heaven, where is the temple now? Listen to what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3:16, “Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst?” Not to pick on my mom, but the sanctuary where God dwells is not the church building, but in the people who come to the church building. The Holy Spirit of God resides in the people who make up His church. This is why the church is unlike any other group on earth because we are the dwelling place of God.

Using the metaphor of the church being a temple building, Paul describes three important elements that make up the church – it's foundation, it's cornerstone, and it's building blocks. Every building begins with a strong **foundation**, and there are many examples of what happens when the foundation is not solid. Some years ago, a large crack in the church ceiling formed right above me, and there were also cracks in the offices on either side of the stage – all of which were the result of this end of the sanctuary being built on fill dirt. Over the years the ground settled and this end of the building began to sink. In 2003 we hired a company to install helical piers under the church to jack the building up and give it a foundation. One of these helical piers, right under my office, went 70 feet underground. I feel very secure and stable when I walk into my office.

In the same way the *ekklesia* must be built on a sure foundation, and that foundation is the “apostles and prophets” – men like Paul and Peter and John and the other apostles who God sent out to start churches and instruct them in sound doctrine.

The New Testament was written by the apostles or those who were closely associated to the apostles. They were God's mouthpieces or prophets to proclaim the foundational truths on which was the church was built. Acts 2:42 says that the early church "devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching" – both what they taught from the Old Testament and the teachings that would make up the New Testament. Any group or organization has a set of beliefs and principles they adhere to. When an immigrant becomes a citizen of the United States, they raise their right hand and swear to support and uphold the constitution of the United States – the document that governs our nation.

As citizens of God's church, we unite around the teachings of the New Testament, written by the apostles and prophets, and well as the Old Testament that was validated by Jesus and the apostles. Our church doctrinal statement says that the Bible is our "sole authority in all matters of faith and practice." As a church, we are governed by the Word of God. We open it up each week and let it speak to us. We don't pick and choose what portions of God's Word we like or don't like, or ignore teachings that are controversial or offensive – we take God's Word – we listen to it, we study to find out what it means, we believe it, and then we strive to live by it.

If a church is not built on the foundation of God's Word it will be weak and ineffective and become nothing more than any other group or club. In 2 Timothy 4:3 Paul laments... "For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear." There is tremendous pressure on churches to compromise truth in order to conform to the thinking of the world, but Paul told Timothy to just keep preaching the Word – in season and out of season – whether is popular or offensive – just be faithful to the teachings that have once for all been delivered to the saints.

Notice also that the cornerstone of the church is Jesus Christ. If you've done construction or masonry, you know how important corners are, and that they're plumb and straight. In ancient buildings a cornerstone was the first stone put in place that served as a reference point for every stone laid after it. Builders wanted to make sure that the first stone was level and aligned so that the rest of the building followed suit.

In the Old Testament, the prophet Isaiah referred to the coming Messiah as the "cornerstone," and exhorted Israel to put their trust in Him and build their lives upon Him. Now that Christ has come, He is the cornerstone upon which the church is built, and all things are measured by Him and held together by Him. The church is not only to be Bible-based, but Christ-centered.

To be Christ-centered means that we must preach Christ as the only way of salvation. Any other basis of salvation, any other way or philosophy, presents a false hope to people and keeps them lost in sin. Being Christ-centered means that we don't follow or elevate human pastors and leaders and treat them as celebrities – Christ is the only celebrity of the church. Being Christ-centered also means that we look to Jesus to lead us – we don't work or make decisions by our own power, but bathe all our decisions in prayer, depending on the Holy Spirit to lead us.

Once the foundation of the building is laid and the cornerstone is put in place, then one-by-one the building blocks are placed to form a building. Verses 21-22 says, "In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit."

Paul pictures the church as a building growing brick by brick into a glorious temple where God dwells. The Apostle Peter also used the analogy of the church being a building and said that each believer placed into the church is a “living stone,” emphasizing once again that the church is not a physical building with a street address, but is the living, breathing people that meet in the church building. Each time someone accepts Christ as their Savior, another living stone is added to God’s ever-growing church.

When the original temple was built in Solomon’s day, stones of every shape and variety were quarried and then shaped and fitted into the building. In the same way, God quarries us from the pit of sin and fits us into the spiritual house He’s building. He chisels us, shapes us, and then places us exactly where He wants us to be. I like that. When we come together as a church we come in all shapes and sizes, with different backgrounds and experiences, with different gifts and talents, in various stages of Christian growth, and He lays us side-by-side. Being part of church means that we are closely connected with each other – flaws and all – and each individual stone is needed and valued.

God is building us together to be a dwelling where He lives by His Spirit. What an amazing thought – the God of the universe lives right inside us! That’s why the church is unlike any other group on earth, and as the world observes us, they should notice that our values and priorities, our morals and ethics are different – they should notice that we are a family that loves and supports and encourages one another – they should notice that we have a deep, abiding peace and joy that stands out – so that they say, “Tell me about your group, how do I join?”

After reading this passage I would like to give three cheers for the church. The church is far from perfect because it is made up of imperfect people, and sometimes the rough edges stick out and need to be chiseled and smoothed out – but these verses remind us of the lofty status of the church and how privileged we are to belong to the household of God and to be part of what God is doing in the world – and with this privilege comes the responsibility to give ourselves fully to the church that Christ loves and for which He gave His life.