

BELONG (2)

People loved by God

A. Introduction

1. What is the church?

There are lots of ways of answering this question.

The church is a gathering, the people of God, visible and invisible, a creature of the Word, the gospel made visible, "one, holy, catholic and apostolic", where the Word is preached and baptism and the Lord's Supper is celebrated, and the dearest place on earth.

Because it is all these things and more, it is a place to belong.¹

By looking at the names given to or the image used to describe the church, we will see why the church is a great place to belong to.

"Being a Christian, by definition, involves belonging to the church – and that, in turn, means belonging to a particular church." (Sinclair Ferguson)

A particular church being a gathering of believers in a specific location under the leadership of elders.

This doesn't mean that the church is perfect or that our experience of belonging to a church will be perfect.

"Give yourself to the Church. You that are members of the Church have not found it perfect and I hope that you feel almost glad that you have not. If I had never joined a Church till I had found one that was perfect, I would never have joined one at all! And the moment I did join it, if I had found one, I should have spoiled it, for it would not have been a perfect Church after I had become a member of it. Still, imperfect as it is, it is the dearest place on earth to us." (Charles Spurgeon)

The apostle Paul knew how disappointing a local church can be, and yet he still wrote about what a privilege and joy it is to belong to it.

Why is the church a place to belong?

2. The church is a great place to belong, because we belong to the people who God has called.

"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his possession, so that you may proclaim the praises of the one who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light." (1 Peter 2:9)

We share the same testimony that we were sinners, but God has shown us grace by saving us.

3. The church is a great place to belong, because it is to be part of the people who are loved by God.

The church is the beloved of the Father and the bride of Christ.

God loves all the church and every local church.

B. We are loved by God

1. The church is the beloved of the Father.

God loves His people. His delight is in His people. He is committed to His people.

This love is eternal.

¹ A Place to Belong is the title of a book by Megan Hill on which this series is based

"I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you."
(Jeremiah 31:3)

"But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him."
(Psalm 103:17)

This love is vast.

"I pray that you, being rooted and firmly established in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the length and width, height and depth of God's love, and to know Christ's love that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God." (Ephesians 3:17-19)

This love is seen in sending of His Son to save His people.

"For God loved the world in this way: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16)

"God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his one and only Son into the world so that we might live through him. Love consists in this: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins." (1 John 4:9-10)

This love is experienced when we belong to the church.

"See what great love the Father has given us that we should be called God's children—and we are!" (1 John 3:1)

The reason why we are the beloved of the Father is because we are in Christ, and that is what He is.

"And a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased."
(Matthew 3:17)

"Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, so that they will see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the world's foundation." (John 17:24)

"...to the praise of his glorious grace that he lavished on us in the Beloved One." (Ephesians 1:6)

2. The church is the bride of Christ.

Jesus looks upon the church as His bride.

"I am my love's and my love is mine; he feeds among the lilies." (Song of Songs 6:3)

"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This mystery is profound, but I am talking about Christ and the church."
(Ephesians 5:31-32)

"Then I heard something like the voice of a vast multitude, like the sound of cascading waters, and like the rumbling of loud thunder, saying, Hallelujah, because our Lord God, the Almighty, reigns! Let us be glad, rejoice, and give him glory, because the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has prepared herself. She was given fine linen to wear, bright and pure. For the fine linen represents the righteous acts of the saints." (Revelation 19:6-8)

"I also saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared like a bride adorned for her husband." (Revelation 21:2)

Jesus loves the church as His bride.

"Before the Passover Festival, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." (John 13:1)

"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her to make her holy, cleansing her with the washing of water by the word. He did this to present the church to

himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or anything like that, but holy and blameless."
(Ephesians 5:25-27)

Jesus shows His love for the church by dying for her.

Jesus shows His love for the church by cleansing her.

"God does not find people who are beautiful and then decide to love them. Rather, he makes the object of his love beautiful." (Garry Williams)

3. If the church is the beloved of the Father and the bride of Christ, we should love the church too.

"Dear friends, if God loved us in this way, we also must love one another." (1 John 4:11)

This is why the New Testament writers call the church 'beloved' or 'dear friends'.

"Dear friends, I am not writing you a new command but an old command that you have had from the beginning. The old command is the word you have heard." (1 John 2:7)

"Dear friends, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet been revealed. We know that when he appears, we will be like him because we will see him as he is." (1 John 3:2)

"Dear friends, if our hearts don't condemn us, we have confidence before God." (1 John 3:21)

"Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see if they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world." (1 John 4:1)

"Dear friends, let us love one another, because love is from God, and everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God." (1 John 4:7)

"Dear friend, I pray that you are prospering in every way and are in good health, just as your whole life is going well." (3 John 2)

"Dear friend, you are acting faithfully in whatever you do for the brothers and sisters, especially when they are strangers." (3 John 5)

"Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good. The one who does good is of God; the one who does evil has not seen God." (3 John 11)

C. We are to love like God

1. What God loves, we are to love.

"I give you a new command: Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you are also to love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."
(John 13:34-35)

"Dear friends, if God loved us in this way, we also must love one another." (1 John 4:11)

We are to love His people.

Though we should have a concern for God's global people, we are especially called to love His people locally.

We have a people to love and they are those who gather as the local church we are part of.

We are to love them, because we love God and God loves us and has put His Spirit in us to enable us to.

"No one has ever seen God. If we love one another, God remains in us and his love is made complete in us." (1 John 4:12)

"We love because he first loved us." (1 John 4:19)

2. How God loves, we are to love.

"Therefore, be imitators of God, as dearly loved children, and walk in love, as Christ also loved us and gave himself for us, a sacrificial and fragrant offering to God." (Ephesians 5:1-2)

We are to love like Christ.

"For those he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that he would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters." (Romans 8:29)

This means loving those who are unlovely.

Christ loves us because He loves us. He loved us when we were fallen, enemies, strangers, rebels, haters, impure, disobedient, hopeless, and ignorant.

"But God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8)

We are to love those in the church even when they are thoughtless, immature, unkind, foolish, and entangled by sin.

This means loving sacrificially.

Christ loves us by giving up His life for us.

"This is how we have come to know love: He laid down his life for us. We should also lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters." (1 John 3:16)

We are to love those in the church by giving up our time, money, energy, comfort, preferences, emotional resources, and respect from the world, to serve them.

This means loving them by obeying Christ.

Christ as the bridegroom is the Lord and head of the church who is His bride.

"Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord, because the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church. He is the Saviour of the body. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives are to submit to their husbands in everything." (Ephesians 5:22-24)

We are to love those in the church by following the lead of our bridegroom, letting Him tell us what we are to be like, how we are to be organised, and what we are to do as a church, because that is how we are made lovely by Him.

"...to make her holy, cleansing her with the washing of water by the word." (Ephesians 5:26)

This is why a local church is where the Word is rightly preached. It must be Bible-believing, Bible-dependent, and Bible-governed.

"My sheep hear my voice, I know them, and they follow me." (John 10:27)

3. The church is a great place to belong, because we belong to the people who God loves.

We are to love those in our local church because they are beloved of the Father and the bride of Christ.

We are to love those in our local church because that is evidence that we belong to Christ and the way God assures us that we do.

We are to love those in our local church because that is how we become like Christ.