

Unity in Christ: Church in Full View
Ephesians 2:19-22

“So then, we are no longer aliens and strangers...”

Introduction: If you had to describe what it means to belong to a church, how would you do it? Or if someone outside the church would try to define what it means to be a part of a church, what would they say?

- Most would say that they **attend services** at some volume and regularity, be it twice a year or once a month. Attendance often equals belonging in our minds.
- Some would define belonging to a church by the **programs** you are a part of – our kids are involved in the children’s or youth ministry, we help with a particular ministry, or have served in a specific area.
- Still others may think about belonging in terms of **family history**, that a church was where they grew up or where their family still attends.
- A few may think it has to do with **giving** money at a church, and where your money is your loyalties lie, and thus belonging would follow.

Now, there is NOTHING wrong with any of these, and each of these is certainly important in terms of our experience in life together. But much like the “Blind man and the Elephant”, with each trying to explain a part of the whole while missing the actual picture. Most will describe the church based on *their own experience, rather than see it from the height of what God is actually doing!* God’s church is both a mystery and glorious reality. It is not something that WE can make ourself belong to, but a placement of God within something HE creates and sustains. There is so much more going on in God’s church than the programs, building, and services that we can see. God is building for Himself a group of people for an eternal possession, and that building is living and growing. But make no mistake: the Church belongs to Him, and He is the One who makes it possible for us to belong.

So, there are two main points or principles we want to look at this morning. 1) We want to see the church from God’s perspective, allowing our definitions and impressions to be built from Scripture outward, rather than our experience inward. 2) We want to understand the power of how God created and sustains the church, and the power of BELONGING to His church. Paul does this by giving us **3 pictures, 3 metaphors** of God’s church that helps us SEE the church so we can live out the reality of it. Remember, chapters 4-6 is *the how*, where these first 3 chapters gives us the “*who*” and “*why*”. Our hope is that by understanding, it will enliven the way you think about your life in God’s church, and that you will undoubtedly remember and embrace the fact that **you belong because God has reconciled you to Himself, moving us from sinner to saint, from alien to citizen, from stranger to son! That is the church!!!!**

Our Unity in Christ gives us NEW ACCESS as Citizens (19a)

“So, then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints...”

- **When Access was cut off**

Think back at how Paul framed chapter 2 of this letter. It started by explaining a believer's **former condition**: dead because of sin, people defined by disobedience, following the course and influences of this world, and perpetually under God's wrath. Then, in 2:11-12, he explained that our situation was even worse, or at least deeper, than we thought. We non-Jews were FAR away from God, since we were not part of God's chosen people of Israel, had no Messiah, no Temple, no citizenship, no God, and no hope. We were wandering in this world trying to make sense of a puzzle with no picture and where the pieces did not fit together. We were:

Strangers – We were like foreigners or tourists traveling in a foreign land by agreement from the visiting nation. We did not belong. We could not. No matter how much we try to NOT be a tourist when we visit another country (no fanny pack, camera pouch, or sunglass strap), we will always be a stranger.

Aliens – This would be someone residing in a foreign country but only with a residence visa, not as a full citizen, meaning you will not experience the **privileges of citizenship** of that country.

BUT WE ARE NO LONGER THAT WAY when we are reconciled with God and thus part of His church.

- **Privileges of Citizenship**

Notice that Paul says we are NOW citizens, fellow citizens with the saints. Perhaps we read that and see it as a minor thing, but this is a monumental, earth-shattering reality.

Being a Roman citizen was everything for someone living in the Roman controlled world at the time. In a culture where there was a huge slave population that made up the vast middle class, citizenship was highly desired. One, like Paul, could be born into it or it could be purchased (see Acts 22:38). Citizenship came with distinct **privileges**: Right to vote, hold office, own property, make contracts, have a lawful marriage, to have your children be born INTO citizenship, to sue and be sued, to defend oneself in court, have a legal trial, and could not be tortured, whipped, or receive a death penalty without a court given guilty verdict. It was this last one that Paul experienced multiple times in his ministry: once while in Philippi, where he was publicly beaten though uncondemned and thrown into prison. This led to local officials to be afraid because they had done this to a Roman citizen (See Acts 16:37-38). It happened again in front of a Roman tribunal where they ordered him to flogged (whipped), with government officials once again filled with fear when they realized he was a citizen by birth (Acts 22:26-28). This citizenship got him a ticket to Rome as he appealed to Caesar (Acts 25:11; 26:32; 28:19)

But what are the privileges of citizenship in God's church? 1) **We are now fellow citizens WITH THE SAINTS** – This means that we are no longer wandering, no longer alone, but we are united in citizenship with not only Jews and Gentiles, but with all saints who are followers of Jesus having been redeemed by His blood and forgiven through His death. 2) **We have privileged ACCESS** – Foreigners are often shut out of the Embassy, with no hope of protection. As a US citizen, I could go to the US Embassy in the Central African Republic and feel a sense of belonging, rest, and even swimming in their pool! As a citizen of God's church, we are under His guidance and protection, the sphere of covering that we enjoy (and that one who is disciplined out of the church misses out on – 1 Cor. 5:4-5). 3) **We have a new future home and hope** – Philippians 3:20-21, *"But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like His glorious body, by the power that enables Him even to subject all things to Himself."* Citizenship has implications now and forever. Here is the irony: ***we are still aliens and strangers***, but now it is in correlation to THIS WORLD (1 Pet. 2:11). We are now tourists in this world, waiting to go home to be with our Savior. The church, then, is

a bastion of citizenship, an Embassy of light in the midst of a foreign land, where we bind together in a common mission because we have a common identity because of our most uncommon Savior!

Our Unity in Christ gives us NEW BELONGING as Family (19b)

“...and members of the household of God.”

- **Pathway of Belonging –**

Being united and connected to a family can easily be taken for granted from those who've always had it, but for those who have tasted being alone or disconnected, belonging is powerful. Erin and I just watched a documentary of Chris Norton called “7 Yards”, telling the story of Chris' life, a paralyzing football injury in college, and his journey in learning to live, take steps, and have a family with his new realities. But he and his wife went further and adopted 4 girls, one of whom was in her later teens and had lived in the foster care system for years. Upon learning that she was fully adopted, young Whitley commented through tears that she had waited her whole life to be a part of a family, to be loved, and to know she belonged.

This is what God has done with us. He took people without hope, who had been homeless, and took them to be His own. We know that God saved us by His grace through the finished work of Christ on the cross, and He paid the purchase price of His blood to buy us out of judgement. This would have been phenomenal in and of itself, but God went beyond that. He did not simply make us slaves, but sons. He brought us into His family. Family **implies intimacy**, an even closer bond than citizenship. This is one of the reasons God presents to us as Father, one who loves and cares for His family the way every good father does.

- **Power of Belonging**

There is power to knowing you belong. It helps heal our insecurities, to be a salve when our human fathers or families have let us down, and to remind us that we all have the same access to our Dad. Family also gives us a different kind of **loyalty and commitment** to each other. People are willing to die for friends, but families are committed to each other in every aspect and in every area. We will travel to see them, sacrifice for them, prioritize them over jobs or money, and truly there is very little that we wouldn't do for them.

When you become a follower of Christ, you are automatically, immediately placed into the household of God, through faith, as adopted sons and daughters. We've often told newer people in this church about how you know you belong. It is not by **what you do or where you serve**, anymore than my daughters doing those things in our house **MAKES** them belong. No, you belong because of who you are in Christ. You belong because we have the same Father. You belong because we are saved by the same grace. You belong because God has chosen to adopt you and make you His own. You belong because you are loved, because you are wanted, and because of God's sovereign grace. **And because you belong, we serve together, love each other, forgive, reach, pray, and pursue.** When you know your position in the family is secure. That's why it's adopted into, not married into. Too many in-laws feel like they can't say certain things because they are not the “original” family members. Security brings motivation and effectiveness. We are ALL adopted in the family through Christ, and are all secure in Him.

Our Unity in Christ gives us NEW GROWTH as God's Building (20-22)

*“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.”*

- **Foundation of the Building (20)**

Paul culminates his picture of the church with that of a living and growing building. Note that these metaphors all interconnect and overlap, built on each other. Now, too many equate the church WITH a building, like it exists within 4 walls. Remember, even if this building and property went away, we'd still have a church, it would simply meet differently. No, the metaphor of a building is WHO we are, not where we meet. He began by explaining, like any sound structure, that the foundation and cornerstone are of great importance.

A Solid Foundation – Growing up in the Bay Area, we know the importance of a reinforced foundation. In Alameda where I grew up, part of the city is built on landfill, meaning tons of sand pumped in to create new space for homes and buildings. Because of this little issue of earthquakes and shifting sands, many homes will develop deep cracks in their walls, stairways, and foundations themselves. This creates major issues not only visually, but in terms of safety. You could say a building is only as good as the foundation it sits on, and the church is no exception. Before the NT Scriptures were finished, God provided for the church to be built up in the Word. He gave Apostles and prophets, those who were commissioned and equipped by God to speak His oracles. We looked at the role that Apostles played in the church in Ephesians 1:1, but its good to review again:

“Regarding who and what function they (Apostles and Prophets) had, an apostle was an official delegate of Jesus Christ, commissioned for the specific tasks of proclaiming authoritatively the message in oral and written form and establishing and building up churches.”¹

These gifts to the church functioned to give special or divine revelation to the church so that they would have all things needed to be presented perfect before God (Eph. 4:12; Col. 1:28). But once the canon was completed and closed, meaning we have contained in our Bible the revealed Word that God wanted us to have, there was no longer a need for this type of function. The office of Apostle no longer exists since no man is commissioned directly by Jesus Christ anymore, and the gift is not needed since it was FOUNDATIONAL in its purpose.

A Perfect Cornerstone – In modern buildings, cornerstones are more decorative or dedications of buildings, but in ancient building, the cornerstone was the first stone laid, one that determined every other wall, angle, and how the building would face (the Cowboys found out last week that a building that lets the light blind their players is NOT helpful!). One writer said, “The cornerstone is the PRIMARY foundation stone at the angle of structure by which the architect fixes a standard for the bearings of the walls and cross walls throughout.” (W. Watkiss Lloyd). In **Isaiah 28:16** it says:

“Behold, I am the one who has laid as a foundation in Zion, a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone of a sure foundation. Whoever believes will not be in haste.”

The picture is clear and powerful. Jesus Christ is the most important Person, the One by which everything else aligns. He is the measuring stick, and everyone else must be in conformity to Him. He sets the direction and makes sure that the church grows into the healthy, living, and active structure it was meant to be. The church, then, has been built on a sure foundation, and is built not apart from it but extending from Christ and His Word. This is why any church that moves away from Christ OR the Word will be on shaky ground and will eventually topple over.

¹ Harold Hoehner, Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary, p. 400

- **Formation of the Building (21a)**

Two things jump out about the formation of the church, God's building.

It is NOT Finished – In this context, the word for “building” refers to the ‘act of building’, and is followed by a participle and main verb that denote an ongoing action of building. This means that the building is not inanimate, but a living and growing organism. Jesus is building His church and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it (Matt. 16:18). He is building His church around the world, calling the nations, and we are not only a part OF it, we get to be an instrument in it. But it is also clear that it is God who is building, not us. We are simply the instruments God has chosen to use.

The Church is Beautifully Fit Together – Again, in modern building, mortar or other ways of fixing together may be used, but the picture of the church is that of perfectly hewn stones that fit together intricately, each fitting in a perfect puzzle to display a beautiful picture. It's like the game Jenga, where the tower is built up in a perfect square with the slotting of pieces together. The church is God's masterpiece, where each person was perfectly chosen, gifted, and placed so that the whole would be fit together, with the only nails used belonging to Christ on the cross. This means that you not only **belong, but your gifts and personhood matter in the church and on our mission**. When anyone does not engage or is not willing to be used, the whole suffers. There is no second-class gifting or person. God crafted each of us perfectly, and planned it all before the world began.

- **Function of the Building (21b-22)**

The picture of the church as a building not only is rooted in our citizenship and belonging to God's household, but has the idea of **GROWTH embedded in it**.

Built to Grow – Not only does the church grow by adding those that God has called, but it must grow in holiness. We know our mission is to make disciples, and we can emphasize, rightly, that this means sharing with those OUTSIDE of the church to come to a saving knowledge of Christ. But we also must teach the same disciples to obey all that Christ commanded. Since we are all indwelt by the Spirit, and our body itself is a Temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19). We are not our own but are to glorify God in our bodies. The church grows, but that growth will be in obedience and holiness! God is creating for Himself a Temple, and that will be a place of perfection, since He can not be in the presence of sin.

Is that how you view the church? Not just a place to serve or be served, but a place to be proactive in killing our sin, hating our sin, and moving toward righteousness. I'm thankful when I hear that the people of this church are friendly and kind, but the reality we're all just a group of wretched sinners whose lives are messed up but have been washed clean by the death of Christ! We are those that battle our sin and flesh, who often fail, yet continue on TOGETHER to turn from sin, to be renewed in our mind, and to put on Christ. Why? Because of what God is building!

Built for God to Dwell – God is dwelling with us now in His Spirit. He enlightens our minds to the truth, convicts us of sin, and guides us. The Spirit is WHO provides true unity, and we only maintain it (Eph. 4:3). God dwells with us now in an unseen way, but there is one day that He will make for Himself a Temple and will dwell with us in Christ: *“Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be His people, and God Himself will be with them as their God.”* (Rev. 21:3).

Concluding Thought – *How would you explain how to belong in the church now?* I hope that we see that we fit as part of God's work in the church, a building that He created, that He grows, and that He fits together. This not only reminds us of our place, as honored and privileged citizens and loved children,

but also sets the stage for how we are to act and live in the church. May we see ourselves not as passive observers but integral members, growing each day in holiness and desire to see more placed into this growing building.