

The Church: Belonging

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[0 : 0 0] For just as the body is one, as many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one spirit we were all baptized into one body.

Jews are Greeks, slaves are free, and all were made to drink of one spirit. For the body does not consist of one member, but of many. If the foot should say, because I'm not a hand, I don't belong to the body, that would not make it any less a part of the body.

And if the ear should say, because I'm not an eye, I do not belong to the body, that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing?

If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God has arranged the members in the body, each one of them as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be?

As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you. Nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you.

[1 : 0 1] On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable. And on those parts of the body that we think less honourable, we bestow the greatest honour.

And our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty. Which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honour to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.

If one member suffers, all suffer together. If one member is honoured, all rejoice together. This is God's word. Amen. Ali. Ali. Thanks very much, Ross.

Nothing quite gets like the pulse going by sitting there, being prepared to preach on one passage, and someone's starting to read another one. So I'm glad we ended up in the same place. That's good. We're currently, this is our second week in a little series we're doing, which will run through to the end of September, on the church.

What does the Bible say about the church? What does it mean to be a biblical church? How can we kind of align ourselves to that pattern? Last week we looked at the kind of fundamentals of the church.

[2 : 1 0] We looked at Acts chapter 2, that church who were devoted to the apostles' teaching, devoted to fellowship, devoted to the prayers, and doing that kind of joyfully and gratefully to praise God.

This week we're going to be looking, in these verses, at the idea of belonging. What does it mean to belong to a church? And I thought I'd begin with a question that I hope we'll see the answer to as we look through these verses tomorrow.

And the question is based on a few facts, I suppose. Fact number one, that if you were to go home now and go onto the internet, you could Google and very quickly, very easily find a huge number of amazing preachers preaching amazing sermons, really good biblical teaching, hours and hours of the stuff.

And that would be a really good use of time to do things like that. You could find, and I am allowed to say this because I was playing this morning, and all due respect to Pam and Craig, that you could find Christian music that would far surpass what we have here at church week by week in its production and its sound quality and all those things.

You could purchase great books of kind of prayers, prayers throughout history. Books like the famous song called The Valley of Vision, This incredible book of famous prayers and the richness of these prayers from the past, the depth with which these people prayed is something that can be so beneficial for deepening our relationship with God.

[3 : 45] I'd really recommend some of those books. And so you could get great preaching, you could get great music, you could get great prayers, you could have all of that sort of on demand, as it were, your exact preferences at a time that suited you.

And so with all that in mind, really the question is this, why do we still bother with the local church? Why do we still bother with the local church?

I think that's a question that has become an even bigger question, kind of over and post-lockdown, where so much stuff has moved online, isn't it? Why bother with kind of being a part of a local church?

Is it actually something that's a bit outdated? Is it kind of a bit of a hangover from before, kind of streaming services and easy access to books and all these things that we could just do by ourselves?

Well, my hope this morning is not that you're going to say, well, that's a good point. Thanks for highlighting that and there'll be no one here next week. That would be a shame. But my hope is that as we see what the Bible says about the church, that even more, even more, now more than ever, we'll see the importance of being part of, in a very real and a very kind of physical way, the importance of belonging to a local church.

[5 : 06] And that is how God designed us as his people to be. And so we're going to look at that foundation of belonging. We're going to look at why that belonging is so important. And then we'll finish off with a few kind of practical ways that I hope we can work that out together here at Huntington Community Church.

So that's the plan. First up in this passage, first up we see the foundation of this belonging. The foundation of belonging. That's what Paul kind of lays out at the beginning.

And it's important to remember as we look in these verses that 1 Corinthians, where our passage is from this morning, is simply Paul writing to a local church in Corinth.

And so what he's saying to them, although the context might be different, Haddington in 2020 is different to kind of Corinth back in the first century. But the ultimate truth of what he's saying is still the same for us all these years later.

And that foundation is this, that as those who believe in Jesus, we are already united. And that the foundation for this belonging is the fact that we are already united to one another in Christ.

[6 : 19] Look at verses 12 and 13 there. For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many are one body, so it is with Christ.

For in one spirit we are all baptized into one body, Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, and all were made to drink of one spirit. Paul's big kind of illustration running through this passage that you have heard as Ross read it, is that of a body.

A body with different parts, but all one body. And so it is with Christ, Paul says, saying that everyone who has put their trust in Jesus has received this gift of the Holy Spirit and is part of that body.

We touched on this last week, that the Bible's teaching about the church being united, being devoted to fellowship, not simply a Sunday meeting, but a genuine community.

The Bible's foundation for that is to say we're not trying to manufacture that ourselves. This isn't something we're trying to engineer. We're not trying to bring together these different body parts, like Frankenstein making his monster.

[7 : 31] It's not something unnatural. It's something that is already true. that if we've trusted in Jesus, that we've already been brought together by God.

We have been united by the gospel. And then the challenge then is simply to live out what God has already done for us.

There's a German kind of theologian called Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He wrote perhaps kind of a classic book about this called Life Together. And he put it this way. He said, Christian community is not an ideal, which we must realize.

It is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate. He said that that has to be the foundation. He went on and said, everything depends upon that being clear right from the beginning.

And that's exactly what Paul's saying here. That's where Bonhoeffer gets what he's talking about from. Paul is saying to this Corinthian church, you are one, so live it out.

[8 : 35] Now, why is that so important? Well, we see it highlighted, Paul highlights that in verse 13. One body, Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, saying here that whatever kind of category of person you are, whatever labels that the world might put on you or that we might put on ourselves, that actually this Christian belonging, this gospel unity trumps that.

The Corinthian church was actually a pretty dysfunctional kind of church. And there was a lot of division within that church.

If you read through the whole of those two letters, there was a lot of kind of jockeying for position and status. It was a church full of people striving to be the kind of the spiritual VIP and claiming they'd reached to kind of another level, a higher tier of Christianity.

And yet Paul's saying, well, that's not how the church works. That is ugly. That is just the same as the world. And you've probably experienced that kind of one-upmanship, haven't you, at work or at school or in some kind of environment where everyone's constantly trying to get ahead.

That's a bit what the church in Corinth was like. And Paul is saying that the only way to get rid of that in the church, that's still just as much a danger for us today, for churches across the world today, the only way to get rid of that is to be clear right from the beginning that we are united by the gospel.

[10 : 04] And that the church is brought together on that one foundation. For us as a church to genuinely live as a community, we have to remember that as priority number one.

We are entirely dependent on God's grace, each and every one of us. Now let me say then specifically to you this morning, if you're here and you wouldn't say you're a committed Christian or perhaps wouldn't say you're a Christian at all if you're still working this stuff out, asking questions, as always, we're so pleased that you're here.

The best place for you to be is in a church. And again, we want to be clear that God holds out that invitation, that offer to be part of the church. And that is not based on anything that you do, anything you have done, anything you will do.

It's not based on certain boxes that you tick. No one is here and no one is part of the church because they've earned it in any way. It is purely based on accepting God's incredible love for you, accepting that forgiveness Jesus has made possible through the cross.

And that is what brings people into the church. And so if you're asking kind of questions, if you're still wondering, we want you to experience being part of a community that cares for you while you're asking these questions.

[11 : 21] But most of all, we want you to know that love of Jesus that truly unites us to one another. And that doesn't flatten our differences. We'll see that in just a moment. But it kind of takes priority over them as we strive to live out together that community, that belonging.

And that the church is a place we don't need to prove ourselves against one another. But we can encourage each other in that unity that Jesus has won for us. So there's the foundation for our belonging.

So important we have that in place first. So important we don't forget that that in Christ we are united. And together we want to live that out. Well, let's continue then. That's the foundation for belonging.

Let's continue and think about the importance then of belonging. That's where Paul goes next in this passage. Why is it so important that we live out this community that God has brought together through Jesus?

We asked that question at the start, particularly perhaps in an online world or in a world where we've all got kind of Bibles at home and can read. Well, why is it important to be part of a local church?

[12 : 28] And I suppose given what we've just said, you could still answer that question by saying, well, yes, I belong to kind of the universal church around the world. I'm united to my Christian brothers and sisters down the road, but also in Africa or East Asia, we're united through Christ.

And theologically, absolutely, yes, that is true. But we see here as Paul builds on this body imagery, that he's speaking about belonging in a much more kind of flesh and blood, day-to-day, down-to-earth kind of way.

And really, I think we could describe that. We could describe what Paul teaches here using a phrase we've used fairly frequently here as a church, which is that we're all needed and needy.

You've perhaps heard us speak about that before, that each one of us is needed and needy. And so let's look at what Paul says under those kind of two headings. He deals with the needed side of things first, verses 14 down to 20.

Let me read those verses. He says, For the body does not consist of one member, but of many. If the foot should say, Because I'm not a hand, I don't belong to the body, that would not make it any less a part of the body.

[13 : 42] And if the ear should say, Because I'm not an eye, I don't belong to the body, that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing?

If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.

If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. And see again, that emphasis on unity, that there is one body.

And yet Paul is clear, that he's speaking about different people, people with different gifts, and different abilities, who make up that one body. Paul's picture of the church, is not like a bowl of jelly, where it's all just kind of, one indistinct blob, and one spoonful is the same as the next.

He describes it as this body, with different parts. And his first point is that, all of these parts are needed. If the ear should say, Because I'm not an eye, I don't belong to the body, that would not make it, any less a part of the body.

[14 : 48] If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? It's this kind of funny picture, isn't it? We watched Monsters, Inc. not that long ago. There is that guy, who's just an eye, kind of wandering around. That's the kind of thing, you know, Paul is pitching.

That is not a healthy person. If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of sight? He says, he goes, it's easy to look around, and to say, well I couldn't do, what that person could do.

Or I'm not as gifted, as that person over there. It's so easy perhaps to conclude, well I'm not, I'm not really needed here. And if we think that, we can end up just kind of opting out a little bit, or just becoming a passenger, just being along for the ride.

And yet, this passage is saying, that if you do that, if we have that attitude, any individuals of us have that attitude, then the church as a whole, as a collective, is missing out.

And this is one of the central reasons the Bible gives why it's important to belong to the church, which is what we're trying to remember throughout this series. When we say, kind of belonging to a church means a kind of a community that exists 24-7, rather than just this meeting on a Sunday or some other meetings as well.

[16 : 00] The Bible says, you need to belong to the church because you're needed. Because other people need you. And we might say, the difference between belonging to a church versus simply attending a church is, are we using those gifts that God has given us for the benefit of others?

Do we recognize that we're needed? Now, I don't know if you, if you think about your appendix very much. I've not thought about mine for a while, up until this week. Medical people can perhaps correct me later, but it seems to me that you can have your appendix removed, and it doesn't make a huge difference the only thing appendix seems to do is explode, which is a bad thing.

And so you can just take them out and no one seems any the worse off from that. And well, although Paul is describing the church as a body, in his description of the church, there is no kind of one who fills that role of an appendix, is what he's saying.

You know, the Bible says there's no people who could just be removed from the church. There's no people who can just decide they're just going to take a back seat in the church and it wouldn't make any difference.

No one would notice. Verse 18 says, God has arranged each one of them, each one of the parts that the people of the church as he chose.

[17 : 21] And we need to belong because we need to bring our gifts and to use our gifts for the good of one another. The Bible says that we are needed within the church.

And I'm not sure how that makes you respond. Perhaps that makes you feel a bit of kind of pressure and you think, oh dear, you know, what should I be doing? Am I doing enough? I would say in some ways, you know, those aren't almost bad questions to ask.

It's not bad to feel that little bit of pressure because we can all very easily, you know, just get comfortable thinking about ourselves, our lives, our struggles and not have time for the people and not have time for the church.

But at some point, if you do feel that pressure that you do remember as well, first and foremost, that foundation that we began with, that you are part of the body because of Jesus. You do belong to the church because of what he's done.

The very last thing we would ever want to do is get that the wrong way around as if we kind of earn our place in the church, earn our value by how much stuff we do. That only leads to pride.

[18 : 25] That doesn't help anyone. And so I hope that perhaps more than pressure, I hope that actually God's saying that you are needed is an encouragement. And maybe you don't feel that you have much to offer.

And yet that is not what God thinks. Actually, God has put you in a particular place, has gifted you in a particular area in order that you may help people in a particular way.

And so the challenge for each of us becomes kind of the how question. How do we find that area? How do we find that way? We're going to touch on that later on and it's always something I'd be keen to chat to people more individually about as well.

Also keen to say you might be going through a real difficult stage in life at the moment. And Paul in this letter is not kind of flattening everyone out saying yes, we're all the same, we could all do the same amount and the same stuff.

Maybe there are health things or other issues going on in your life where it is especially difficult to think, well how can I be giving out? How can I serve? Where am I needed? It's okay that this will look different for different people, at different stages in their life.

[19 : 31] And yet it is important as well that we take seriously what Paul says that it's important you belong because you're needed. So that's the first part of that importance. The second half then of the importance of verse 21 onwards he focuses on the other side of the coin.

It's important you belong because you're needed but also because you are needy we might say. Needy is not particularly, we don't like to think of ourselves as needy do we.

But Paul's point is to say that you need to be in a church. Verse 21 the eye cannot say to the hand I have no need of you nor again the head to the feet I have no need of you.

Paul highlights this real danger for all of us who are part of the church which is to think well you know individually I've actually kind of got it sorted I'm fine. And so maybe we're very good at thinking about what we've just said recognising that call to serve others and we're really busy with that and yet it's also very easy for us to forget that we need to be a part of a church for ourselves as well and that God has brought us into a Christian community because we need the help of others.

And we live in a very sort of individualistic society don't we you think of examples of that like you know advertising Nike just do it or I did it my way the famous song or any number of films where someone kind of ploughing ahead despite what other people think is kind of celebrated as the hero we live in an individualistic society and that affects all of us more than we might like to admit it does.

[21 : 05] Perhaps an example to highlight that when was the last time you know you had a big decision to make or something and your first instinct was to think oh I should speak to people at church about this or I should ask someone to pray about this with me how much more do we often think oh well I can just figure this out for myself rather than thinking we need the wisdom of others or perhaps how often do our struggles and our worries remain something hidden away because we think no no I can deal with this I can work this out and we forget that we're needy and because of that actually because we forget that other people don't get the chance to see how they're needed and yet Paul's point in verse 25 that the members may have the same care for one another that all of us are needed and needy that division runs through each of us as an individual rather than kind of down the middle of us as a congregation as it were caring for one another that is the importance of belonging because it's how God has designed us to be and it's as we recognise that it's as we are united that it's as we are both needed and needy that's the only way we're able to live that out that's how we end up with this amazing picture at the end of verse 26 this genuine community where it says if one member suffers all suffer together if one member is honoured all rejoice together that is genuine belonging that things aren't just about us individually but collectively that actually just to say well I'm fine isn't an option nor is it an option to say well I don't want to bother anyone this is my own thing

I'll keep this to myself instead Paul says that the healthy church the church functioning as a healthy body as it should be they suffer together and they rejoice together because we belong together so there we go the foundations of our belonging is what Jesus has done he's brought us together the importance of that belonging is that we're both needed and needy there are ways we should be helping others and there are ways we need others to help us that we'll miss if we're not part of a local church let's finish then with some real kind of nuts and bolts ways we can work this out we said last week in this series we want to be seeing the Bible's kind of pattern of the church but also to work that out in the practicalities of the church here in Haddington so let me suggest kind of a few takeaways as we draw towards a close three different things first and foremost I suppose really I suppose in some ways it's just a recap of what we've been saying but it's in our attitude toward church and the other people who make up the church and remembering this unity remembering this belonging we've spoken about thinking of our church community in terms of where can I help and where do I need help and not being afraid to act on that

I read a really helpful section in a book recently speaking about this in terms of helping others it said this when we see someone struggling in their faith or going through hard times we might say someone ought to do something but we don't often mean us we've all heard that voice in our heads that says don't get involved you don't know that person well you might say the wrong thing anyway other people will be looking after them you're too busy the author goes on to say very pointedly don't listen to that voice but recognise that you are needed make that move towards people and I think we could flip that idea around as well couldn't we we probably recognise that voice that actually says well don't tell people what I'm struggling with don't ask for help here I can sort this don't bother people they've got their own things going on it would be weird to kind of ask someone about this that's just not what happens and again the point would be very clearly to say don't listen to that voice but to remember that we are needy that in the church we belong to one another we have this responsibility for one another and we're really blessed I think in the church where there are in this church where there are lots of people who have that attitude there are lots of relationships where that happens in both directions those who are needed and needy there's so much kind of good stuff that happens that I know nothing about and it's a great attitude for us all to be seeking to have throughout the church it comes as we remember that foundation and that importance of belonging so number one

I think it's simply our attitude to one another our attitude to the church as a community the second thing and very much linked to that would just be in the practicalities of serving at the church perhaps you sit this morning and you say okay I see the Bible says I'm needed in the church but where having that attitude of looking for opportunities is a great attitude to have it would be great to kind of if you're asking that question this morning do come and speak to me and see where would be a great place to get stuck in I'd also be keen to say and this is a very unfashionable sort of thing to say but don't be afraid of being on a rota in that rotas get a lot of bad press nowhere more so than in a church and it's absolutely true to say that serving is far more than that and it's all about that kind of attitude that we've just spoken about and it's also to say it's also true to say that there are tasks that simply need to be done and I've actually we put a list at the back of some of the different areas and roles within the church it's kind of focused on Sunday services so again there's much more than that because we want the church to be much more than that it's not in any way an exhaustive list but it's perhaps a helpful thing to look at these are real needs that we have as a church and you'll see how often it's a very small number of people making up those teams doing those same things time and time again do have a look at that list don't be afraid of committing to being on a rota and serving in that way we don't want to burn people out we don't want rotas to replace a genuine commitment to one another but at the same time

I think it's fair to say a great way to serve the church to belong in a way that really builds others up is to say yes I'll sign up for that I'll do it when it's needed and I'll do it really well to the best of my ability I'll make it a priority so don't be afraid of that looking and listening for where those needs are and finally perhaps the more formal side of belonging to us as a local church would be church membership this is an area of church life we might say where we're a little bit behind the curve on church membership is not about being some sort of platinum member you don't get a card or anything like that that would be the opposite of what this letter to the Corinthians is all about church membership is simply making that slightly more formal commitment as to what we've just been speaking about this morning it says I believe in Jesus and so I am united to this congregation and it also says and I recognize

[28 : 34] I'm needed and needy I want to work that out in a practical way in this congregation we started that process of membership before lockdown it all got shelved slightly but we're keen to pick that up a little bit more so we'll speak more about that in the future we'd love to hear from you if you'd be interested in that again I put a sheet at the back if I would like to hear more no commitment to that no commitment to take it any further but if you'd like to hear more do sign up for us do sign up at the back and we'll get in touch different churches do that differently and you may or may not have experience of that it may or may not be a positive experience but we'd love to tell you about how we're trying to work that out here and it really is just what we've been speaking about committing to belonging to Harrington Community Church as a local congregation of the universal church it's not even saying it's the best church certainly not saying it's the perfect church it's just simply saying that it is your church and so if that's something you'd like to find out more about do sign up at the back or get in touch and we'll send something out on the email as well and as part of that we'd really encourage people last thing here really encourage people to be part of a community group again as we said when we set them up even if you can't regularly make Wednesday evenings it's still great to be in a kind of a smaller group within the church they're great places for this belonging to happen these smaller groups which again we want to think of not just as a meeting but as a community of people a cross section of the church are great places for those relationships where we can help and be helped where we can be needy and needed for those relationships to grow and there's been great things that have happened in those community groups over the past 12 months so do find out about those we'd love you to get involved in one of them so there's a few kind of practical pointers please do come and speak to me after the service or get in touch over email or give me a call if there's anything there that kind of strikes a chord with you if there's any way we can help with this belonging and kind of drawing people into that but as we close let's remember first and foremost where we began which is where

Paul begins that we are united in Christ and that God has brought together a people through the cross that through the cross we can be forgiven that we can be brought back into a relationship with God and through that brought into a relationship with one another brought into the church that it's not an exclusive club but there's that invitation for everyone to turn to Jesus and it's as we do that that we're brought into his church where each one of us are both needed and needy where we work that out in practical ways as we belong together let's pray before we think of four because we don't long we don't wrong whisper you are long out.