

"Belongingness"

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January 22, 2017

¹⁰Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. ¹¹For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. ¹²What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." ¹³Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? ¹⁴I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. ¹⁶(I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) ¹⁷For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power. ¹⁸For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

(1 Cor. 1:10-18)

According to the grapevine in Corinth, there were quarrels. Chloe's people were reliable. They were smart, they were observant, and they told the truth. And they had reported back to Paul that there were divisions in the church. They were not united in the same mind or the same purpose, and those divisions were evident in ways that people were finding and describing their identities. The names of certain leaders had become shorthand for knowing a person. If someone "belonged" to Apollos, for example, it meant that they ascribed to a certain set of values, policies, gripes and hopes represented by Apollos. If you "belonged" to Paul, it showed your adherence to a different set of values, policies, gripes and hopes. And so the various names drew lines of distinction within the culture of the church.

According to the grapevine in Concord, there are quarrels here, too. We have just celebrated or endured, depending on your point of view, a few days that have revealed just how deep our cultural divisions and disagreements are. Over the past year, some of you have said proudly "I'm with Trump," while others just as passionately said "I'm with Her." Many are already looking to other leaders in whom we might vest our hopes and find our identities.

Wherever we fall on this spectrum, there is a common denominator that we all share, and it is our deeply ingrained need to express ourselves. We want to clarify -- to the world and to ourselves -- who we really are. And, throughout human history, we have tended to express our identities by reference to the human leaders we follow. When we say we "belong" to a particular leader, that person's name becomes a potent symbol -- a simple and concise way to express to the world who we are and what we are about.

However, this tendency to identify with leaders is about more than self-expression. It also touches an even deeper need that we all share. The word "belongingness" almost sounds like I just made it up (kind of like Stephen Colbert did when he coined the expression "truthiness" back in 2005), but belongingness is an actual word that describes an actual phenomenon. It first emerged in 1995, when psychologists Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary suggested that human beings have an innate and nearly universal **need to belong**. The "belongingness hypothesis" holds that we all "have a basic psychological need to feel closely connected to others" and to contribute to an endeavor that is greater than ourselves.¹ In other

¹ Dylan Selterman "The Need to Belong - Part of What Makes Us Human," <http://www.scienceofrelationships.com>, April 16, 2012.

words, we all have a longing to be part of a group of people that is doing something important, and we want to feel that our own role within that group is itself relevant and important. Those who belonged to Apollos, for example, not only shared a certain set of values, but also felt like they belonged to a mission that was ultimately good, worthy, and significant. They believed that what Apollos was doing mattered, that their connection to Apollos' people mattered, and that their individual contributions within that group also mattered. At the root of belongingness is the implicit satisfaction of being loved and appreciated for the gifts that one brings to a larger mission.² Over the past few days, we have seen this kind of belongingness play out in Washington D.C. and other cities in the various groups that gathered and found identity, meaning and purpose in the groups to which they proudly belong.

For the record, Paul never says that belongingness is wrong. On the contrary, he seems to presume that our need to belong to someone or something greater than ourselves is natural, valid and important. The problem, in Paul's mind, is that the Corinthians had aimed way too low. It's not that the people they had chosen as leaders were bad. In the book of Acts, we are told that Apollos was a Christian from Alexandria who was both "eloquent" and "well-versed in the scriptures."³ Cephas was another name for the apostle Peter, and Paul lists himself as another one of the missionary leaders that had acquired a devoted following. These were all valid choices for leaders. What Paul was concerned about was that the belongingness people had created around these leaders had been corrupted into something unhealthy. It had degenerated into something more akin to tribalism.

Last June, during the contentious debates over Britain's exit from the European Union, Jo Cox, a Member of Parliament from the Labor Party, was brutally murdered on the street in her hometown. As her assailant shot and stabbed her multiple times, he was heard to shout repeatedly, "Put Britain first!" Michael Jinkins, the current president of the Presbyterian seminary in Louisville, says that deplorable actions like these are the product of what he describes as "a tribal spirit which threatens to split the human family into ever smaller units, to drive wedges between us in the name of nations, politics and religions, to erect impregnable walls so that the 'we' on one side need never be sullied by the 'them' on the other."⁴ This angry brand of tribalism, Jinkins argues, is violent, demonic, and has no place in the Christian faith.

In Corinth, Paul had observed the beginnings of these dangerous trends. Factions were growing. Fractures were deepening. Negative passions were intensifying. In their affiliations and beliefs, people had begun to move beyond healthy belongingness into more divisive kinds of affiliation. And as they did so, they were drifting farther and farther away from the kind of spiritual and emotional belongingness that God created us to enjoy.

Like all the rest of us, Anne Bechard wanted to belong. First, she wanted to belong in her convent, where her family sent her as a fourteen year-old girl. To use her words, she wanted to be accepted. She longed to feel at home. She hoped "for that reassuring up-nod from the universe that says, 'You're one of us. And you get to stay.'"⁵ Unfortunately, it was not to be. She

² Frode Stenseng, Jacques Forest and Thomas Curran. "Positive Emotions in Recreational Sport Activities: The Role of Passion and Belongingness." July 8, 2014.

³ Acts of the Apostles 18:24

⁴ Michael Jinkins. "The First Shall Be Last: Tribalism And Christian Faith." http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-jinkins/the-first-shall-be-last_t_b_11875454.html, posted September 27, 2016.

⁵ All quotes and references to this story are taken from "How to Stop Trying to Fit In and Finally Belong" by Anne Bechard, <http://tinybuddha.com>, accessed on January 21, 2017.

found that she just was not cut out for life as a nun. At first, it seemed like a failure, but she felt like she had no other choice but to leave.

"I know what it's like to ache for belonging," Anne says. "After six years in a convent as a teenager, I decided it was time to try life on my own." But coming home to Memphis didn't seem to solve the problem. "I didn't feel like I was "home" at all," she says. "I was a complete stranger. Nothing seemed to fit."

As she continued to struggle to find that illusive ideal of "belongingness," Anne Bechard made all kinds of mistakes. In all of them, she later realized, her problem was that she had just aimed way too low. Not wanting to alienate potential friends, she had hidden her past, including those things that made her who she really was. In her attempts to fit in, she had pursued the hopes and dreams that she thought others wanted for her, instead of the dreams she dreamed for herself. In her hopes to belong, she had sought out the in-crowd and the cool people, but she had quickly realized that those people had never really accepted her for who she really was. In the places where she was looking for identity, she had been aiming too low. In the heroes and role models she had chosen for herself, she had been aiming too low. In the groups of friends she sought to join, she had been aiming too low.

I think we do the same thing. In the ways we seek identity, we are aiming much too low. In our role models, we are aiming much too low. In the ways that we seek to belong, we are aiming much too low. In this letter that still speaks to us today, Paul urges us to set our sights higher in all of these ways. Our true belongingness, he says, is only found in the cross of Christ. The world says the cross is foolishness, but faith says it is wisdom. The world says the cross is weakness, but faith says it is power. While the world chases human ideas, taunts human success, and boasts in human power, the factions that divide us only deepen and intensify. By contrast, Paul urges us to look higher -- to rise up and find ourselves in a Christ who heals, energizes and unifies. That is where our true identity is. That is the only place where we always fit in. That is the only place where we are always OK. That is where we truly belong.

As we seek this enduring kind of belongingness, we have to be vigilant in identifying negative tribalism in our own country, in our own community, in our own church and in our own selves. We have to rise above the easy path of identifying ourselves with reference to human leaders, human parties, human businesses and enterprises. In short, we are called to seek our belongingness in Christ -- and only in Christ -- because this kind of affiliation (unlike the human hash-tags that we so quickly adopt) is the only place where we truly do belong. We will never truly belong, and we will never truly know ourselves, until we rise higher and see ourselves through the eyes of Christ -- as people who truly "belong to Christ."

Anne Bechard went from a Christian convent, to cultural compromise, to confessional confusion, and ultimately to confidence and confirmation in Christ. So, I will give her the final word:

"Want to know the truth about belonging? It takes courage to belong. It takes bravery to show up in your own skin. It's easy to fit in. It's easy to blend in and hide your outrageousness. And it's also the easiest way to lose the precious parts of you. You deserve to be seen. You deserve to be heard. You deserve to be known for the real deal that you are. Stop taking the easy way out. Stop trying to fit in. The best place in life is where you're already okay. Come home to you. It's where you belong."

Thanks be to God. **Amen.**