

**WHAT IT MEANS TO BELONG
Colossians 1:15-20**

I. INTRO

A. Next week, Father's Day, we're going to be talking about pure, raw power! Guys, you need to be there for that! I grew up in the era of muscle cars. Pure, raw power was a big deal. Cars didn't have to be well-made; they didn't need great engineering—or even handle well or have the parts fit well. Most of them didn't. But, to be cool, they **did** need to have a big chunk of iron under the hood that sucked gas. **Lots** of it!

1. Unfortunately, what I could **afford** for \$300 in my university days was a 67 Ford Falcon. There was **nothing** powerful about this car—it had the smallest slant 6 cylinder they made with a 3 speed column shift. I tried to make it hot to fool people—you know, put wide tires in it, jacked it up with air shocks, put hood pins in it, lest the hood fly off at the vastly sub-sonic speeds it traveled.

2. My brother's strategy was much more sophisticated. His car wasn't much better, but it **did** have an 8 cylinder—so he jazzed it all up, dual exhaust, Holley carb, Edelbrock hi-rise manifold, Hurst shifter. But his strategy was to have a **sleeper**—i.e., a car that looked average but was hot and could blow other cars away in drag races on Main Street. Not that he ever had one.

3. The **sleeper** strategy is actually more widespread than you'd think. I've watched tiny, fine-boned women bring huge men, strong as a bulldozer, right to their knees! The best **sleeper strategy** users, though, are kids. I've watched little tiny babies who can't even talk cause big, tough, sophisticated CEOs to act like monkey's—Saturday morning cartoon stuff! I've watched a stubborn 3 year old turn a grown woman into a soggy, exhausted mess!

4. I'm wondering if maybe God Himself uses **SLEEPER** strategy. Let me explain what I'm saying. Listen to this:

He [Jesus Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created BY him and FOR him. He is BEFORE all things, and in him ALL THINGS HOLD TOGETHER (p. 807, Col. 1:15-17 NIV).

-That is a **powerful** statement making it clear that Jesus Christ is God in flesh and **everything** is under his authority.

5. Yet, when He showed up here, no one would've ever guessed that little baby born in Bethlehem was God. No one would've ever guessed that as Jesus was growing up that He'd created the very dirt he walked on. It was the **sleeper** strategy—awesome power; unassuming form..

B. And Christ's body, the Church, is the same. Let me continue:

And he (this same Jesus Christ who created everything and holds it all together) is the head of the body, the Church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through Him, to reconcile to

himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross (p. 807, Col.1:18-20 NIV).

1. I believe that what God is up to in this world is **way** more important than anything else. So. **How** does He work? Who has He delegated this to?

-After describing the **amazing** power of the Holy Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead--and seated him above every power in the universe—the Bible gives this amazing answer to that question: **And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be the head over EVERYTHING for the church, which is his body, the fullness of Him who fills everything in every way (p. 800, Eph. 1:22 NIV).**

See it? It's the same sleeper strategy. The Church has this awesome power and responsibility on the inside—but there's this unassuming, and sometimes shabby, flawed exterior.

2. We have to be careful because what God is doing—even through our lives—is many times secret; hidden from our eyes. Most people in our world would laugh you off the sidewalk if you told them that what God is doing through the church is more important than the Canadian government, the U.S. government, the U.N., Habitat for Humanity, or any other organization in the world.

-Yet, if I believe that the redemption of the people on this planet is the most important thing happening—and I do—then I know of no other group of people who have that as their focus. It's the **sleeper strategy**. Unassuming on the outside; awesome raw power on the inside.

-And when I'm done, you'll have to decide what **you** believe—and how that will be reflected in your life.

II. THE HOPE OF THE WORLD

- A. Most people in this world have an opinion about the Christian Church. In **The Da Vinci Code**, it's portrayed as a power-seeking organization, quite willing to lie, manipulate and kill to protect it's power. When the church has been off-mission, it has become one of the ugliest groups in the world. But when it's truly been the Body of Christ—and not a **religious organization**—it's been nothing short of **awesome!**

1. By the way, know what the word *church* means? It comes from a Greek word, *ecclesia*, meaning a group of people called out, gathered out of this world system, for a specific mission.
 - a. The most important thing to understand is that the church is **people—individuals**—not buildings or organizations.
 - b. According to the Bible, there is only one way to become a member of the Church of Jesus Christ. You **can't** baptized as an infant into it, **married** into it, **catechized** into it, or **signed** into it.

-You can only become part of the true church by putting all of your faith in Jesus Christ and being personally transformed by the Holy Spirit.

- c. If you read through the Bible, you won't find a **single word** that implies that if you attend or belong to a church that makes you a true Christian--any more than sleeping in a garage makes you a car.
2. The church is a group of sinners—flawed people—transformed by God's grace who have **pledged their full allegiance to Jesus Christ**.
- a. So, let's just be clear on this. The church is **not** an institution or corporation. It is a living organism--literally Christ's Body at work in this world.
- b. The church is also not a **club** or a **gated community**--you know, where you pay dues, let certain people in, keep certain people out, and govern the club by the needs and desires of the members--where membership **has it's privileges**.
- c. The church is also not a hierarchy. Somehow, early on the church started this distinction between the **clergy** and **laity**.
-Most people have no idea how far this is from what Christ intended. Jesus Christ intended the church to be a living body, led, helped and strengthened by teachers and leaders--but a place where **everyone** had a vital part. Leaders were to **serve and equip**--not **boss everyone around**—like the church did, particularly in the Middle Ages.
- d. Sometimes people say, “Yeah, well the church has hypocrites in it.” I say, “Tell me something I don't know. Jesus predicted that!” The church is a collection of forgiven sinners--all in various stages of **voluntary** transformation.
3. To put it as simply as possible, the **church** is the group of people God has chosen to forgive, empower with His Spirit, and grow up as His children. The Holy Spirit, Who lives in **every** believer, has been given to us to make us loving, give us guidance, and empower us to overcome sin and, especially, be a part of Jesus' mission of seeking and saving **all** the lost people on this planet.

-Want my honest opinion? This group is sometimes not very impressive. You'd think God would only use the cream of the crop. Au contraire! Listen to this: **Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things--and the things that are not to nullify the things that are, so that NO ONE MAY BOAST BEFORE HIM (p.780, 1 Cor. 1:26-31 TNIV).**

-See it? It's the **sleeper strategy!** Unassuming exterior, but filled with the power of a God who creates universes in His spare time. Contrary to everything you see, the church is unstoppable. It **will** defeat Satan and transform this world--one life at a time.

- B. One of the questions I run into a fair amount is this: Why are churches so different from each other.
1. You need to know that there are basically three components that make up what a church teaches and practices.
 - *The first is the **Bible**. That's pretty straightforward.
 - *The second is **tradition**. For over 2000 years, the church has done things in certain **ways and styles**. These are usually based on the culture the church is in and the leaders who are leading. Traditions are **man's** word, not **God's** Word. Sometimes we haven't made that distinction very well.
 - *The third component is **reason**. Looking at what you believe and what you need to do and making sense of it.

 2. Churches look **very** different depending on how they align these three components.
 - a. If a church believes in the Bible, but chooses tradition **over** the Bible when there's a conflict--well, that has an impact on how the church develops. Tradition ages; gets outdated—and, when it stands alone, becomes irrelevant and dry and boring.
 - b. Some churches say they follow the Bible, but the truth is that **reason** is chosen over the Bible when there's something in the Bible that appears to contradict it. Like miracles. The supernatural. Again, when **reason** is used to judge which parts of the Bible are accurate and which aren't, it has a huge impact on what the church looks like and what it teaches.
 - c. Let me tell you where we stand on this. The Bible comes first. Hands down. Yes, there are some things we don't understand--but we believe that there is more than enough historical and archaeological evidence to support everything the Bible says. And in **this** church, the **Bible** stands in judgment of us, our traditions and our powers of reason.

 3. Now, it's obvious that there are **still** some vast differences between those churches who believe that the Bible comes first. Some have high ceilings, stained glass and formal services. And the people who worship there feel very close to God.
 - a. Some churches are **notebook** churches. There's heavy-duty exegetical teaching, people wear suits and sing from hymnals. When the service is done--everyone closes their notebooks and they all feel nourished. And they love Jesus.
 - b. In some churches, you get a workout. The success of the service is measured by how much the preacher--and the people--perspire. I mean, they're swinging from the chandeliers, doing push-ups in the Spirit. And they love Jesus.

- c. **The Olive Branch?** Well, we're somewhere in between. We see what we do as a mission to the undecided. It's very important to us that people without a lot of religious background can feel like they belong—and that they have time to make the most important decision of their lives—to follow Jesus and be fully devoted to Him.
-Our plan is for people to **belong**, to **believe in Jesus and the truth of the Bible**, and then **become everything God created them to be**. And we **love** Jesus.
- d. Now, which of these do you think God loves the most? Well, **that's** a no-brainer! Us! Of course! No, really--these churches represent different personalities--different facets of truth.
And they serve a **multitude** of people on this earth who are all different. And you know what? That's okay!

4. If I were to use a metaphor to describe church history, I would choose a volcano. Tremendous power under the surface that, in the power of the Spirit, has erupted down through history. God's works has flowed fresh and red-hot into the world. But, just like a volcano, it has hardened and crystallized into buildings, organizations, traditions, windows, pulpits, hymnals, altars, robes--and even language.

-Volcanoes form mountains--majestic, steep, high and beautiful. But mountains are cold, hard, and lifeless. And when traditions become hardened, empty, ritualistic religion—so are they.

- a. Jesus warned us about this. When he was being judged by the religious traditions that had developed over the years, he said:
And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins, the wine will run out and be ruined. No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins. AND NO ONE AFTER DRINKING OLD WINE WANTS THE NEW, FOR HE SAYS, 'THE OLD IS BETTER (p. 705, Luke 5:37-39 NIV)!
-Let me ask a question for those of you who are wine connoisseurs. Which of these is more valuable (empty bottle, and fully bottle of wine). According to Jesus, it's possible to become a bottle worshipper! Bottles--forms, traditions, ways of reaching lost people, teaching styles, ways of worship will **change**.
But the wine--the truth about Jesus Christ **won't**. Don't mistake the bottle for the wine!

C. The clearest metaphor the Bible uses to describe the life of the church is the human body.

1. The passage that fleshes out this metaphor best is found in the NT book of Corinthians. And it makes several statements about how this fits you and me.
- a. The first truth is that as a believer in Jesus, you **are** part of the Body of Christ and are called to engage in Jesus' mission and love and serve and

live in unity with others. Period. This will literally determine whether or not you ever become the person God wants you to be.

- b. The second truth is that you are **extremely** important. If you don't engage, the Church will limp; it will have to do without a vital part. In our culture, we tend to attribute value to visibility—things like music and speaking.
-Let me ask a question. How many of you could survive without a finger? An eye? How many of you could survive without a liver? Typically speaking, it is our least visible parts that are most vital to live!

-Satan, enemy of our soul, has a favorite lie for believers. It goes something like this: **What you offer isn't that important—nobody will miss it!** And that is a lie that has crippled people and crippled the church for thousands of years.

- c. There's another interesting truth. The spiritual gift—the ability God has given you to serve others—and you have at **least** one--**doesn't belong to you**. Listen to this: **In Christ we who are many form one body, and each member BELONGS TO ALL THE OTHERS (p. 776, Rom. 12:5 NIV)**.
-Let me just be real specific about the implications of never using your gift: If you don't find out what God has given you and give your time to serve others, not only are **you** getting ripped off, what God is doing in this world is getting ripped off, and someone will probably end up doing something they are not gifted to do! Yikes!
- d. One more truth. We don't have any right to put down someone else's role or gift. Everyone is important, even if we don't like it or think so.

2. This is the amazing truth that flows out of all of this. God has **limited Himself** to working through flawed, limited people like you and me. If we don't love and serve and heal and help people find their way to God—no one else will. God has called us--me--you--to do it.

III. DO CHURCH--OR BE THE CHURCH?

- A. How many of you would like the bottom line implications of all I've said so far? This is it. You and I have to choose whether or not we believe we are on the front lines of what God is doing in this world—and whether we will **DO CHURCH** or **BE THE CHURCH**. Doing church is, at the core, hypocrisy. Lifeless. Uninspiring. Cold. And, ultimately, dead and powerless.
-Several years ago, I read an article in **NOW**, a fringe paper in the GTA. It was entitled **AMAZING DISGRACE: The Five Worst--and Five Best Churches in Toronto**. Now, how do you think a cynic would rate churches? Well, this person's opinion was that if churches were going to be exempt from property tax, they ought to be giving back to the community by **servicing the people there**--not just being a huge container—taking up space--where a few people meet once or twice a week. I think they're right.
-Remember what a church is. It's not a building; it's not an organization; it's people—imperfect people who are called by God to be **his** people; salt and light. People do

church when they simply take the name and attend the meetings and consume the services without **being** an active, meaningful part of what God is doing in the world.

1. Think of the absurdity of people with the most powerful force in the universe living inside them—the Holy Spirit—basically focused on bottle worship—preserving rituals and traditions without ever once thinking, “I wonder how God wants to use **me?!?”**

-Wouldn't it be tragic to waste life worried more about the **bottle** than the life God wants to give in us—and through us to others. The church is not about preserving the past. The church is about giving hope for the future. And when it becomes about the past instead of being a transforming influence in the world, then we've stooped to **doing** church. **Being** the church is very different.

2. People **do church** when the church becomes primarily about all about their interests and tastes.

We live in a culture of consumers--and we've become very discriminating shoppers. We walk into stores, restaurants, gas stations, offices--and we expect to have others serve us.

-But the church—the gathering of believers—is different. Do we get served by the church? Sure we do—just as a part of a body gets served by the other body parts. But, basically we are here together to get fueled up and empowered to go to our world and **give; i.e. BE** the Church.

-Now, if that hits you the wrong way, blame Jesus! He's the One who said that we are to be like him—and that He came, not **to be served**, but **to serve**--and to **give his life**. Now, I realize that there are stages in this. We all start by simply receiving. And from there we grow into giving in a whole variety of ways. But if we always take and never give of our resources, love, time and energy—something's wrong.

- B. The message of Jesus Christ is that God has called us to **be** the church—not **do** church. We are called to actively participate in being the **Hope** of the world. Jesus' coming was ultimately called the **Good News!** Jesus' followers went out and **good news-ed** people. -Truth is, the fact that you and I believe in Jesus should be **Good News** to everyone around you. It should **never** be the case that someone groans when they see us coming. The fact that you and I have responded to the Good News should be good news to everyone around us. That we will love better, live better, be better neighbors, better employees, better employers, better parents, better friends. The Good News should be precisely **that transforming** in our lives. “If it's not good news for everybody, it's not good news for anybody.”

1. I'll tell you why this message we have is **Good News**—capitalized. The sin disease that every person in our world is infected with is eternally fatal. Really. That the only antidote is the grace and forgiveness of God—made possible through Jesus' death on a cross. According to Jesus, there is **no other way**. If Jesus was right—and I believe without a shadow of a doubt He was—then this truth I have in my heart is the most important truth in the world.

-Does anyone know of a religious system that can change your heart and transform your life and give you eternal life after you die? Even Christianity as a **religion** can't do that. e you eternal life after you die. Let me be really clear on what I mean by **religion**. Religion typically offers salvation through a system of rules, regulations, rituals, and routines. Religion is any reliance on systems or institutions as our conduit to God (*The End of Religion, p. 21*).

2. What do you think would happen if people like us just started radically living out their faith in Jesus Christ the way He taught? What if our lives could be simply summarized, not by the stuff we do in church, but by being **Good News** wherever we went.

-When we go to restaurants, it's **Good News** to those who serve; when we go to our office, or school or to cubicle-land—it's truly **Good News**. It's **Good News** in family gatherings that Jesus got ahold of our lives. People say, "Wow, that was a **great** day!" The person you're married to should be able to say, "Wow! The day I married them was a **good** day." Kids should be able to say, "It's **Good News** that I have parents like this!" Okay. I know that's a stretch...

-What if it was **Good News** for the poor, the outcast, the people on the fringes of life in Markham—the nations of the world that live in Toronto's high-rises—that we were here. That, as salt, we bring flavor—and preservation. That, as light, we bring color and clarity and beauty? What if we, as followers of Jesus, could be trusted on the depth of our character to always tell the truth and keep our word and do the right thing?

3. Why do I say that? Because that's how **Jesus** was! Have you ever thought about the fact that the only ones who couldn't stand being around Jesus were **religious people**? The irreligious loved being around Him. It wasn't that He didn't tell the truth; it was that he didn't wrap truth in judgmental attitudes and prudishness and spiritual arrogance—and cloak it with impressive-sounding words. He simply loved, healed, did immense good, and puzzled people with how powerful His influence was.

-What was it about Jesus that would cause people who would **run** from religious people—**flock** to Him? I think it's because He was a loving, life-giving, gracious presence. Jesus' forefinger almost never pointed to people in condemning ways. It was like his hand was always turned over and open, fingers curled upward—encouraging people to come.

4. What if Jesus, through us, was turned loose in the neighborhoods where we lived?
Jesus said:

*Someone asks you to do a hard, unfair job—do it twice!

*Someone asks you to give something you don't think you should have to give—give. Give more—and it will be given to you.

*You have enemies that are spreading dirt behind your back? Pray for them. Love them.

*There's a war zone? Don't choose sides—be a peacemaker. Be a healer. Look at others with pure eyes. Seek rightness. If there's lots of bad stuff to think about; what don't you feed on what is good, noble, right. You are what you feed on!

5. Know why I can say all this stuff? Why I'm not living in la-la land? It's because the early church—those first few thousand who became part of that early church—had that kind of effect. They weren't perfect by any stretch of the imagination, but they devoted themselves to the teachings of Jesus; they devoted themselves to learning how to love God and love each other; and they became outrageously generous.

-Initially, to call someone a **Christian** was a form of insult. People said, "What a bunch of **little Christs!**" And it stuck. The tragedy is that by the Middle Ages—particularly in the Crusades--the **Little Christs** didn't even **resemble** Jesus.

Good News became **Bad News**. "Oh no! Here they come! Hide!"

-My guess is this. For what we call **Good News** to carry any weight at all, it will have to be **lived** as Good News first. And that's what it means to **Be** the church.

IV. CLOSING

- A. Well, I one day sold my 67 Ford Falcon to a friend. Last I saw it, it still looked hot—but had no power.

-I decided one day that I didn't want my life to be like that car—with lots of stuff on it that made it **look** hot, when it was a wimp car. All external; no internal. And I don't think that's what you want to look like either.

-That first group of Christ-followers to gather had a phenomenal impact. A book by a sociologist named Rodney Stark has this subtitle: **How the Obscure Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religion in the Western World in a Few Centuries**. In 40 AD, 1/1000th of 1% of the Roman Empire was Christian. By 350 AD **56%** of the Roman Empire was Christian. What happened? I think it can be summed up with a phrase used in The Message that describes the early church. **People in general LIKED what they saw (Acts 2:47 Msg.)** I'd like to be accused of that. "In general, people liked what they saw in Ken Davis's life."

- B. Does anyone here want The Olive Branch to be a club? A kind of gated community—you know, that keeps the bad people out and the good people in? A group of people who are satisfied with having a few hundred people where things stay safe, clean and uncomplicated? A bunch of bottle worshippers who are satisfied to stockpile knowledge—and let the rest of Markham, the rest of Toronto, the rest of Canada and the world do as they please?

-I need to tell you—I'm not satisfied with that. I never will be. If Jesus' mandate is our mandate, then we can never say, "That's enough people. That's enough truth. That's too inconvenient. That's too messy, too risky, too scary." I'll tell you why—it's because we are the people of God, the **Body of Christ**—chosen by God to do **His** work and accomplish **His** Mission—and be **Good News** to a world He loves.

Blessing

In closing, I would like to read the following prayer of commitment. It was found on the desk of a young pastor from Zimbabwe, Africa, after he died.

I am a part of the fellowship of the unashamed. I have Holy Spirit power. The die has been cast, I've stepped over the line, the decision has been made. I am a disciple of His. I won't look up, slow down, back away, or be still. My past is redeemed, my present makes sense, my future is secure. I'm finished and done with low living, colorless dreams, timid visions, and dwarfed goals. I no longer need pre-eminence, prosperity, position, promotions, plaudits, or popularity. I now live by faith. I now live by faith and am uplifted by power. My face is set, my gait is fast, my goal is Heaven. My road is narrow, my way is rough, my companions are few. But my God is reliable, and my mission is clear. I cannot be bought, compromised, detoured, lured away, deluded, turned back, or delayed. I will not flinch in the face of sacrifice, or hesitate in the presence of the enemy. I won't give up, shut up, or let up, cause I'm a disciple of Jesus. I must go till you come, give till I drop, preach to all I know. And when you come for your own, you will have no trouble recognizing me, for my banner will be clear. I am part of the fellowship of the unashamed!"