CONNECTED: MY LIFE IN THE CHURCH
I am a Christian. Therefore, I am connected.

Let’s make a quick list of pressing issues we face on a regular basis:

- Paying the bills
- Raising a family
- Keeping afloat in today’s economy
- Church membership

Church membership? I doubt the issue of church membership makes it on most people’s list, but it should. Unfortunately, many Christians have developed a faulty view of what it means to be a church member. Many of us talk about our church in terms of what we get out of it. This consumer mentality focuses on the perks we gain from the church, which makes church membership sound more like club membership.

In reality, being part of the body of Christ means so much more. The Book of Ephesians helps us see the true benefits that come from our connections to Christ and His church. Within this study we’ll discover six ways that church members are connected: connected in Christ, connected in unity, connected in growth, connected through words, connected in service, and connected through prayer.

Your connection to the church—your membership—will prove over time to be just as important as paying the bills and raising a family. During this study you’ll discover that, through Christ, we are all truly connected in a way that lasts not just for a lifetime, but for all eternity.

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SESSION 1
CONNECTED IN CHRIST
The Point
Church membership is a privilege made possible through Christ.

The Passage
Ephesians 2:17-22

The Bible Meets Life
We join clubs and organizations because of the perks and benefits we receive. After all, we’ve paid good money to join. Unfortunately, we often approach the church in the same way. The privilege of church membership, though, does not come from anything we’ve done or paid for. Instead, Christ paid the price and made it possible for us to be a part of the church, God’s family.

The Setting
Paul penned the Letter to the Ephesians from prison, probably in Rome. He had invested a great deal of time in Ephesus, having visited there briefly near the end of his second missionary journey and having spent three years in the city on his third journey. In Ephesus, Christianity confronted both other religions and Greek philosophies. Paul wrote to clarify the concept of the church—what it is, how one enters it, and how one behaves as part of it.
Ephesians 2:17-22 (HCSB)

17 When the Messiah came, He proclaimed the good news of peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.

18 For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father.

19 So then you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with the saints, and members of God’s household,

20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the cornerstone.

21 The whole building, being put together by Him, grows into a holy sanctuary in the Lord.

22 You also are being built together for God’s dwelling in the Spirit.

Key Words

Foreigners, strangers (v. 19)—“Foreigners” refers to non-citizens who are short-term in a country; “strangers” refers to longer-term residents. Neither had citizenship or full rights.

Cornerstone (v. 20)—The foundation stone that anchors the whole structure. It sets the angle and the bearings for the structure that will rise from the foundation.
GET INTO THE STUDY

DISCUSS: Question #1 on page 9 of the PSG: “When have you been interested to join a group or a cause?”

GUIDE: Direct group members to “The Bible Meets Life” on page 10 of the PSG. Introduce the concept of membership by reading or summarizing the text—or by encouraging group members to read it on their own.

ACTIVITY (OPTIONAL): Instruct group members to look through their purses and wallets for membership cards. These can be library cards, club memberships, grocery store discount programs—anything that grants a person access to a specific place or service. Have group members display their cards as they feel comfortable, then conclude the activity by asking for volunteers to share which membership cards they have found most useful, and why.

GUIDE: Call attention to “The Point” at the top of page 10 of the PSG: “Church membership is a privilege made possible through Christ.”

ENHANCEMENT: Use Pack Item 1, “Connected,” to introduce the major theme of this study, along with the specific focus of each session.

Note: If you’re not able to display posters from the Leader Pack, consider passing them around the group as a visual aid.

PRAY: Transition into the Bible study by thanking God for your inclusion in the church—the body of Christ. Ask for wisdom as your group begins to explore the important topic of church membership.
Ephesians 2:17-18

17 When the Messiah came, He proclaimed the good news of peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. 18 For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father.

READ: Ephesians 2:17-18 on page 11 of the PSG. Read the text out loud or ask a volunteer from the group to do so.

RECAP: Read or restate the following material from page 12 of the PSG.

If you or I went to the White House in Washington D.C. and requested an audience with the president, we’d likely receive a formal reply that could be translated as, “Yeah, right.” It wouldn’t happen. Not for ordinary citizens like us. But if the president’s wife or children appeared with the same request, the response would be different. Of course they have unqualified access to the president—they’re his family!

To put things in perspective, Ephesians 2:17-18 is not about the elected leader of any one country. It’s about the sovereign, eternal Ruler of the universe. We may not have access to the U.S. president, but we do have access to God.

DISCUSS: Question #2 on page 12 of the PSG: “What emotions do you experience when you think about having direct access to God?”

DISCUSS: Question #3 on page 13 of the PSG: “How is being part of a church like being part of a family?”

TRANSITION: Jesus’ sacrifice provides direct access to God for those who follow Him. But that’s not all: we also receive the gift of membership in the body of Christ.
The apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesian church from prison, probably in Rome around A.D. 62. He wrote to clarify what the church is, how we enter it, and how we behave as part of it. Ephesians 2:17-22 plunges us into the depths of Paul’s discussion and God’s purposes for the church.

The Ephesians were far away from God before they were saved. Ephesians 2:11-12 specifies what far away means. Many of the Ephesian believers were Gentiles—that is, not Jews. They were uncircumcised and had been without knowledge of a coming Messiah. They were excluded from Israel, God’s chosen nation. They did not know of God’s covenants. They had neither hope in nor right knowledge of the true God. Furthermore, the city of Ephesus was a place where magic flourished (Acts 19:18-19) and where people worshiped regularly at a temple for Artemis (vv. 23-41). They were indeed far away.

On the other hand, the Jews were near in the sense they had the knowledge and promises of God that the Gentiles lacked. In another sense, however, they were not so near. They were dead in their sins and “under wrath as the others were also” (Eph. 2:1-3). The Jews needed reconciliation with God, just as the Gentiles did (Eph. 2:16).

What does this mean for you and me? Simply that if we are now in Christ, we were once dead in sin and in need of peace with God. Religious background, family training, and warm childhood feelings about Jesus do not make peace between God and sinners. We only have real peace with God “by the blood of the Messiah” (v. 13). Therefore, Jew and Gentile alike need the cross of Christ, where Jesus shed the redeeming blood by which He would include people in His body, the church. The cross of Christ is the basis for peace with God and our place in His church. We don’t underwrite our status in Christ or membership in His church by our attendance, volunteer service, or giving. These are responsibilities based on His purchase of us, not the purchase prices of membership or its privileges.

Rather, through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father. The term both refers here to Jews and Gentiles, including people of all nations, ethnicities, and cultures (Rom. 1:13-16; Col. 3:11). Thus, both includes every single human being under heaven who comes to God. Everyone who has saving access to God comes by that access in exactly the same way. This doesn’t mean the circumstances are the same in everyone’s experience of coming to God. Rather, God has established one way of saving access to Him: through Christ as the Spirit enables.

Therefore, there is no distinction between races or ethnicities. All are saved in the same way (Acts 15:9-11). If we are connected with the Father, we are connected in Christ.
DO: Direct group members to complete the activity “Your Ideal Membership” on page 13 of the PSG. If time permits, ask for volunteers to share what they created.

Use these questions to create a membership card that would improve your life right now: What will you gain? Who can use it? How much will it cost? How long will it last?

READ: Ephesians 2:19 on page 11 of the PSG.

DISCUSS: Question #4 on page 14 of the PSG: “What prevents us from viewing church membership as a privilege?”

GUIDE: Highlight the third and fourth paragraphs on page 14 of the PSG, which relate Dr. Rainer’s salvation testimony. Use this as an opportunity to share the message of the gospel and what it means to follow Jesus.

Note: You’ll find a summary of the gospel message on page 2 of this Leader Guide. You can also direct group members to page 2 of the PSG to learn more about salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

TRANSITION: Let’s move on to Ephesians 2:20-22 and see what it means for Jesus to serve as the chief cornerstone of the church.
Ephesians 2:19 Commentary

So then signals a result of the nearness to God that Gentile and Jewish believers now share in Christ. The result: Gentiles are no longer foreigners and strangers without citizenship in God’s kingdom, as Ephesians 2:12 describes their former status. Instead, believing Gentiles are fellow citizens with the saints. The term saints refers simply to people who are truly in Christ (Eph. 1:1). They are not of a higher spiritual level than “ordinary” believers. Instead, Christians are all in the same class together. Jewish and Gentile believers are all full and fellow citizens of the kingdom of God’s saints.

Beyond fellow citizenship, we see another image that further presses home the intimacy of fellowship in the church. Jew and Gentile alike are members of God’s household. Across ethnic, racial, cultural, and linguistic lines, all believers are included together as members of God’s family in the church!

To have a biblical view of salvation and the church, we must see that peace with God is more than vertical. It is also horizontal, reaching across ethnic and racial boundaries. The gospel is not just about “Jesus and me.” When God brings a person to Himself in Christ, He brings that person together with everyone else who is in Christ. “Connected in Christ” means connected with others who are in Christ.

This truth might thrill us or it might stagger us, but one thing is for sure—it is totally biblical. Let’s take a short tour through the Bible to see that God’s plan has always included uniting Jews and Gentiles in the church through Christ. In Genesis 12:3, God promised to bless all the peoples (or clans) on the earth through Abraham. Psalm 67:1-4 calls on God to make His salvation known among the nations so they would rejoice in Him. In Isaiah 49:6, God promised His Servant would be a light to extend His salvation to the nations of the earth. In Luke 24:47, the risen Jesus said proclamation of forgiveness of sins through Him was to start in Jerusalem and continue to all nations. In Acts 1:8, Jesus sent His witnesses to the ends of the earth—that is, to non-Jews of all kinds! In Acts 8–11, God gave His Spirit freely to people who believed the gospel in Samaria and in a Gentile military officer’s home. Peter shared close fellowship with Gentiles in the military man’s home! In Revelation 5:9, Jesus is praised in heaven because He purchased for God by His blood sinners from all the tribes, languages, peoples, and nations of the world!

Hopefully, God’s plan to make the Gentiles His children and members of His household is overwhelmingly obvious to us, but early Jewish Christians struggled to see it. Paul called it a “mystery” that God has now clearly revealed and that the church is to display for His glory (Eph. 3). Now that the mystery is revealed, we can see how destroying the walls between people and uniting them in Christ in the church would give God great glory.
Ephesians 2:20-22

20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the cornerstone. 21 The whole building, being put together by Him, grows into a holy sanctuary in the Lord. 22 You also are being built together for God’s dwelling in the Spirit.

READ: Ephesians 2:20-22 on page 11 of the PSG.

SUMMARIZE: Use the first paragraph of the commentary on page 19 of this Leader Guide to explain how the church was “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets.”

GUIDE: Highlight the key word “cornerstone” on page 11 of the PSG.

DISCUSS: Question #5 on page 15 of the PSG: “Jesus remains the foundation of the church. What is our role in continuing His work?”

RECAP: Read or restate the final paragraph on page 15 of the PSG:

God never intended His church to be a place for followers to act like consumers seeking to be served and entertained. Instead, He designed the church to be a missionary people carrying out the greatest work the world has ever known. Therefore, an invitation to join with Jesus and His followers in carrying out that mission is truly a gift that should inspire our humble gratitude and motivate our sacrificial service.

GUIDE: Refer back to “The Point” of this session: “Church membership is a privilege made possible through Christ.” If time permits, encourage group members to share any final thoughts or questions.
Ephesians 2:20-22 Commentary

If God’s household is not built on cultural identities or along racial dividing lines, on what is it built? The answer to this question lies at two levels. At one level, we see that the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets whom Christ gave to the church (Eph. 4:11-16). The apostles witnessed Jesus’ resurrection and functioned with His authority in founding the church. Prophets were specially inspired by the Spirit to declare and teach God’s truth to His people. Like the apostles, they had received and communicated the “mystery” of Gentile inclusion and partnership in the gospel and the church (Eph. 3:5-6). Through the apostles and prophets, the gospel went forth in the first century. Their foundational character is inseparable from their message. Their message made clear the focal point of the church’s foundation.

At the level of deepest importance, we see Christ Jesus Himself as the cornerstone. He is the first stone. He sets the direction of the building. He is the focal point in whom all the building components are joined. The apostles and prophets have their places only in relation to Him. Without Him—His towering person, His saving work, His authoritative Word—there would be no church.

Having looked down at the foundation, we now look around to see that the whole building is being put together by Him. Jesus said He would build His church (Matt. 16:18). As He builds, He includes Jew and Gentile. He includes students from China, Japan, and Taiwan. He includes black and white. He will include people from every nation, tribe, and language (Rev. 7:9).

As Christ Jesus builds, the church grows into a holy sanctuary in the Lord. Jesus applied sanctuary-language to His own body—the body that would hang on the cross (John 2:19-21). Since we have access to the Father through Jesus, He is our sanctuary. Also, the church is His body. Jesus and His church are as fully linked and should be as united in purpose as the foundation and walls of any great edifice.

How do we grow into a holy sanctuary? We grow as we learn and live out together the word of truth, the gospel. We grow as we serve and care for one another and pray with and for one another. We also grow as the Lord Jesus adds those whom He is saving.

With the words you also, Paul turned attention again specifically to the Gentile believers in the church in Ephesus—and, by extension, to every local church. The Ephesians were being built together for God’s dwelling in the Spirit. Of course, God’s Spirit dwells in the body of Christ, which is all true believers across the globe and the ages. It’s also true that the local church is to be God’s dwelling in which His purposes are on display.
LIVE IT OUT

GUIDE: Direct group members to page 16 of the PSG. Encourage them to consider the following actions for church members:

- **View church membership as a gift.** Thank God daily for the opportunity to be included in His family, the church.

- **Ask the right question.** John F. Kennedy famously challenged Americans, “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.” This week, ask your pastor, “What can I do for my church?”

- **Invite others in.** Identify those around you who need to be introduced to the gospel and included in Christ’s church. Invite at least one of these individuals to church this week.

Wrap It Up

TRANSITION: Read or restate the conclusion from page 16 of the PSG: “Church membership isn’t about our needs. It’s about meeting the needs of others. Most importantly, it’s about serving the one true God.”

PRAY: Ask God for His Spirit to help you and your group members see church membership in a new and exciting way throughout this study.
My group’s prayer requests

Additional suggestions for specific groups (women, men, boomers, and singles) are available at BibleStudiesForLife.com/blog. And for free online training on how to lead a group visit MinistryGrid.com/web/BibleStudiesForLife.

He’ll Come Running

There’s a dangerous temptation many of us face when we think we’ve got God all figured out. I’ve noticed that I tend to get myself into all kinds of trouble when I make assumptions about how He moves and leave no room for mystery. We walk a fine line when we assume that God must think and feel and respond as we do. God is “other,” unlike us in so many ways.

To continue reading “He’ll Come Running” from HomeLife magazine, visit BibleStudiesforLife.com/articles.