

“We are saved not just into an individual relationship with Christ but into the gathered community of his church. In an age of extreme individualism and profound loneliness, Barnabas gives us a glimpse into the church’s purpose and beauty, her shared values and challenges, inviting us to take our place in something greater than ourselves: the communion of saints. Here is good help for all who long to belong.”

**JEN WILKIN**, Bible Teacher; Author, *None Like Him*

“Our local churches, despite their flaws and imperfections, are purposed by Jesus to be a taste of heaven on earth. With pastoral warmth and biblical wisdom, Barnabas paints a picture in these pages of what our experience in the church is meant to be. This book is deeply refreshing and grounded with helpful application.”

**ADAM RAMSEY**, Lead Pastor, Liberti Church, Gold Coast, Australia; Network Director, Acts 29 Asia Pacific

“In our time, when loneliness is at epidemic proportions, something proactive must be done. As Barnabas shows, the local church is the epicenter for belonging to be experienced in the richest, most life-giving and sustainable ways. I cannot recommend this book to you highly enough.”

**SCOTT SAULS**, Senior Pastor, Christ Presbyterian Church, Nashville; Author, *A Gentle Answer*

“Most Christians really want to connect with and to serve their local congregations. They often just don’t know how or where to start. Barnabas Piper does away with hectoring or manipulation and offers accessible and wise counsel on how to find that kind of love and belonging within the community of Christ.”

**RUSSELL MOORE**, Editor-in-Chief, *Christianity Today*

“In an age of isolation, individualism, and loneliness, the church has a wonderful opportunity to remind people that they were made for community—made to belong to the family of God, the church. *Belong* is a book that can help Christians retrieve the priority of the local church. I am praying this book gets a wide reading.”

**J.T. ENGLISH**, Lead Pastor, Storyline Church, Arvada, Colorado; Author, *Deep Discipleship*

“Jesus is inviting us to truly belong to a church community full of humility, honesty, and honour. Part of the value of this book is that its author has experienced the pain of churches where belonging was hard and the attempt to belong left him weary and wary. Whether you are loving church life, scared of stepping through the doors of another church, or somewhere in between, this book will be valuable to you.”

**JOHN HINDLEY**, Pastor, BroadGrace, Norfolk, UK;  
Author, *Serving without Sinking and Refreshed*

“Barnabas Piper helpfully reminds us about what it really means to belong to a church family in a way that is full of heart and life. I highly recommend this book—it will challenge and inspire you to think differently about your church and love your church family more deeply and authentically.”

**JENNY REES**, Chair, Southern Women’s Convention, UK

“This book is a welcome and needed vision for creating church cultures that warmly reflect the gospel. It is an encouragement for each of us to be the church we hope to be a part of—loving one another, encouraging one another, bearing with one another, and serving one another.”

**MELISSA KRUGER**, Director of Women’s Initiatives for  
The Gospel Coalition; Author, *Growing Together*

“The church of Jesus Christ is designed by God to be a celebration of the miracle of belonging. Because of the grace of Jesus, we belong to God and to one another. In a way that I have never read before, Barnabas Piper not only defines that belonging but also helps us to understand how to live with one another in a way that always reflects that, by grace, we together belong to God.”

**PAUL TRIPP**, Author, *New Morning Mercies*

“For too long, we have viewed church (whether consciously or not) as consumers. Barnabas provides a much-needed corrective to help us see and value what it means to belong. Here is wise counsel and radical yet biblical therapy for us all.”

**ADRIAN REYNOLDS**, Head of National Ministries, FIEC, UK



# belong

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BARNABAS PIPER

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Belong

Loving Your Church by Reflecting Christ to One Another

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[thegoodbook.com.au](http://thegoodbook.com.au) | [thegoodbook.co.nz](http://thegoodbook.co.nz) | [thegoodbook.co.in](http://thegoodbook.co.in)

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Cover design by Faceout Studio | Art direction and design by André Parker

ISBN: 9781784988227 | Printed in the UK

*This book is dedicated to my dear friends from my  
community group at Immanuel Nashville.*

*You have shown me what belonging to the family of God  
looks like and invited me into it through your honesty,  
compassion, hospitality, humility, humor, constancy, and  
faithfulness to Jesus through so many joys and sorrows.  
Together we have experienced the profoundly normal and  
supernatural reality of fellowship in Jesus. I love you all.*

*Thank you.*



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# FOREWORD

BY RAY ORTLUND

*You belong to Christ.*

*Mark 9:41*

**G**od created us to belong, both to him and to one another. But our pride drove us far away, both from him and from one another. Now Jesus is bringing us back, both to him and to one another.

Belonging is an adjustment for every one of us. Maybe there was a time when we felt so superior that belonging was beneath us. Or maybe we felt safer in our own guarded aloofness. Or maybe we feared that belonging might pull us into commitments we couldn't live up to. But if you have picked up this book, you are at least open to belonging. This book will help you to see your options more clearly and to make your decisions more confidently.

Here's why your future will get better by bravely jumping in. Jesus is not out to save isolated individuals scattered here and there. He is creating and gathering a new

community in which everyone deeply belongs, both to him and to one another. And when we finally belong—really belong—to a group of people whom we respect and enjoy, it feels *so good*. We've come home.

I admit, it isn't easy to get there. It can be even harder to stay there. If the belonging we all desire were simple and formulaic, the experience would be common. In fact, for me, it can be difficult to stop and think about belonging. The topic stirs painful memories. I know what it's like to discover that I did *not* belong. I thought I did, but I was wrong. And it hurt. Maybe that's been your experience too. Churches can make belonging hard and even risky—which is to say, churches can make it hard to experience Jesus. And that is not ok.

Barnabas Piper has written this wonderful book because he understands from personal experience both how hard and how glorious belonging can be. He is qualified to help the rest of us think it through. I believe you will find in Barnabas a trustworthy guide, because his experience is deep and his conclusions are honest. Most importantly, Barnabas is a faithful follower of Jesus. The Lord gently led him from the outer margins all the way to the deepest heart of Immanuel Church in Nashville. I watched Barnabas walk that journey. Sometimes it was painful. Other times it was joyful. Always it was Jesus leading Barnabas closer to his heart. From his early cautious explorations all the way to his eventual glad commitments, Barnabas kept on saying

yes to Jesus. And now he is helping us make Immanuel a safe place for still others to belong. His story looks to me like the newness of life that Jesus died and rose again to create.

Barnabas wisely counsels us, “The church is the only place where we can heal from the hurt we’ve encountered in church.” If he’s right—and he is—then this book might open a door for you to heal in surprising ways.

So, I commend to you this book by my friend Barnabas. He is a man who can truly say, “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1, CSB).

*Ray Ortlund*  
*Renewal Ministries*  
*August 2022*



# INTRODUCTION

## WHO THIS BOOK IS FOR

In the summer of 2017 I walked through the doors of Immanuel Church in Nashville for the first time. I was a few months removed from a painful divorce and a few months into searching for a new church home. Both experiences had left me spiritually exhausted and emotionally discouraged, uncertain of my future, and uncomfortable in church.

I grew up in the church—quite literally, as I’m a pastor’s kid. I had been part of churches for my entire life, sometimes feeling joyfully at home, sometimes feeling like I was in the middle of a family feud on steroids, and other times feeling like the outsider. I was intimately familiar with the best and worst the church had to offer, and I knew I needed to be part of one.

But I wasn’t at all sure I *wanted* to be.

I sat in the furthest back corner of the service that day and did my best to meet nobody (my usual strategy

when visiting churches). When the service began, a pastor stood up and welcomed the congregation warmly. *Probably phony*, I thought. Then he proceeded to say these words:

*To all who are weary and need rest;  
To all who mourn and long for comfort;  
To all who fail and need strength;  
To all who sin and need a Savior;  
This church opens wide her doors and her heart with a  
welcome from Jesus Christ.*

Beautiful words, comforting words, welcoming words; words I desperately wanted to believe—but words I instinctively rejected. I didn't think the pastor was lying, per se. I just thought it was aspirational nonsense. In my experience churches usually declare what they want to be, not what they are. They advertise their mission and vision, but are less clear on their present state. *If only a church actually welcomed people like that, I might find a home*, I thought. I had enough self-awareness to know that I was particularly cynical about churches, so rather than walk away with an eye roll and a snarky tweet, I decided to let the church prove itself to me either as a place of welcome or as a place of hypocrisy.

What I found in the two years following that first cynical Sunday was a place of belonging. It was a place of safety for the weary and broken. Honesty was upheld as a value: speaking the truth about our lives and our spiritual state and our needs. People were treated with

the God-given dignity they deserved, even as they were honest about the ugliness in their lives. And it all worked because it was done in humility before God and in dependence on Jesus.

The pastors and leaders exemplified this, but it was the members who embodied honesty, safety, honor, and humility week in and week out to me, so that God could work in my life. It was in conversations over drinks, in living rooms on Sunday afternoons, and in weeknight Bible study and prayer with other men that my heart was thawed and my eyes were opened to what church could be. I had found a church home, a place of belonging to the family of God. Out of this belonging God healed and restored me, gave me strength, tempered my cynicism, and eventually called me to full-time pastoral ministry.

So it is, that in what to me is the unlikeliest turn of events, I have the privilege of serving as a pastor at Immanuel now. When I stand in front of the congregation on Sunday mornings and welcome people, I think of where I was in 2017. Each time I open my mouth to say those words, “To all who are weary and need rest...”, I pray that the people in that room will find *belonging* in that welcome from Jesus.

That’s who this book is for—the person figuring out what it means to belong to a church and whether it is worth it. You may love the church and desire to commit more deeply and serve better. You may be skeptical and reluctant because of past experiences, but you believe

God wants you in his church. You may be wounded and cautious, fearful even, because of damage inflicted on you through the church. You may be a brand-new believer, unsure what to think about church. Or you may be uprooted, having relocated from a place of familiarity to be dropped in a new town and new church where you hope to find a home.

My hope is that this book shows what it looks like to belong in church, really and truly, and what it looks like to help others to do the same.



# 1. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BELONG?

**L**et me set your mind at ease about this book, or maybe disabuse you of false notions. I neither want you to be intimidated by what you think is in these pages, nor do I want you to be disappointed by what you don't find.

In these pages you will not find a list of qualifications for church membership against which you can measure yourself. Nor will you find an explanation or defense of church membership as a system or structure. My aim is not to give a survey of how membership works in different denominations or traditions. I am writing about *belonging*, and while there is a close connection with formal membership, they are not the same. A person can be a member of a church without belonging, and a person can belong to a church that does not offer formal membership. The pressing question is not about processes or polity but about connection to and closeness within the body of Christ.

This is not a book primarily for pastors or church leaders either, except inasmuch as they are members of the body too. I'm not here to write about marks, measurements, or metrics of a healthy church. Nor will you find a manual on how to recruit or assimilate people into church membership. Rather, my hope is that any church leaders who read this will see themselves as one of the sheep, under Christ our Shepherd, part of this family of God.

Finally, I will not lance a boil of church bitterness in these pages. I have experience of being hurt by churchgoers and church leaders alike. You very well might too. Disillusionment with church comes easily. I've found that dwelling on it doesn't help me love Jesus or his church more. And make no mistake, it is *his* church.

I played football in high school, and the coaches would sometimes have us watch our own game film so we could review our performances and correct errors. Our team was exceptionally bad, so those film sessions were mostly an exercise in the coaches disgustingly yelling, "Look how much y'all suck; be better!" (Poor coaching may have contributed to our overall lack of success.) That's not my aim in this book, either. Yes, the church has some "bad film," with plenty of lowlights, and we can be better. But how to be better, rather than what sucks, is what I will focus on in these chapters.