

I've never worked in a split office, one where two companies share space and some materials but not necessarily everything. I suppose it doesn't happen all that much, but I have seen it a couple of times. I would think it could get challenging, especially since some things are shared but not everything. One employee quickly grabs a pad of paper and a pen only to discover it was supplies from the other company. That's probably why sharing of space isn't practical. Too hard to keep separate what belongs to each.

We value our possessions that belong to us. One aspect of being Americans we enjoy is standing on the principle of private ownership. Our stuff belongs to us. But we also like to say we belong to no one. It would be highly unlikely to hear someone say they belong to someone else. It's not that we want to belong to someone else but can't work out the details. We don't want to. We're not going to be the property of anyone else; we aren't going to belong to anyone else but ourselves.

But is that true? We might think we don't but in the second lesson Peter wrote to Christians of all stripes who were out there, living among unbelievers. Those believers were sure they didn't belong to the unbelievers, but they weren't independent either. They were just like us...

### **We are people belonging to God**

Not belonging to someone, not being their possession, is important. Equally important is belonging to someone, being desired by someone. We don't want to belong to someone, yet we do want to be wanted. Go walking through the dog pound and look at all the dogs no one wants. It's so sad because they don't belong to anyone. We don't want that for dogs. But we don't want that for ourselves. If we never run in social circles with people at work or school and we feel we don't belong it's a sad existence.

You don't run in God's circles, you can't by choice. The perception we human beings have is that God's got too many rules to be included among his people. It requires so much dedication and focus. It would mean giving up the fun things and becoming overly religious. Not enough freedom belonging to God's social group. It makes people question what the gain is for them. Why would I want to be close to God? I don't think Christians are ever any less likely to have bad things happen. Even when we perceive benefits we make it all about us. I come to church to be seen. I give to church to cover my bases. I talk with people to see what I can get from them. In some ways then the other people start to belong to me, or at least I think they do.

I can remember the satisfaction of buying my first car. It was a baby blue 1990 Mercury Topaz. And it was mine. I worked and saved for the money. I made the deal to buy it. I went and got the license plates, I scheduled the service, and I paid the insurance. Sure it was responsibility, but it belonged to me. And with no small amount of effort either. But the effort, the fact it didn't come easy, that made the car belonging to me more satisfying. Because of my sinfulness I'm not worth to God what that 1990 Mercury Topaz was worth. Being separate from God costs me my life. Sin will take your life from you. But Jesus didn't care about your sticker price. He took on human flesh and got to work. He followed the rules, was dedicated and focused, watched what he said, and came out perfect. With no small amount of effort he made the payment for you and me. It wasn't cheap. But the effort, the fact that he owed nothing but gave everything, made his claim on us more satisfying. And not only for him, but for us. The Son of God made us his own. He went to the cross to declare to you a love willing to make you people belonging to God.

Jesus put forth the tremendous effort and you gained all the benefits. **"Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."** It had nothing to do with you. It couldn't. You didn't have mercy, you weren't his people. Then suddenly Jesus showed you mercy. A total change happened. Once you were outside God's social group, outside of belonging to anyone, destined for hell. Now you are people belonging to God. Jesus alone stands in the middle, between once and now. His sacrifice, his claim on you, his mercy makes you people belonging to God.

Martin Luther, a man who at one time knew what it was like to feel no mercy and no relationship with God, said once, *"Since all Christians are called out of darkness, each one is bound to declare the might of him who has called him."* Luther was a 15<sup>th</sup> century Roman monk who at one time thought you earned a relationship with God. But God opened up the Bible and called Luther into the light. And what power in that light. Power to make a child of God. Power to make Luther and anyone else who believes in Christ a part of the people of God. And once that happens a Christian is bound. **"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God."** We could examine each title and spend an entire morning on each. But being people belonging to God bounds you **"that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."** Praise towards God comes pouring out. Its mercy, its grace, it's simply being people belonging to God that makes you and me praise him.

It seems like centuries ago when communes formed, monasteries popped up, and monks, nuns, and anyone who wanted to be religious got behind walls in isolation. There they could safely be God's people. That still happens some today. Religious people still sometimes isolate themselves. Examine your friendships, acquaintances, and the people you rub shoulders with most frequently. Do you find there are not a lot of unbelievers? Maybe there's not a lot of diversity. I know I construct social circles that include people like me. You might feel most comfortable coming to church and meeting up with the same people week in and week out. This allows our Christianity to sit for another week. It's dangerous to talk Jesus or faith or religion during the week, especially if that person is an unbeliever.

In a way, you're already living as Peter says. **"Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul."** The encouragement is to isolate from the sinful world. There's a war going on and all the ammunition is aimed at you. The world, the devil, even your sinful flesh want you to remain opposed to God. When you're God's people they really come after you hard. But being who you are as a believer means avoiding sin. To do that best means avoiding those who tempt you to sin. It means avoiding unbelievers.

But before we start building the commune walls around the church building meant to keep those nasty unbelievers out let's read further. **"Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us."** You are called to live among the pagans. Instead of running from unbelievers we should rub shoulders with them. Be intentional about drawing good attention to ourselves. Live among them, walk in their circles, be in their groups, befriend them so maybe they're forced to ask you why you're doing the good deeds you do. Then God gives you the opportunity he always meant for his people to have. You'll talk to them about him. You'll bring unbelievers to the very Word of God which first called you to recognize sin but recognize the Savior and now calls them. You'll bring them Jesus who caused your heart to soar and now beckons the same from them.

They're already watching. They may not understand your beliefs but they understand an honest hard working life. They don't understand your motivation found in Christ, but they get love and respect shown towards a spouse. Just be careful because the moral life never converts a soul. Only knowing Jesus by faith does that. And be careful to continue to care for your own soul. Find the time to be in regular worship. Get into the Scriptures regularly by yourself. Feed your faith with the sacrament. Your soul needs these to survive. And someone you know needs your soul to be strong in its relationship with Jesus so you can confess the gospel and sharing your faith and God might save them.

So do you see? You are the people who belong to God. That means you have gifts from God to put to use in the world among believers and unbelievers. It means you are just the one that God wants going to work. You may have weaknesses and you may have struggles. But you are still God's people. Where you might be weak and struggling, God raises up someone who can support and work opposite you. You are empowered to be people belonging to God.