Good morning, family. I pray that your new year has started off well. I have been in prayer about our church, asking God for His guidance as we enter this new season of ministry. Today, we begin a new sermon series. Many of you know that for years, I coached baseball. And I began each new season the same: My players and I would go back to fundamentals, to the foundation of playing the game—back to basics. For us as believers and as a church, I believe it to be beneficial for us to do the same, to rediscover the founding principles, the vision, the purpose that undergirds our faith.

In our Old Testament reading today, we are reminded of who we are:

Worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs. Know that the LORD is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture. (Psalm 100:2-3)

We are His and we are to worship Him with gladness. In Acts 2, we are reminded of what it looks like to belong to the church of Almighty God:

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (42-47)

This passage describes in detail the blessings of belonging. As believers and church members, we belong to something greater than ourselves. And here’s the truth: human beings are wired to belong: clubs, gangs, social media, family. And from the beginning, the description in Acts tells us that Christianity has been about community. But family, listen to me carefully: for the first Christians and for us, belonging as a citizen of Heaven comes before church membership. Our belonging begins with repentance, leading to salvation (\*2 Corinthians 7:10)

Before belonging to the earthly church, we must first be reconciled to God through the completed work of Christ on the cross (\*\*2 Corinthians 5:20-21).

The foundation of faith is Christ, the cornerstone (\*\*\*Ephesians 2:19-22), and with Him as the cornerstone, we believe, we belong, and we build. And since He is the cornerstone, we take all of our measurements from Him. The church is not built on a foundation of our own thoughts or principles or preferences but upon Jesus.

\*2 Corinthians 7:10 “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.”

\*\*2 Corinthians 5:20-21

We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.

\*\*\*Ephesians 2:19-11

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In Him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.

The church is not a human invention but a divine institution. Christ is what connects us and builds us. It is a place at the table of grace. Being a part of the church is an expression of what Christ has made and is making of us. In the founding of Shepherd Church, the first sermons preached were from the book of Acts. One of the primary principles was and continues to be that “every member is a minister” (\*1Peter 2:4-10). Shepherd Church is a royal priesthood. It’s not some cute nickname but a commissioning of the saints.

And family, belonging for the believer means we respond appropriately to the word of God. Belonging is not “fitting in.” Belonging means we share the same truth, the same mission, the same vision, and the same Savior (\*\*Acts 2:46).

In reading the minutes and notes from the early meetings of this fellowship, the primary focus was and is “Bringing people to the Kingdom.” Jesus is our fixed

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\*1Peter 2:4-10

4 As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him— 5 you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 6 For in Scripture it says: “See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.” 7 Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,” 8 and, “A stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.” They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for. 9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. 10 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.

\*\* Acts 2:46

46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, point of

reference. And we invite people to find a seat at the table of grace. We offer everyone a place of love, grace, accountability, and growth. We offer everyone a place of forgiving because we are forgiven. We offer community, a common unity (\*Ephesians 4:4-7). And this hospitality of shared belief reflects for me the content of one of our foundational expressions of the Christian faith, the Apostles’ Creed:

I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth;

And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord:

Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary,

suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried;\*

The third day he rose from the dead;

He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;

From thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic [meaning universal] church,

the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

When, together, we recite this statement of our beliefs, we affirm the foundational aspects of faith that make us a church: believing, belonging, and building. There is great blessing in belonging. Our belonging is confirmation of what Christ has done. We are not in a Jesus fan club or country club. We are not together aboard a cruise ship, but we *are* together aboard a battleship. And in this belonging, God builds for Himself a people. Our personal relationship and fellowship with our

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\*Ephesians 4:4-7

4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism; 6 one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. 7 But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.

Holy God impacts our relationships and fellowship with one another. Belonging helps us set our hearts on God, His kingdom, His mission, and His purpose. A rereading of this congregation’s statement of purpose affirms, Family, that Jesus is our fixed point of reference. Our mission here at Shepherd is to love God and to love people. And to repeat one of our primary principles, each and every one of our members is a minister. What joy we have to belong to such a wonderful local church! But beyond that, what a joy to belong to the Kingdom of God!!! We are not meant to travel this road—to take on the task of Jesus ministry—alone. In that spirit, I encourage you to become part of one of our congregation’s small groups, if you haven’t already done so. But mostly, I encourage you, if you haven’t already repented of your sin and surrendered your life to Jesus as your personal King and Savior, may you do so today. Find, today, that in His saving grace is the real belonging!

Bible Passages in Support of This Sermon

Psalm 100

1 Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth. 2 Worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs. 3 Know that the LORD is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture. 4 Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. 5 For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations.

Acts 2:42-47

42 They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. 44 All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45 They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. 46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, 47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.