



## **No Longer Strangers** *Finding Belonging in a World of Alienation*

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As a third-culture kid and a gay Christian, Greg Coles has some first-hand experience about struggling to fit in. In *No Longer Strangers*, he mixes stories from his own experience with reflection on Scripture to contemplate the idea of belonging. As Christians, we do belong to Christ and to his community: but that doesn't mean we won't stick out in lots of ways in the meantime!

## Where Do You Belong?

What experiences led you to write this book on belonging?

**Gregory Coles:** As I spoke about and talked with readers of my last book (*Single, Gay, Christian*), I found that I kept running into questions of belonging: "If you're gay and celibate, does that mean you never quite belong in Christian spaces or LGBTQ ones?" "If you never build your own family, how can you still find people to belong with?" It struck me that people didn't just seem to want abstract reassurances in response to these questions (God will provide!)—instead, they wanted stories, bits of evidence, to show that God would keep his promises and to describe what it might look like and feel like to be a recipient of God's faithfulness in the realm of belonging.

Though it was questions about singleness and celibacy that first sparked these conversations, I quickly found that the search for belonging seemed to resonate with audiences far beyond the sexuality conversation. It wasn't just me and the other gay celibates trying to figure out which people and places and ideals we belonged to. Nor were sexuality and singleness the only parts of my life where I'd needed to grapple with belonging—in particular, my childhood in Indonesia and my murky sense of national identity had given me an already-complicated sense of where I "fit." So I set out to write a book that might draw from some of my own experiences and speak to the concerns and hopes and fears and needs of a wide variety of others (especially those like sexual-minority Christians and third-culture kids whose experiences are most similar but also a wider range of people wrestling with what it means to belong in the world).

Describe the main thesis in *No Longer Strangers*.

**Greg:** With apologies for the shameless self-quotation, the thesis of my book comes in a paragraph toward the end of the introduction (or at least, it does right now, per the genius editorial interventions of editor Ethan McCarthy):

The way Jesus tells it, if we give up on belonging in order to follow him, we'll find ourselves belonging anyway, as if by accident, in spite of ourselves. We might not belong the way other people do, with normal homes and normal families and normal ways of fitting in. But we'll belong in a way that's a hundred times better, fully in place because we know we are out of place. We'll belong in all the weirdest ways, finding family among strangers, making homes out of tents that are better than mansions. We'll belong like aliens.



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The distinctive of this approach, as I see it, is that I'm not offering a how-to book to solve people's lack of belonging. This isn't "seven tips for finally fitting in!" Instead, I'm inviting readers to reframe the kind of belonging they're after and the goal of that belonging, in order to recognize that the belonging God wants to give them may not be doled out in the currencies they're used to . . . and yet it's also so much more robust than the cheap, temporary belonging they've been chasing.

What messages do you hope to convey to your readers?

Greg:

- Jesus has promised to provide his followers with belonging, and he keeps his promises.
- If we're truly following Jesus, our belonging might not look like other people's, and that's okay.
- Trying to fit in by acting just like everyone else is a terrible way to seek out belonging.
- Healthy belonging and feeling out of place sometimes go hand in hand.
- Through Christ, our ultimate belonging is rooted not in this lifetime but in eternity.



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## Still Learning How to Belong

*"I used to believe that my placelessness made me a rarity. I assumed that most people fit naturally into their environments, found the tribe they were meant to join, never had any doubt about where they belonged in the world. Everyone else had been told the secret to feeling claimed and understood, the secret to fitting in somewhere. I alone had missed that day of second grade (because I was homeschooled, probably), and I was doomed to be a misfit for the rest of my life.*

*"But the longer I live, the more I study people and get to know them, the more I believe we're all still learning how to belong."*

—Gregory Coles, *No Longer Strangers*

Gregory Coles (PhD, Penn State University) is a writer, speaker, and worship leader. His first book, *Single, Gay, Christian*, was a 2017 Foreword INDIES Award Finalist. He lives in central Pennsylvania, where he recently completed a PhD in English at Penn State.

An American author, playwright, and songwriter, Gregory spent fifteen years growing up in the Muslim neighborhoods of Southeast Asia, in the shadow of a golden-domed mosque marked by a spire with a silver crescent moon. The son of two committed Christian teachers, Greg learned from a young age to look for God in the world around him. He read Shakespeare's *Hamlet* at age eight, learned to speak several languages, and published his first short story while still in high school. At age eighteen, he returned to the United States to pursue his education.

Gregory is also a contributor to Jim Henson's *The Dark Crystal Author Quest*—a collection of short stories published by Grosset and Dunlap (Penguin Random House)—and a top-five finalist in the international contest to "find the next great Dark Crystal author" for Jim Henson Company's book series set in that world.



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