

ACTS 2:41, 47
WHY BELONG?

“Those who accepted [Peter’s] message were baptised, and that day about three thousand people were added... And the Lord was adding to their number every day those who were being saved.”^{1, 2}

Charles Spurgeon told of his intense desire to be a member of a local church during one particular sermon. “I well remember how I joined [the church], for I forced myself into the Church of God by telling the minister—who was lax and slow—after I had called four or five times, and could not see him, that I had done my duty, and if he did not see me, I would call a church-meeting myself, and tell them I believed in Christ, and ask them if they would have me. I know when I did it I meant it.”³

Clearly, Spurgeon held a high view of membership in a local congregation. Today, church membership is neglected among the churches of our Lord. I am not actually certain when the transition occurred, but membership in the local church seems to be disregarded across the spectrum of Christendom. It seems at times as if membership in the local congregation is dismissed as unimportant. Modern Christians seem to believe that the Faith of Christ the Lord involves believing only, and not belonging. However, believing should lead to belonging; for the one who believes will love the church as much as does the Saviour who redeems [see ACTS 20:28; EPHESIANS 5:25].

Church membership is not merely enrolment for the sake of having one’s name on a list, nor is it solely an issue of privilege. Outside of Canada and the United States—especially in countries where being a believer may entail considerable personal cost—it is rare that one would find a Christian who remains unconnected to a local congregation. Being a believer is synonymous with holding membership in a local congregation—in the Word of God, in historical experience and in the experience of contemporary Christians outside of North America. However, in Canada, membership is too often associated with paying dues, performing meaningless rituals, abiding by silly rules and simply having one’s name on a roll that is seldom consulted. However, the New Testament presents quite a different picture of membership in the local congregation.

To be a Christian without holding membership in a congregation is akin to being a hockey player without a team. Perhaps you enjoy playing the game, but you really do not compete. Being a Christian without holding membership in a local congregation is somewhat like being a tuba player without a band. Though you play ever so well, only as the tuba lends its melodious bass in harmony with the entire band is the beauty of the instrument truly heard. To be a Christian without holding membership in a local congregation is to be a sheep without a flock, exposed to danger. To be a Christian without accountability to a local congregation is to be an orphan without a family.⁴

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

² **The NET Bible First Edition** (Biblical Studies Press) 2006

³ Charles H. Spurgeon, **Spurgeon’s Sermons: Volume 60**, “Joining the Church,” No. 3411 (electronic ed., Logos Library System; Spurgeon’s Sermons, Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1998)

⁴ Suggested by Rick Warren, **Turning attendees into a part of the family**, <http://www.pastors.com/RWMT/?id=225&artid=4137&expand=1>, accessed 1 November 2005

In my studies in the New Testament, I note that the writers frequently address the missive to a “church”; or they will refer to the “churches.” The word “church,” or the plural, “churches,” occurs 109 times in the **ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION** of the New Testament. For those who use the **NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION** of the Bible, you will discover that the word “church” and its cognates occur 113 times. I leave it to you to find the extra occurrences. There are six instances of the Greek term *ekklesia* occurring that are not translated by the English term “church” in the **ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION**.

It is indisputable that the overwhelming number of occurrences of this word in the Greek text clearly speaks of a local congregation. This would have been the usual understanding for the first readers of the New Testament, even in the limited instances that we question what the writer may have meant. This point is sufficiently important to stress so that we gain an appreciation of the importance of the church to early Christians.

Accordingly, it would be fair to say that the local congregation loomed large in the estimate of the writers of the New Testament. If we should discover that the early Christians valued church membership, we should see their practise as a model to emulate. If they treated membership as the expected practise of any who name the Name of Christ, we are obligated to adopt that practise in our own day.

In order to explore this issue more fully, I deliver this homily, based loosely upon **ACTS 2:41, 47**. In these two verses, I note that Doctor Luke twice stresses addition to the number of the believers. I am quite certain that his language is not superfluous, but rather than he is carefully reporting what occurred with a view to providing a model for each church during the Age of Grace to adopt. Consider God’s Word, then.

THERE WERE ADDED THAT DAY — Honesty compels me to admit that even in the recent past, people often joined a church as an act of conformity. Children attending Sunday School were typically urged to “join” the church. Tragically, churches often were guilty of plucking “green fruit” as people united with the congregation more out of obligation than out of conviction. Children, especially, sought to please their teachers or to fit in with their peers, and so they “joined” the church. Likewise, it was once considered social suicide not to be a member of the church; and so joining a church was frequently treated as a mere business decision to enhance social standing in business circles.

If earlier generations erred in treating membership as obligatory for the wrong reason, contemporary generations have moved too far toward a form of individual autonomy that depreciates the need for church membership. Membership in the New Testament view is an act of commitment. It is a statement of purpose in which the Christian commits himself or herself to the Body of Christ—His church. The one uniting with the congregation is accepting responsibility to fulfil the purpose of God through investing his or her spiritual gifts in the life of the congregation that God chooses.

I have focused intensely on the passage before us during the past weeks. I have frequently cited this passage as I preached the message of life. It is not that this is the only passage available to instruct us in the importance of membership in the local congregation; but it is certainly one of the clearest examples of the early practise of the apostolic churches. Consequently, the treasures to be found therein have not been exhausted. Accordingly, I ask that you weigh the teaching implicit in this divine account of the nascent Jerusalem congregation once again.

In a paper read 10 February 1945, C. S. Lewis attested, “The very word membership is of Christian origin, but it has been taken over by the world and emptied of all meaning.”⁵ Referring to the Pauline use of the term “member,” Lewis stressed complementarity as contrasted to homogeneity. I do know that those saved “were added” to the number of disciples. That this was an ancient understanding is evidenced in early manuscripts that add the words “to the church” to **ACTS 2:47**.⁶ Though the words “to the church” may be questioned, the obvious intent of Luke’s words is that those baptised were enrolled in the membership of the congregation.

That individuals were enumerated and recognised as disciples seems abundantly obvious from the New Testament documents. In the days preceding Pentecost, we read, “Peter stood up among the brothers” [**ACTS 1:15**]. This was a company of about one hundred twenty persons identified as belonging to Christ. Among these disciples were “Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James.” Included also were “the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers” [**ACTS 1:13, 14**]. “The women” seems to speak of those women that had followed the Master throughout His ministry. Undoubtedly, this group of women would have included Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Mary the mother of James [see **LUKE 24:10** and **MATTHEW 27:56**].

Those gathered in the upper room were a distinct group, the composition of which was known to all present. In other words, there was a criterion for membership and at the least an informal enrolment of those who were thus identified as members. Perhaps you would argue that before Pentecost, this group was not a church; but it was certainly a prospective church, if not a nascent church. It had all the elements of a church.

From this pool of members, the assembly prayerfully sought whom God might appoint as a replacement for Judas Iscariot [**ACTS 1:21-26**]. Among the requirements for appointment was the evident qualification that the individual would need to be identified as belonging to the group. No unbaptised person could have been part of this group. They were threatened by the civil and religious authorities because of their identification with the Lord; thus, no person who refused to identify as part of the group would have been permitted the privilege of serving since they did not belong.

In **ACTS 2:41** we are given a count of those who were baptised upon confessing Christ as Master of their lives. Why maintain a record of the number who were baptised if there is no membership? In fact, throughout the early account of the church in Jerusalem, there is careful attention to the number of believers who are identified with Christ in baptism [see **ACTS 2:47; 5:14; 11:24**].

If there were no membership roll, how would the disciples know who to choose to serve the members of the church [**ACTS 6:1-6**]? Clearly, there was a pool of people that met the criteria proposed for those serving in this capacity. As far as that goes, how would the congregation know which widows to include in the daily distributions, if there were not a record of those widows affiliated with the congregation [**ACTS 6:1**]?

⁵ C. S. Lewis, “Membership,” in **The Weight of Glory and other addresses**, http://www.hjkeen.net/halqn/wt_glry3.htm, accessed 10 April 2011

⁶ See the critical apparatus for Kurt Aland, Matthew Black, Carlo M. Martini, Bruce M. Metzger and Allen Wikgren, **The Greek New Testament, Third Edition** (American Bible Society, New York, NY 1966, 1968, 1975); Barbara and Kurt Aland, Johannes Karavidopoulos, Carlo M. Martini, and Bruce M. Metzger, **Novum Testamentum Graece, 27th Edition** (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, Stuttgart, Germany 1898, 1993)

Paul writes of enrolling widows. Whether this enrolment was in order to provide guidelines for distributing assistance, or whether it was an official order of service within the church, cannot be stated with certainty. However, what is known is that a list of widows was maintained for some specific purpose. It seems apparent that these women were drawn from the membership of the congregation, since the elders knew them. Widows were to be “enrolled” after meeting specific requirements, including an age threshold and a history of devotion to godly works [1 TIMOTHY 5:9].

While it might be possible to guess a lady’s age, only through observation over time would the elders be able to know of her devotion to caring for the needs of the congregation. The evidence assumed throughout the New Testament is that there were lists of members and that these lists were kept current.

Unspoken, but apparent nonetheless, is the fact that those who were not “enrolled” as widows would not be included in their number. If Paul’s intent was to give instruction concerning an office related to service, the widows who were unenrolled would not be permitted to serve in any official capacity. On the other hand, if the enrolment was to guide church assistance, that help was restricted to those who truly had need. The point that should be noted is that a list of those who were recognised as enrolled “widows” was maintained, and it seems to have been drawn from a larger pool since “younger widows” were known but were not enrolled [1 TIMOTHY 5:11].

The elders of the congregations have specific responsibilities for those under their charge. When Paul addressed the Ephesian elders, he issued a charge that demands careful consideration. You will no doubt remember that the Apostle urged the elders to “pay careful attention ... to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.” The importance of his charge is emphasised in that he identified that flock as “the church of God which He obtained with His own blood” [ACTS 20:28].

The language in the translation I use is precise as it preserves the underlying Greek by stating that the elders were to care for “the flock ... **in which**” [*en hos*] the Holy Spirit had made them “overseers.” Consequently, the Holy Spirit appointed the elders as overseers; they were not “elected.” Again, the language demands that we understand that the elders held responsibility over a specific body. They were not “elders-at-large” who were able to function as elders wherever they might choose.

Eugene Peterson’s treatment of this particular verse provides valuable insight. “Be on your toes—both for yourselves and your congregation of sheep. The Holy Spirit has put you in charge of these people—God’s people they are—to guard and protect them.”⁷ The elders were not in charge of all Christians. Elders have no authority whatsoever over any Christians, save for their own flock. This being so, it should be obvious that there must have been a membership roll.

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews urges the readers to “obey your leaders” [HEBREWS 13:17]. “Leaders” implies that there must be followers, and the leaders are responsible to keep watch over the souls of the flock, knowing that they must give an account of their service. Consequently, the readers could not obey the injunction to greet their leaders [HEBREWS 13:24], unless they knew them and were in turn known to them. Showing respect to those who are over you in the Lord [1 THESSALONIANS 5:12] means that there must be a membership, an enrolment into a recognisable entity.

⁷ Eugene Peterson, **The Message: The New Testament in Contemporary English** (NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO 1993)

Unless you are willing to agree that a church includes all living within a particular geographic region, much as the statist churches argue, then an overseer bears responsibility for a limited number of individuals. The church can only discipline those who are united to that body and the elders bear responsibility only for those who are enrolled as members of the Body. Indeed, Jesus commanded that intractable or recalcitrant members were to be dismissed from the assembly and treated as though they were outsiders [MATTHEW 18:17]. In short, unrepentant members were to be dismissed.

That the early congregations understood this to be the case is evident through Paul's instruction to the Corinthian Christians. You will recall his summary statement concerning a flagrant sin that had been long ignored by the congregation and the remedy that he insisted upon to the church. The unrepentant sinner was to be removed—delivered “to Satan for the destruction of the flesh” [1 CORINTHIANS 5:5]. How will a congregation know whom to exclude from the Lord's Table if there is no membership roll? God never commands us to discipline those who are not one with us. We bear responsibility only for those that share our identity. The congregation of the Lord has no responsibility toward outsiders.

Surprisingly, I find confirmation of the view I am advocating from an unlikely source. R. B. Kuiper, a noted Dutch theologian in the early twentieth century, writes of the local church, “It's clear that in the days of the apostles, it was the universal practice to receive believers into the visible church. It's possible that a true believer, because of some unusual circumstances, may fail to unite with the church. One may, for instance, believe in Christ and die before receiving baptism, or joining a local church. But such instances are exceptional. The Scriptural rule is that while membership is not a prerequisite for salvation, it is a necessary consequence of salvation.”⁸

To substantiate his point, Kuiper cited one of the verses in our text. He noted, “Extremely significant in this connection is Acts 2:47: ‘And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.’ Not only does the Lord Christ require of those who are saved that they unite with the church; He Himself joins them to the church. And the reference is unmistakably to the visible church.”⁹

Robert Saucy challenges believers to think carefully concerning the modern contention that one can be a Christian without being a member of a congregation when he writes, “The follower of Jesus Christ cannot profess allegiance to Him and deny His church. What is needed is ... renewed effort to seek God's ways in which one may be a part of the building process.”¹⁰

To fail to join a church is deliberately to ignore the Body of Christ—the church that He loved and which purchased with His own blood. To refuse to unite with the church while professing love for the Saviour is logically inconceivable, for it demonstrates disdain for His choice of a Holy Bride. Anyone who would speak ill of a man's fiancée would depreciate that man's love, call into question that man's ability to choose a wife, and ultimately demonstrate contempt for that man's standards. Likewise, to hold oneself apart from the Body of Christ is to show disdain for His beloved. It is impossible to imagine that refusal to unite with the church is pleasing in the sight of the Lord, and especially when viewed in light of His love for this bride.

⁸ R. B. Kuiper, **The Glorious Body of Christ** (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI 1996) 112-3

⁹ Kuiper, op. cit. 111-2

¹⁰ Robert Saucy, **The Church in God's Program** (Moody, Chicago, IL 1973) 7

THE LORD ADDED TO THEIR NUMBER — Well over one hundred years ago, the British Baptist divine, Charles Spurgeon, wrote regarding membership in the local congregation: “I know there are some who say ‘Well, I hope I have given myself to the Lord, but I do not intend to give myself to any church.’ I say, ‘Now, why not?’ ‘*Because I can be a Christian without it.*’ Now, are you quite clear about that? You can be as good a Christian by disobedience to your Lord’s commands as by being obedient? Well, suppose everybody else did the same, suppose all Christians in the world said, ‘I shall not join the Church.’ Why there would be no visible Church, there would be no ordinances. That would be a very bad thing, and yet, one doing it—what is right for one is right for all—why should not all of us do it? Then you believe that if you were to do an act which has a tendency to destroy the visible Church of God, you would be as good a Christian as if you did your best to build up that Church? I do not believe it, sir! Nor do you either. You have not any such a belief; it is only a trumpery excuse for something else. There is a brick—a very good one. What is the brick made for? To help to build a house with. It is of no use for that brick to tell you that it is just as good a brick while it is kicking about on the ground as it would be in the house. It is a good-for-nothing brick; until it is built into the wall, it is no good. So you rolling-stone Christians, I do not believe that you are answering your purpose; you are living contrary to the life which Christ would have you live, and you are much to blame for the injury you do.”¹¹

Spurgeon pointed out that refusal to unite with the local congregation certainly ensures that the individual is disobedient and that the individual fails to fulfil the purpose for which she was saved. God variously identifies the local congregation with common pictures that anyone should be able to understand. In **1 CORINTHIANS 3:9**, Paul says of the Corinthian church: “You are God’s field, God’s building.” In **1 CORINTHIANS 3:16**, Paul describes the Corinthian church as God’s Temple. In **1 CORINTHIANS 12:27**, the Apostle speaks of the Corinthian congregation as the Body of Christ. These are pictures of the local congregation—a field, a building, the Temple of God and the Body of Christ.

If the church is a field, then the unaffiliated Christian is a wild vine growing outside of the vineyard of the Lord. If the church is a building, then the unaffiliated Christian is an unused brick left to crumble on the ground or to trip the unwary. If the church is God’s Temple, the unaffiliated Christian is piece of furniture left outside to weather in the elements. When the Apostle speaks of the spiritual gifts entrusted to each Christian, he states that the church is the Body of Christ [**1 CORINTHIANS 12:27**], and he identifies each member as a necessary part of the body. If the church is the Body of Christ, the unaffiliated Christian is at best an excised piece of tissue.

Perhaps the most meaningful picture of the local congregation is Paul’s statement that it is the Family of God. Writing in the encyclical we have received as the Book of Ephesians, Paul speaks of the church as God’s Family. In **EPHESIANS 2:19**, he says, “You are members of the household of God.” He follows up on that thought by saying, “We who believe are carefully joined together, becoming a holy temple for the Lord” [**EPHESIANS 2:21**].¹² Reading Peterson’s rendition of this same passage, it becomes evident that each believer placed in the fellowship of a church shares in this building.

¹¹ Spurgeon, *ibid.*

¹² **Holy Bible: New Living Translation** (Tyndale House Publishers, Wheaton, IL 1996)

“You’re no longer strangers or outsiders. You belong here, with as much right to the name Christian as anyone. God is building a home. He’s using us all—irrespective of how we got here—in what he is building. He used the apostles and prophets for the foundation. Now he’s using you, fitting you in brick by brick, stone by stone, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone that holds all the parts together. We see it taking shape day after day—a holy temple built by God, all of us built into it, a temple in which God is quite at home” [EPHESIANS 2:19b-22].¹³ Nor is this the only time that Paul speaks of the local congregation as God’s Family.

In his first letter to Timothy, the pastor of the congregation located in Ephesus, Paul identifies the local congregation as “the family of God. That family is the church of the living God, the support and foundation of the truth” [1 TIMOTHY 3:15].¹⁴ Because the local church is known as God’s Family, the unaffiliated Christian identifies himself or herself an orphan.

Some may complain that the family is dysfunctional, but in no small measure that can be true only if you have failed to invest your life and your gifts within this family. Just as there are pressures in all families, so there are problems even in God’s Family. Babies may be colicky, just as infantile Christians demand undue attention on occasion in the church. Rebellious teens challenge parental instruction, and some rebellious church members refuse the discipline and instruction of the Lord administered by leaders in the Family of God. Some families suffer because a husband or a wife proves unfaithful. In the same way, some church members experience the pain that arises when mature Christians are sometimes seduced from their firm foundation. The failures of some within the church do not negate the instruction of the Lord, but rather they prove the reality of what God has set in place. It is precisely because we recognise that there is an objective standard that we are disappointed at the failures of a church.

Membership does have a basis in Scripture. Unfortunately, in the estimate of far too many among professed people of God, church membership has no more value than membership at the local country club, membership in a service club or membership in some fraternal organisation. Consequently, such professed believers foolishly sacrifice the rich benefits that accompany membership in the local congregation.

Among the benefits of church membership are the following truths taught in the Word of God. Membership in the local congregation **identifies me as a genuine believer**. On occasion, I will be challenged as to why it is necessary to become a church member. Often, the individual challenging me will say, “The thief on the cross didn’t join a church.” That is a rather foolish apologia for refusal to join the church since the person making that statement isn’t hanging on a cross.

Perhaps it will be beneficial to remember a statement the Apostle made to the Roman saints. “Each of us finds our meaning and function as a part of [Christ’s] body. But as a chopped-off finger or cut-off toe we wouldn’t amount to much, would we? So since we find ourselves fashioned into all these excellently formed and marvellously functioning parts in Christ’s body, let’s just go ahead and be what we were made to be” [ROMANS 12:5].¹⁵

¹³ Peterson, op. cit.

¹⁴ **The Holy Bible: New Century Version** (Word, Dallas, TX 1991)

¹⁵ Peterson, op. cit.

Membership in the local congregation **provides a spiritual family** to support and encourage me in my walk with Christ. We are taught that believers are to encourage one another. “Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” [GALATIANS 6:1, 2].

This sounds very much like HEBREWS 10:24, 25. “Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”

Christians encourage and strengthen one another through their shared walk with the Master. They do this, not as disinterested spectators, but as part of the family of God, interacting especially in the congregation in which Christ has placed them.

Membership in the local congregation of the Lord **gives me a place to discover and to use my gifts in ministry**. You will recall the extended passage of 1 CORINTHIANS 12:4-27 that teaches us that each Christian is specifically gifted to build the people of God according to God’s purpose both for that Christian and for the church in which he is placed. The gifts entrusted to you when you became a Christian were given so that you could participate in building up other believers. If you are not investing your spiritual gifts in the lives of your fellow saints, you are squandering the gifts of God. However, it is God’s intent that each of us discover our gifts through interaction with one another, and that we exercise our gifts through building one another in the Faith of Christ the Lord.

Church membership **places me under the spiritual protection of godly leaders**. We have already noted both HEBREWS 13:17 and ACTS 20:28, 29, each of which speaks of the responsibility to protect the flock that has been imposed upon those who would lead. Holding members accountable is often a thankless task, as is protecting the flock from assault. Nevertheless, it is only as we are part of the Body that we can enjoy such protection. Perhaps that is why we are able to be casual about that protection. Without membership, there is no protection from spiritual assault. Remember that this is why the errant member is to be put out of the church. The unrepentant member is delivered over “to Satan for the destruction of the flesh” [1 CORINTHIANS 5:5].

Membership in the local congregation **gives me the accountability I need to grow**. EPHESIANS 5:21 teaches us to submit to one another. Each member of the congregation must work at being submissive, seeking peace within the Family of God. Members are accountable to the leaders of the congregation, and leaders make themselves accountable to the members on an ongoing basis; and all together are accountable to one another as we work together and seek to honour God through building one another in the Faith.¹⁶

Perhaps you question why I should have delivered this homily—why should I take such pains to address the issue of membership in the local congregation. In the first place, I seek to fulfil faithfully the ministry God has given me—the ministry of providing sound instruction in the Word of God. Again, I long to see each one enjoy God’s richest blessings—blessings received through discovering what is pleasing to Him. I am also concerned that you understand the will of God concerning His church so that the message of welcome extended here will be multiplied as you speak with others each week. Above all else, I want Christ the Lord to be glorified as He works in the life of each one whom He calls. That call of the Lord Christ is to you, also, if you hear His message of life.

¹⁶ The benefits listed were suggested in the article by Warren, *ibid*.

The Word of God calls each individual to life with these words. “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved... For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’” [**ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13**].

Have you believed this Good News? Have you confessed Christ as Lord of your life? Are you fulfilling His will for your life, that perfect will that calls you to unite with His people that there you may invest the gifts He has entrusted to you? If not, why not? The message concludes with an invitation for each one to believe the message of life that is offered through faith in the Living Son of God; and then, having believed, we call you to obey the command of Christ that you openly identify with Him and that you walk in visible concourse with His people, the church of the Living God. Amen.