

ACTS 5:12-16

A REGENERATE CHURCH

“Many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon’s Portico. None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, so that they even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed.”¹

A church of Jesus Christ is a body of baptised believers, associated together in one place to preach the Gospel, to keep the ordinances and to represent the interests of Christ’s kingdom in the world.² This old definition of the word “church” was at one time well known to Baptists throughout North America.

Unfortunately, this definition has fallen into disuse in this day. As it has been dropped from common usage, so the biblical concept of a church has also been forgotten.

The word “church,” as used in the New Testament, usually refers to a local assembly or congregation of the followers of Christ. The exceptions would be when the term is used of an ideal or in perhaps one instance when speaking of the saints who shall be assembled in the presence of the Master following the rapture. In the days of the New Testament, believers associated and covenanted together for religious worship and work. These are the only kind of New Testament churches on earth. Consequently, and as a significant aside, the term “**universal church**” is extra-biblical, as is the concept. Though we share the Faith in common with all who are saints, we make no appeal of belonging to an amorphous, indistinct something named “**universal church.**”

A New Testament church is a local, independent body subject to no central human power. Governed by the New Testament code, it is subject only to Christ, the Living Head and to His Word. The New Testament knows nothing of a church covering a given territory, such as the Church of England or the Church of Ireland. The Word of God knows nothing of a denomination called by the name of a religious entity, such as the United Church or the Roman Catholic Church. Thus, there is no creature such as “the Baptist Church,” although there are Baptist churches. The issue is sufficiently important to our understanding of Baptist theology that it bears repeating. There is no “Baptist Church” as a denominational, national or universal entity. One does not belong to “the Baptist Church,” though an individual may belong to “a Baptist church.”

Yet another truth must be stated for precision and accuracy. **Churches were created not in order to save people; they were organised for saved people.** A church is a congregation of baptised believers, covenanted together and observing the ordinances of Christ. This assembly covenants to carry out the principles of the New Testament as they worship, evangelise and fellowship under the headship of Christ Jesus.

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 J. G. Bow, **What Baptists Believe and Why They Believe It** (Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, Nashville, TN, nd) 20

We believe that a church is responsible to the One who brought it into existence. The corollary to this truth is that a congregation has no responsibility to any hierarchy or outside authority. A congregation has no authority of its own, but is subject to the authority of Christ as expressed through the Word of God. Thus, a church does not—indeed, cannot—save. A church is the body of Christ, for He is the head of the church.³

This simple ecclesiastical truth is neglected to the detriment of congregational strength and vitality. Too many Baptists are ignorant of the most basic truth concerning their church. The reason for this ignorance must be laid at the feet of pastors who are themselves illiterate concerning the teachings of the Word of God, or else they hold no convictions worthy of the blessed name by which they are called. Join me in exploration of the model provided in the New Testament of the Church that Jesus loved.

TWO CONCEPTS OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP — “They were all together in Solomon’s Portico. None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem.” How people can read the same book and come to such radically different conclusions as they do is a mystery to me. As an example, history has witnessed development of a concept that permits a union of state and church. Nevertheless, Baptists are adamant in insisting that such a union is a monstrosity and an abomination before God.

A significant segment of Christendom is convinced that people are born into the church, much as they are born citizens of a nation. Baptists, however, stand firm in insisting that only one born from above is qualified to be recognised as a member of a New Testament congregation. The question of church membership—whether a person must be converted to be a church member is certainly the most important and controversial of all that concerns the teaching of the church. This question divides the Christian world into two unyieldingly opposed groups. On one hand, the churches “of the masses” or “the multitudinous churches” (all of the state churches) affirm:

“One can consider the visible or exterior church as composed of all the inhabitants of the Christian world, even the indifferent and unbelieving... One comes into the world, thus into relationship with the lights and graces it sheds, here one is brought up in the knowledge of the truth; but after having been a member in fact one must become a member by choice; one must declare he is joining it on the conviction that it is evangelical... This principle is recognised by all the great Christian communities. They baptise infants, but they do not admit anyone to the Lord’s Table until he is older, has received more or less serious instruction and testing at which time he is required to confirm his baptismal vows.”⁴

In contradistinction to that view, Baptists believe that a “church is a society of believers and of believers only; entrance into the church is on the basis of accepting of one’s own free will the grace of God in Christ.”⁵

³ William Cooke Boone, **What We Believe** (Convention Press, Nashville, TN, 1936) 15

⁴ Paul Jalaguier, **De l’Eglise** (Fischbacher, Paris, 1899) 321-322, cited in Alfred F. Kuen, **I Will Build My Church** (Moody, Chicago, 1971) 127

⁵ Henry Cook, **What Baptists Stand For** (London, Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, 1947) cited in Kuen, *op. cit.* 127

The confession of faith for one group of European Baptists states: “We believe that conforming to the practise of the apostles, it is absolutely necessary for all those who make up a local church to have accepted the Gospel message, to have manifested the new birth by faithful Christian conduct, and to have testified to their faith by being symbolically buried.”⁶

However, in most of the European countries, one is a member of the church unless he or she specifically asks not to be a member. As an example of this practise, in Sweden today each Swedish child that is born in the nation is born a citizen of Sweden, and is also born a member of the Lutheran church. In order to disassociate oneself from the state church, there must be a legal process through which one is allowed in these modern days not to become a member of that state church. There is no such doctrine in all the Word of God. Such teaching does not come out of revelation of the Word of God, but it comes through coercion and through an unholy union of church and state.

Professor Alfred Kuen cites several examples of this practise by state churches in his excellent book, **I Will build My Church**.⁷

Article 4 of the constitution of the Evangelical Reformed Church of Neuchâtel states that, “The Church considers to be members all who do not declare themselves excluded from it.” In other words, they believe that citizenship or even residency makes one a member of that particular congregation and imposes upon one the duties of a member of that particular religious group.

“In our canton (Vaud) all who do not declare themselves not to be a part of the national church are considered to be members of it” (Pastor André Bovon, president of the syndical council).

“The national Church of Geneva is composed of all people of Geneva who accept the organisational forms of the Church as later established” (Art. 114 of the political constitution of 1847). “These organisational forms are purely administrative which have nothing, either remotely or closely related, to do with the Christian faith and life. All the amendments tending to indicate that the National Church of Geneva was a Christian Church were ruled out by the Great Constituent Council” (Henri Heyer, *L’Eglise de Genève*, p. 155)

“The matter of belonging to the Church rests upon the residence in the district of the community” (Constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Bavaria [1920], Art. 7, paragraph 2). “The child must be incorporated in the Church, the body of Christ, from his birth” (Reformed evangelical synod of Pau).

“Our church is a multitudinist Church. One becomes a member by birth, not by the new birth, and is considered a member as long as he has not asked to be dropped from the church” (Church of Zurich, *Dienst der Kirche in Unserer Zeit*).

⁶ **Confession de foi de l’Association des églises évangéliques baptistes**, cited in Kuen, op. cit., 127

⁷ Kuen, op. cit., 157, 158

Most Canadians are members of a church because they were born into that particular communion. Their parents arranged for them to be christened into the church and they are members of that church—whether they have been born from above, whether they believe the tenets of that particular communion, or even whether they are by their own choice agnostics or atheists. The majority of professing Christendom never had a choice of whether they would join the church of which they are a member—they only had a choice to withdraw from the particular church. As is true for the European churches, for the most of Canadians, church membership was arranged by parents instead of being a response by the individual to the teaching of the Word of God. For most Canadians, church membership is not a volitional act.

Throughout the Word of God, it is apparent that those who have faith in God will commit themselves openly to union with others sharing the Faith in worship of God and service to His cause. Tragically, by this late date there has arisen an understanding that the church is a social organisation, or even a national organisation. Consequently, many more people profess to be members of the various churches than have been born into the Kingdom of God. From the days of the New Testament, Baptists have stood on the principle that one must be born from above in order to be a member of a church.

THE REQUISITES FOR MEMBERSHIP IN A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH —“More and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to the group of believers.”⁸ The text makes clear that faith in Christ was a precursor to membership during the days of the Apostles. Those received into membership were expected to give credible evidence that they had received Christ as Saviour and Lord. Becoming a Christian is a voluntary matter, and only Christians should be members of a church. Consequently, the corollary must be that all Christians should be members of a church. The Church of Jesus Christ is to be a regenerate church—each congregation being composed of saved people.

In every closed society, one must choose to enter after having met a certain number of conditions. According to the New Testament, what conditions had to be met by those who wished to become members of the church? Consider a few examples.

“Those who accepted [Peter’s] message were baptised, and about three thousand were added to their number that day” [ACTS 2:41].

“The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” [ACTS 2:47].

“Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there. When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said. With shrieks, evil spirits came out of many, and many paralytics and cripples were healed. So there was great joy in that city...

“When they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptised, both men and women” [ACTS 8:4-8, 12].

Peter proclaimed the Word of God in the house of Cornelius, a Roman centurion. The Holy Spirit was poured out on all who heard the Word [see ACTS 10:34-46]. Peter commanded those who had received God’s Spirit to be “baptised in the Name of Jesus Christ” [see ACTS 10:47, 48].

“Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptised” [ACTS 18:8].

⁸ The Everyday Bible: New Century Version, © 2005, Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission.

When you review the evidence, you are compelled to accept that the obligatory condition for church membership as revealed through the pages of the New Testament is faith and its corollary, baptism. Exactly the same succession of events is found for multiple individuals in the New Testament—preaching, faith, baptism, membership. Paul tells of his conversion [ACTS 9]—he is baptised and seeks to join the church in Jerusalem [ACTS 9:18, 26]; finally, joining the church in Antioch [ACTS 11:26]. Lydia hears the Word, believes, and is baptised [ACTS 16:13-15]; there is a church in her house [ACTS 16:40]. There is the same order of events in the case of the Philippians jailer [ACTS 16:30-34].

The evidence compels reasonable individuals to accept that the obligatory condition for church membership is faith and baptism. There is no evidence to indicate that the contrary was true in any case presented in the New Testament. Of the one hundred twenty that constituted the members of the church of Jerusalem, doubtless most of them had been personal disciples of Jesus. From the foregoing Scriptures it should be obvious that those added to them voluntarily received the Word of the Gospel, repented of their sins and believed in Jesus as Saviour. There is no evidence whatever to indicate that the contrary was true of any of them. Paul, in writing to the churches, always addresses the readers as saints, faithful in Christ or he uses such other terms as to leave no doubt that those assembled were all professing Christians.⁹

The nature and mission of the church carries with it the view that only regenerate people should belong to a church. The church is a spiritual organisation; it is the Body of Christ [ROMANS 12:4, 5; 1 CORINTHIANS 12:12 ff.]. Only those who are animated by His life should be members of the Body.¹⁰

The work of the church is spiritual. It has a spiritual function. To do this work it must be a spiritual body. An unregenerate church cannot be the means of conveying the renewing grace of God to an unregenerate society around it.

Moreover, if regeneration is an absolute necessity to Christian character and regeneration depends on the voluntary acceptance of the Gospel, then for a child to be reared in the church, or an adult to be received into the church without regeneration is a perilous thing. **The inevitable tendency of such a procedure is to encourage the unregenerate church member to think that somehow his church membership makes him a Christian and turns him in his mind away from the necessity of definitely repenting of sin and trusting Christ for salvation.**

Either the Word of God is clear or it is somehow obscure and dark. Either each of us can read the Word to discover the will of God or we require specialists to tell us what God meant. As Baptists, we are convinced that the Word of God was given in language sufficiently clear that any individual can read it and know the will of God. In this particular instance of church membership, it is abundantly evident that either the Word of God presents a model that requires a regenerate church membership or it does not.

Those who believed were quickly baptised. When they had come to the point of faith, they confessed that faith immediately by submitting to the command to be baptised. When, on that glorious Pentecost the Spirit of God descended in power, the people cried out, “Brothers, what shall we do?” Peter responded without hesitation, “Repent and be baptised, every one of you” [see ACTS 2:37, 38].

⁹ Walter Thomas Conner, **Christian Doctrine** (Broadman, Nashville, 1937) 260

¹⁰ W. T. Conner, **Gospel Doctrines** (Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, Nashville, 1925) 118

The baptism of believers points to creation of a church of confessing Christians. We baptise those who have come to faith; we do not baptise in order to create faith. Kuen comments, “All the members of the primitive churches were baptised; only those who had believed and had confessed Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord were baptised. Therefore, the early churches were composed of believers solely. The churches of the masses adhere to infant baptism, which admits as members all ... new-born babes...”¹¹

Some among the state churches object to the thought of a regenerate church membership, as have apologists for the multitudinous church. Dr. Charles Hodge, a respected Presbyterian theologian, objected to the concept of a regenerate church membership because, he argued, no individual can tell with certainty who is saved and who is not. Thus, the good doctor argued that the ideal cannot be maintained. I agree with him that the ideal cannot be maintained. It is obvious that there are some unsaved people in the churches—and there always will be. However, this does not prove that the doctrine is wrong. It only proves the necessity of guarding the standard of membership for the churches. This teaching cannot be perfectly enforced, but if a regenerate membership is the ideal, it should be maintained as near the ideal as possible. On the authority of New Testament teaching and by the very nature of the church as a spiritual body, we must insist that only those who are saved should be members of a church.

A WELL-ORDERED CHURCH IS A MINISTERING CHURCH — “Believers were added to the Lord in increasing numbers—crowds of both men and women. As a result, they would carry the sick out into the streets and lay them on beds and pallets so that when Peter came by, at least his shadow might fall on some of them. In addition a multitude came together from the towns surrounding Jerusalem, bringing sick people and those who were tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all healed.”¹²

On any given week, a pastor will field a variety of phone calls asking for help. People may seek gasoline to make it to the next city; they request assistance in securing housing or they ask the church to provide food. It is one thing for those who are part of the Body to turn to the church; but I have you ever noticed how those who are outside the Faith turn to the church almost automatically in time of need?

On one occasion, I asked a woman seeking assistance from a church I pastored whether she had contacted a local mosque for help. I wondered aloud if she had spoken to the leadership of a Sheikh Temple situated just a few blocks from our church. She had no affiliation with any church and did not particularly wish to hear the message of Christ, so I just asked if she had contacted any of these other groups. “No,” she replied, “Because they won’t help a person in need.” I find that an astonishing confession, which if people were to think would speak of the reality of the Christian Faith.

Christians are recognised as a compassionate people. A well-ordered church is a ministering church. With respect to the apparent conflict between the Good News of Christ the Lord and social ministries, it is not a matter of either/or—it is an issue of both/and. We are concerned for the needs of those about us, but we are convinced that they need to hear the message of life, for if we only feed their bodies and let them continue in their condition of death, we have ensured great harm for them at last.

¹¹ Kuen, op. cit., 256

¹² **Holman Christian Standard Bible**, © 2000, Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission.

As Christians, we are convinced that the whole world lies in sin. All are by nature and by birth condemned and under sentence of eternal death. As Christians, we are responsible to warn all people of the consequences of sin, calling them to life in Christ the Lord. The history of public education, the history of hospitals and medical care, is the history of the compassion of the people of God. Nevertheless, all such service is worthless if we fail to warn all people of the consequences of sin.

Look again at the text. "More and more men and women believed..."¹³ Then the divine author hastens to add a peculiar introductory phrase "so that," or "as a result..."¹⁴ As result of people being saved, many from within the Faith were impelled to address the hurts and sorrows of society. This is a truth that is virtually neglected in this day. Christians, through evangelism, do more to address human misery than do all the determined programmes promoted by all the governments of the world.

If our congregation shall ever accomplish some great thing for God, we must be a church founded on biblical principles and performing the work of God according to the revealed will of God. We will heal more broken marriages, restore more people to health, bring more people back from the brink of despondency and despair through winning them to Christ then through any other effort. If the Government of Canada truly wishes to address the needs of the nation, I recommend that it encourage the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Until this is done, there is no hope of permanent change in our health system or in any social service. In lieu of a message of life and liberty, we will continue our march toward totalitarianism with its concomitant depreciation of life.

Two generations ago, virtually all the hospitals in this nation were run by the churches. Those institutions were the outgrowth of concern that Christians have for the sorrow resulting from our fallen condition. With the advent of government-sponsored and controlled health care, those hospitals have systematically transferred responsibility for their operation to government. The result of this change is that while life expectancy has increased dramatically, the value of life has decreased just as dramatically.

As a society, we no longer consider the unborn precious, and the elderly are increasingly viewed as though they a burden. The weak and the vulnerable among us have a questionable right to live, and as result, no one has a claim on life. We have an awesome task before us of preaching the message of life to our world.

One man, observing the social scene in the United States, pronounced observations that are just as applicable to our own nation. In a perceptive editorial, John Ransom noted, "As a consequence of the care of so many government experts who insist on doing stuff for our own good, we are at the point where nothing is true.

"Men marry men and we call it marriage. Doctors kill babies and we call it choice. We practice targeted discrimination against certain classes of people, under the law, and we call it justice.

"We ban the religion of some in the public square as a matter of taste and call it a moral good.

"In the name of safety, the government takes away guns for self-defense, but sues states for enforcing federal immigration laws.

¹³ **The New International Version**, electronic ed. (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 2011)

¹⁴ See **Holman Christian Standard Bible**, op. cit.

“We ‘improve’ public education by lowering standards rather than raising them; and we design a medical and retirement ‘safety net’ that threatens not just life, but everything our country was built on: liberty, opportunity, property.”¹⁵

Baptists in prior generations were noted for their sound doctrine. They had a set of beliefs that defined them as a people, and they vigorously promoted those beliefs. Their people were grounded in the teachings of the Word of God; Baptists were truly a people of the Book. They were aggressively evangelistic, winning as many people to the Faith as possible. They were not ashamed to call men and women to repentance and faith in the Risen Son of God. Many people were saved without showy campaigns or expensive crusades. Baptist believers simply lived godly lives and preached the Good News of Christ.

As a result, they established hospitals and orphanages, schools and care homes for the aged and the weak. They did not talk about compassion—they were compassionate. Their compassion grew out of their love for the peoples about them. They did not look to government or wait until someone organised some great crusade to do what ought to be done. Because they were alive in Christ and concerned for the lost, they did what God would rightly expect of His people.

Professor William H. Whitsitt, lecturing on Baptist History, is recorded as saying, “The Baptists in other days had many trials, persecutions and discouragements; they also had some peculiarities, some of them had ‘foot-washing,’ some of them had the ‘jerks,’ but the best thing they had was—*religion*.”¹⁶

The message this day is nothing less than a call for us as a congregation to reaffirm this essential Baptist foundation of a regenerate church. The message serves as a call for the people of God to hold the line against the pressure to concede this vital biblical truth. I hold to a position that does not set well with the world about me; I understand that. I have insisted that those who unite with this congregation tell of their conversion to Christ the Lord, confessing faith in the Risen Son of God. I have preached with conviction that we must not lower this standard, but rather we must stand firm in this truth that the church of our Lord Jesus Christ is to be composed of those who are truly born from above.

Neither do we baptise our infants, nor do we casually dismiss the importance of church membership. We expect that all who confess Christ should find a church in which they will invest their lives. We call all who serve God through this congregation to join in committing life and heart and soul to the unity of this Body and to the glory of God. We seek to honour God through ensuring that the biblical model is adopted and practised.

A couplet from years ago states:

Some men die by shrapnel,
and some men die by flames.
But some men die
an inch at a time,
playing little games.

¹⁵ John Ransom, “Shun the Expert and Pass the Ammunition,” Townhall, 3/17/11, http://finance.townhall.com/columnists/johnransom/2011/03/17/shun_the_expert_and_pass_the_ammunitio_n/page/full/, accessed 17 March 2011

¹⁶ Bow, op. cit., 6

I trust that will not be true of any of us. I trust that we will not be guilty of “playing church,” but that we will be the church. I pray that we will adopt biblical convictions and that we will live out those convictions before the eyes of a world that is confused at best, and that is cynical and jaded at worst. I pray that we will be a church filled with men and women who are born from above and thus revealing the life of Christ our Lord.

And that is our invitation to you. Among us are some who have yet to confess openly their faith in the Son of God. Why do you wait? God calls you, saying:

“In an acceptable time, I heard you,
and in the day of salvation I helped you.

Look, now is the acceptable time; look, now is the day of salvation” [2 CORINTHIANS 6:2].¹⁷

God invites each individual to life. We invite you to place your faith in Him. You who have trusted Christ as Master of life, have you obeyed His call to be baptised as He teaches? The invitation is for you to confess Him openly through baptism as He has taught. Stand with Him, that the people of God may rejoice with you and that God may be honoured through your life and through your obedience.

You who now confess Christ as Lord, we invite you to come to unite with the church as He has taught. To fail to place your life in the membership of a Bible believing church is to dishonour Him who loved you and gave His life for you. Together, all should ensure that they have trusted Christ and together united to serve Him as He calls.

We invite you to receive Christ Jesus the Lord as Master of your life. We invite you to be born from above and into the Kingdom of God this very day. In His Word, God has promised life. “If you confess with your mouth ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. With the heart one believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth one confesses, resulting in salvation. Now the Scripture says, ‘No one who believes on Him will be put to shame,’ for there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, since the same Lord of all is rich to all who call on Him. For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’” [ROMANS 10:9-13].¹⁸

Our earnest prayer is that you will this day be saved, obey His call to identify with Him openly and find your place in the church to which He appoints you. Come, join His people and unite with the congregation to which He appoints you. Do it today; do it now. His angels will attend you as you step out of your seat and into the aisle. Amen.

¹⁷ Holman Christian Standard Bible, op. cit.

¹⁸ Holman Christian Standard Bible, op. cit.