

ACTS 2:41, 47 WHY BELONG?

“Those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls... And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.”¹

In one of his sermons, Charles Spurgeon spoke of his intense desire to be a member of a local church. “I well remember how I joined the church after my conversion. I forced myself into it by telling the pastor, 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 for church membership, I would call a church meeting myself and tell them I believed in Christ and ask them if they would have me.”²

Clearly, this stalwart of the Faith held a high view of membership in the local congregation. However, the concept of church membership has fallen into woeful neglect among the churches of our Lord in this day. I cannot say with certainty when the transition occurred, but membership in the local church is well nigh universally disregarded, if not actually disdained, in modern life. Modern Christians seem to believe that the Faith of Christ the Lord involves believing only, and does not include belonging. However, believing assuredly leads to belonging, for the one who believes will love the church as much as does the Saviour who redeems it [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 nations where confessing faith in Christ the Lord may entail considerable cost, it is rare that one would find a Christian who remains unconnected to a local congregation. Being a believer is synonymous with being a member of a local church; this is true in the Word of God, in historical experience and also in the experience of Christians outside of North America. Nevertheless, 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. Professing Christ without holding membership in a local congregation is somewhat like being a tuba player without a band. Though you play ever so well, it is only as the tuba lends its melodious bass in harmony with the entire band that the beauty of the instrument is truly witnessed. 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.³

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 C. H. Spurgeon, “Joining the Church,” **Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons, vol. 60** (Passmore & Alabaster, London 1914) 294-5

³ 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 studying the New Testament, I observe that the writers frequently address or speak of a “church” and often refer to the “churches.” The word “church,” or the plural, “churches,” occurs 109 times in the **ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION** of the New Testament. In other versions of the Bible, the word “church” and its cognates is noted to occur 110 times.⁴ I leave it to you to find the extra occurrence. In six instances, the Greek term *ekklesia* occurs in the autographs though the word is 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 very few instances that we question what the writer may have meant. This point is sufficiently important to stress in order to gain an appreciation of the meaning of “church” for 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 the early saints treated membership as the expected practise of all who named the Name of Christ, we are obligated to adopt that practise in our own day.

In order to explore this issue with you today, I deliver this homily, based loosely upon **ACTS 2:41, 47**. In these two verses I note that Doctor Luke twice stresses union with the number of the believers. I am quite certain that his language is not superfluous, but rather than he is carefully reporting what occurred, thus providing a model for each church throughout the Age of Grace.

THERE WERE ADDED THAT DAY — Even in the recent past, people often joined a church as an act of conformity. Children attending Sunday Schools were typically urged to “join” the church. Consequently, 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; so they “joined” the church. Likewise, it was once considered social suicide to fail to hold membership in a church; thus, joining a church too often was reduced to a mere business decision designed to enhance social standing within 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 church membership. In the New Testament, membership in the local congregation is seen as an act of commitment—it is a statement of purpose in which the Christian commits himself or herself to the Body of Christ. The one uniting with a 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.

Throughout my ministry I have focused intensely on the passage that is now receiving my focus. I have frequently instructed churches from this text. It is not the only passage available for instruction in the importance of membership in the local congregation, but it is unquestionably one of the clearest examples of the early practise of the apostolic churches. Consequently, there are treasures yet to be found in these verses. Accordingly, I ask that you focus on this account of the nascent Jerusalem congregation.

⁴ E.g. **HOLMAN CHRISTIAN STANDARD BIBLE**

In one thought-provoking lecture, C. S. Lewis wrote, “The very word membership is of Christian origin, but it has been taken over by the world and emptied of all meaning. In any book on logic you may see the expression ‘members of a class.’ It must be most emphatically stated that the items or particulars included in a homogeneous class are almost the reverse of what St. Paul meant by members. By members he meant what we should call organs, things essentially different from, and complementary to, one another, things differing not only in structure and function but also in dignity.”⁵

I note that those saved “were added” to the number of disciples. That this was the 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” were not likely part of the original text, the obvious understanding is that those baptised were enrolled as members of the congregation.

That individuals were enumerated and recognised as disciples seems obvious through review of 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 120 persons identified as belonging to Christ. This number included: “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.” Also included were “The women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers” [ACTS 1:13, 14].

The group included the remaining Apostles, Mary the mother of Jesus, Jesus’ brothers, the women that had followed Him throughout His ministry (no doubt including Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James [see LUKE 24:10 and MATTHEW 27:56]) and others. Thus, we observe a distinct group with a defined membership known to all. In other words, there was a criterion for membership and at the least an informal enrolment of those identified as members. Perhaps you are inclined to 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 [see ACTS 1:21-26]. Among the requirements for appointment to this particular office was the qualification that the individual selected must be identified as belonging to the group. No unbaptised person could have been part of this group, for they were threatened by the civil and religious authorities because of their identification with the Lord. Also, no person who refused to identify as part of the group would have been permitted the privilege of serving—they did not belong.

We are provided with a count of those who had received baptism when they confessed Christ as Master of their lives in ACTS 2:41. Do you wonder why they would maintain a record of the number 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].

⁵ C. S. Lewis, “Membership,” in **The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses**, edited by Walter Hooper (Macmillan Publishing Co., New York 1965), 110

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)

If there was 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 who would serve in this capacity. Again, how would the congregation know which widows to include in the daily distributions if there was not a record of widows affiliated with the congregation [ACTS 6:1]? There simply was not, nor is there now, sufficient resources for a church to provide for all the needy in a given community!

Paul writes of enrolling widows. This enrolment served a dual purpose of providing guidelines for distributing assistance and to permit appointment to an official order of service within the church. A list of widows was maintained for a 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]. Even though it is possible to guess a woman’s age, how would the elders know her devotion to caring for the needs of the congregation without knowing her. The evidence assumed throughout the New Testament is that there were lists of those who were members and that these lists were kept current.

Unspoken, but nevertheless apparent, 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 the capacity Paul describes. 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 the list appears 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 congregation have specific responsibilities for those under their charge. When Paul addressed the Ephesian elders, he issued a charge that demands careful consideration. The Apostle urged these elders to “pay careful attention ... to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit” had made them “overseers.” The Apostle sought to ensure that they understood the importance of his charge; the flock is identified as “the church of God which He obtained with His own blood” [ACTS 20:28].

The language in the ESV is precise in seeking to preserve the underlying Greek; it states that the elders were charged with caring for “*the flock ... in which*” [Greek “*en ho*”] the Holy Spirit had made them overseers. Note that the 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 states: “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 These elders were not in charge of all Christians—elders have no authority over any Christian, save for the members of their own flock. Since this is true, it should be obvious that there must have been a membership roll.

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

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews urges the readers to “obey your leaders” [HEBREWS 13:17]. The mere fact that “leaders” existed implies that there must have been followers. Moreover, the leaders are charged with the responsibility of keeping watch over the souls of the flock, knowing that they must give an account of their service. The readers of this letter 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.

Unless you are prepared to argue that a church includes all living within a particular geographic region, as statist churches argue, then an overseer bears responsibility for a limited number of individuals. Free churches understand that the term “church” does not apply to all Christians in a given region or a particular city—the appropriate term in that case is the plural “churches.” 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 that 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]. Unrepentant members are to be dismissed.

That such was practise for the early congregation, we need but recall the Apostle’s instruction to the Corinthian Church. The Apostle confronted a sin festering within the congregation, insisting upon the remedy for the contamination. The unrepentant sinner was to be removed; he must be 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.

As I prepared for this message, I found 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

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

⁹ Kuiper, *op. cit.* 111-2, *italics added*

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

Choosing not to join a church is deliberately ignoring the Body of Christ, the church that Christ loved and which was 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 Christ's 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 despite for the Lord's beloved. It is impossible to imagine that refusal to unite with the church is pleasing in the sight of the Lord, especially when viewed in light of His love for this bride.

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've given myself to the Lord, but I don't intend to give myself to any church.' I say, 'Now why not?' And they answer, 'Because I can be just as good a Christian without it.' I say, 'Are you quite clear about that? You can be as good a Christian by disobedience to your Lord's commands as by being obedient? There's a brick. What is the brick made for? It's made to build a house. It is of no use for the brick to tell you that it's just as good a brick while it's kicking about on the ground by itself, as it would be as part of a house. Actually, it's a good-for-nothing brick. So, you rolling stone Christians, I don't believe that you're answering the purpose for which Christ saved you. You're 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 who refuses to unite with the congregation is disobedient and therefore the individual fails to fulfil the purpose for which he or 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 compares the Corinthian church to a field. He writes, "You are God's field, God's building."

In **1 CORINTHIANS 3:16**, he describes the Corinthian congregation as God's Temple. In that passage the Apostle challenges the Corinthians, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" The pronoun in this verse is plural, demonstrating that Paul is speaking of the entire assembly.

In **1 CORINTHIANS 12:27**, the Apostle speaks of the Corinthian congregation as the Body of Christ. In that letter he has written, "Now you are the Body of Christ and individually members of it." Again, the pronoun is plural, demonstrating that he is speaking of the corporate body, the congregation.

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 where it lies on the ground. If the church is God's Temple, the unaffiliated Christian is piece of furniture left outside and exposed to 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 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.

¹¹ Spurgeon, op. cit., 295-6

Perhaps the most meaningful picture of the local congregation is provided by Paul's statement that the congregation is the Family of God. In the Book of Ephesians, Paul speaks of the church as God's Family. In **EPHESIANS 2:19**, he says, "You are members of God's Family." He follows that thought by stating, "We who believe are carefully joined together, becoming a holy temple for the Lord" [**EPHESIANS 2:21**].¹² Eugene Peterson's rendition of this passage emphasises that each believer placed in the fellowship of a church shares in this building.

"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 the pastor of the New Beginnings Baptist Church of 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 is an orphan.

Some may complain that if the local church is family, then the family is dysfunctional. But in no small measure that can be true only if an individual has failed to invest his life and his gifts within this family. Just as there are challenges presented to all families, so there are problems even in God's Family. Babies are sometimes colicky, just as infantile Christians occasionally demand undue attention in the church. Rebellious teens challenge parental instruction and authority; 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 husbands or wives prove unfaithful. In the same way, church members experience acute pain when seemingly mature Christians are seduced from their firm foundation. The failures of some within the assembly do not negate the instruction of the Lord; rather, failures 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 in the failures of a church.

Membership does have a basis in Scripture. Unfortunately, for far too many professed people of God, church membership means nothing more than does membership at the local country club, membership in a service club or membership in some other organisation. Consequently, uncommitted Christians sacrifice many of the 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, an individual will protest, "The thief on the cross didn't join a church." That is a rather foolish apologia for refusing to join the church since the person making that statement isn't hanging on a cross.

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

¹³ Peterson, op. cit.

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

It will undoubtedly prove beneficial for us to remember what Paul said 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

Membership in the local congregation ***provides a spiritual family*** that is available to support and to encourage me in my walk with Christ. In GALATIANS 6:1, 2 we learn that believers are charged with encouraging 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.” Perhaps this charge is neglected in this litigious day; but our neglect does not obviate the divine charge.

The charge given in Galatians sounds very much like HEBREWS 10:24, 25. This passage urges Christians to invest themselves in one another. “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 are responsible to encourage and to strengthen one another in their walk with Christ. We do this, not as disinterested spectators, but as part of the family of God interacting especially in the congregation where Christ has placed them.

Membership in the local congregation of the Lord ***gives me a place to discover and 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 she 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 for leaders to protect the flock. Many times protecting the flock is a thankless task; members resist being held accountable and protecting the flock from assault is seen as being narrow-minded. Nevertheless, it is only as we are part of the Body that we enjoy such protection. Perhaps that is why we are able to be casual about that protection. Without membership, there is no protection from such spiritual assault. That 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

¹⁵ Peterson, op. cit.

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

Perhaps you question why I have delivered this homily. First, I seek to fulfil the ministry God has given me, instructing you in the Word of God. Again, I long for you to enjoy God's richest blessings—the knowledge of what is pleasing to Him. I am also concerned that each one who listens or who reads the message should 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.

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... ‘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 and there to invest the gifts that 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 to obey the command of Christ to openly identify with Him and to walk in visible concourse with His people, the church of the Living God. Amen.