

ACTS 2:41-47

A REGENERATE CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

“Those who received [Peter’s] word were baptised, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.

”They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.”¹

All Christians are expected to hold membership in a local church. However, not all individuals who are members of a local congregation are Christians. This is not some sort of mystical doublespeak; rather, the statement recognises a sad reality in modern congregational life. Whenever one speaks of membership in the church of the Living God, ideally, he is speaking of a spiritual activity. However, we are a fallen race, and consequently—I might say unfortunately—membership in a local congregation too often carries a political connotation in the minds of church members.

Whenever I speak of membership in the church, I fear that many focus on the political parameter. One can, and should, join a church where he or she can fulfil the ministries God has assigned. However, to speak of “joining” implies that we are in control of our actions instead of demonstrating obedience to the mastery of Christ over our lives. Perhaps it would be better to use biblical language and say that we are “added” to a church. That statement implies that we are seeking the will of the Master and it implies that we have accepted His gracious working in our lives.

Tragically, many professed Christians have seized control over their own lives. Thus, they “join” the church of their choice; and, just as surely, when they are offended by something in that church, they are able to “leave” the church of their choice. They will attend when they feel like attending, and they will stay away when they feel like staying away, thus showing disrespect for the Lord Christ.

Membership in a church is not a requirement for salvation, although those who are saved will demonstrate their salvation through identifying with a local congregation. In the New Testament, there is not found even one unaffiliated Christian; those who were redeemed were always identified with a local congregation. There is no precedence found in Scripture for belonging to an “invisible” church. Those who are born from above demonstrate their relationship to the Master through affiliation with fellow saints. Affiliation with a local congregation demonstrates recognition of God’s appointment. We Baptists hold to the concept of a regenerate church membership. By that statement, I mean that we believe that only Christians should be members of a congregation, and therefore, each congregation is ideally composed of those who are twice born.

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.

The biblical requirements for church membership are salvation and baptism following faith; this message seeks to explore of the composition of the New Testament congregation as outlined in the Word of God. The questions asked are: who is a member of the church and what roles do the members of the congregation play in the life of the Body. To lay a foundation for the answers to these questions, I invite you to consider the account of the formation of the first church.

ENTERING THE CHURCH — “Those who received his word were baptised.” Translations based on the majority text present a significant difference when speaking of the receipt of Peter’s message. Some translations—a minority of those available today—inform us that “those who *gladly* received his word were baptised.”² Those receiving the message were described as having joyfully welcomed the message.

Most newer translations fail to make the connection of joy with receipt of the message, but the Greek term, *apodéxomai*, has as its primary meaning, “[to] welcome someone [or something],” or “[to] receive someone favourably.”³ In the New Testament writings, this word is used only by Luke—five times in Acts [ACTS 18:27; 21:17; 24:3; 28:30] and twice in the Gospel that bears his name [LUKE 8:40; 9:11]. There is no question but that in every other instance, the term speaks of a sense of welcome or joy. Thus, it is appropriate to conclude that the message Peter preached was received with joy.

Receiving the message of life is not merely an intellectual transaction—there is an emotional component associated with the new life. I am not saying that one must have a particular emotional state in order to become a member of the church, but I am saying that receiving the New Birth results in a new response to life. Joy accompanies salvation; those who are redeemed are a joyful people!

In the Psalms, I find a beautiful expression of this truth. The Psalmist writes:

“My lips will shout for joy,
when I sing praises to you;
my soul also, which you have redeemed.”

[PSALM 71:23]

Christians have, since the earliest days of the Faith, been a joyful people; and their lives are marked by joyful songs of praise to God. The redeemed of the Lord are encouraged to declare His redemption with joy. The Lord makes us glad [see PSALM 92:4], and we are joyful in His presence [see PSALM 16:11].

“Let the redeemed of the LORD say so,
whom he has redeemed from trouble.

“Let [the redeemed of the Lord] offer sacrifices of thanksgiving,
and tell of his deeds in songs of joy!”

[PSALM 107:2, 22]

² **New King James Version** (Thomas Nelson, Inc., Nashville, TN 1982)

³ William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, **A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature** (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL 1957)

I assure each listener that joy is the inevitable result of salvation. Those who enter the Faith in the way God intends will enter through the door of salvation, and they will experience joy—wild, unimaginable joy. Just as the eagle and the snail each were compelled to enter into the ark through the one door Noah had provided, so each Christian enters into the life of Christ through salvation. How is that salvation received?

Christ the Lord, the Son of God, was crucified because of our sin. He was “delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” [ACTS 2:23], receiving in Himself the punishment of death that we deserved. However, He did not remain in the grave. God raised this Jesus up from the dead [see ACTS 2:32] and exalted Him to His right hand [see ACTS 2:33]. Therefore, God declares Him, through this resurrection, to be Lord and Christ [see ACTS 2:36]. Therefore, all mankind is called to “repent [and believe] in the Name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins” [ACTS 2:38]. Peter concluded his powerful message with an invitation for those listening to be saved: “Save yourselves from this crooked generation” [ACTS 2:40].

I have been frequently challenged to explain why I invite people to faith in the Risen Christ at the conclusion of each message. I am following apostolic precedence when I invite listeners to believe! Peter concluded his excellent message with a call to do something about the knowledge that he had just communicated; he issued an invitation for those listening to be saved. Just so, the contemporary preacher is remiss if he fails to call those listening to his message to repent and to be saved. Whether the invitation is formal or implied is perhaps not as important as whether there is a pleading note in each biblical message. Speaking of Christ and His salvation is not simply a matter of delivering mystical esoteric knowledge—it is an issue of life!

Salvation demands a response! Those redeemed will openly identify with Him who gives them life. Early in my Christian walk, an older saint and I would often visit in the homes of people that lived in the neighbourhoods nearby. God wonderfully enabled that rough man to be an instrument of grace bringing many people to salvation. Whenever an individual had placed faith in the Living Christ, he would ask them if they were ashamed to be known as a Christian. When they assured him that they were not ashamed, he would turn in his Bible to ROMANS 10:11, and reading that passage, he would tell the new believer that their response verified the Word of God. The passage asserts: “Scripture says, ‘Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.’”

Those listeners who **gladly** received Peter’s message were baptised—they openly identified with the Master in His death, burial and resurrection. Baptism is the initial ordinance prescribed for those who believe, and it is performed but once for those who have believed. It is conducted not in order to be saved, but baptism is expected because one is saved and openly identifying with Christ. Those who so identify are declaring that they believe that Christ died, that He was buried, and that He rose from the dead. They do this as they are immersed in water, picturing His burial. Then, as they are raised up out of the water they are declaring that they believe that He rose from the dead.

Those who thus identify with the Saviour declare that they personally identify with Him in this death, burial and resurrection, declaring that they accept that their old nature was dead, but that it has been buried with Him through faith in His sacrifice. They moreover declare that they are confident that they have been raised with Him through faith in Him as the risen Lord of Glory.

This is the declaration of **ROMANS 6:3-9**. “[A]ll of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death[.] We were buried ... with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

“...If we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him.”

Proponents of regional or denominational churches contend that one becomes a member of the church either through birth or through geo-political considerations. In this view, the church is composed of families, and a child born into the family holding membership in the church is *ipso facto* a member of the church. Though some, perhaps even many, within these institutions are evangelical, they nevertheless support a system that assumes people have a place in the church through either citizenship or through birth.

Centuries after the close of the apostolic era, citizens—and their children—of a region were expected to be members of the particular church that was sanctioned by and propped up by the state. Thus, citizens of Italy, Spain and France were expected to be Catholic; it was anticipated that citizens of Germany and Denmark would be Lutheran; citizens of England would be Anglican; and citizens of Scotland were expected to be Presbyterian. Nationality determines church membership in the ecclesiology of the multitudinous churches. In a measure, this expectation prevails to this day, though the advance of the Baptist ideal of a free church has permeated Christendom to drastically diminish the power of statist churches, especially in the western world.

Several corollaries necessarily flow from the statist view. Advocates of the multitudinous churches are compelled to ascribe undue importance to baptism. For those holding this view, baptism is necessarily salvific. This is necessitated by the need to make children members of the Kingdom of God, which is identified as “the church.” Though some of the multitudinous churches teach salvation through faith in Christ, and while they would argue the necessity of “confirmation” before children assume full rights and privileges as members of the church, their practise demands that baptism be salvific.

Proponents of the multitudinous church are driven at the logical extreme to promote the view that failure to unite with the church is an act of *lèse majesté*. Since the church supports the state, then of necessity the state is closely identified with the church; and refusal to unite with the church necessarily excludes oneself from loyalty to the state. Because worship is reduced to an act of citizenship, participation in the rites of the church tends to become occasional and attendance is often considered as a duty to be performed preformed on high holy days, instead of being a continuing joyous act.

Contrast this situation with the Baptist view that those who joyfully receive Christ are expected to demonstrate their allegiance through baptism. This expression of faith is voluntary and not coercive; and those baptised assume their rightful place of responsibility within the community of Faith. To avoid the error of the multitudinous churches, keep several key concepts in view: **faith before water, the voluntary nature of baptism, and joyful acceptance of one's responsibility** as marks for the people of God.

THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH — “There were added that day about three thousand souls.” We need to know something about the composition of the church now that we know how to enter the church. I invite you to explore the makeup of the church. What is the church? Who are the members of the church? I stated three concepts a moment ago: **faith before water**, the **voluntary nature of baptism**, and **joyful acceptance of responsibility**. These concepts accurately describe the nature of the church.

There are essentially two differing views concerning composition of the church. Nor should it be surprising that these views express radically differing concepts of what the church is to be. One of those views considers the church to be a political expression. This view promotes—explicitly or implicitly—the concept of a statist church, believing the church is an expression of the state. This view is essentially a geo-political position that lends itself to the view that the church is a means to empowerment. The view is, of necessity, connectional in its scope. It appeals to a supra-congregational body to review entry into the church, and to define and regulate the work of the local congregation.

This view considers membership to be related to citizenship, and ascribes to the church considerable power over the soul of individual members. Since the oversight body—whether a synod or a bishop or a church boss—controls entry into the church, it also controls access to the rites and rituals of the church. Since these rites and rituals are strictly controlled, they gain undue weight in determining the relationship of the members to God, and they become the means to salvation. This accounts for the reason that sacerdotal churches speak of sacraments, whereas free churches speak of ordinances. Sacraments confer grace on participants, whereas ordinances continue received tradition.

The Baptist view is that of the believers’ church—**faith before water**. Members of a congregation are expected to be saved before they enter the church. They do not unite with the church in order to be saved, but because they are saved, they enter into the church. This view argues that only those who have been saved should be members of a congregation. In our text, this doctrine is supported through knowledge that those added were already redeemed. They received Peter’s message and then they were baptised.

According to the text, those baptised were added to something. They were added to some identifiable entity contingent upon acceptance of Christ as Lord and baptism. The church is indeed a spiritual entity, but modern Christians have almost spiritualised the church to the point of rendering it meaningless. There is a spiritual unity of believers, but that does not preclude the physical association of those who are born from above and into the Family of God. According to the text, those who were saved devoted themselves to fellowship— together they attended the Apostles’ teaching, shared their homes as an act of worship and together they demonstrated the reality of Christ’s presence among them. The entity to which the newly baptised believers were added was certainly visible and tangible. Too many people have adopted a faulty ecclesiology that speaks of a “universal, invisible” church. One can only ask, “Where does that ‘church’ meet?”

Hermeneutics is the term applied to the study of biblical interpretation. Hermeneutics seeks to discover what the writer of a particular portion of Scripture meant. The best interpretation of a passage of the Word leads to understanding what the original reader would have understood the writer to mean. This means that the interpreter must know the historical and cultural context of what was written. Instead of attempting to impose his own concept of what the writer should have meant on what has been written, the interpreter must permit what was written to dictate the meaning intended.

If I wish to know to what the new believers were added, I might ask if the writer makes similar references elsewhere. When I review the **BOOK OF ACTS** I discover that Luke writes of the impact of judgement on two errant believers resulting in an increase in membership in the church. When Ananias and Sapphira were judged by the Holy Spirit, not only did those who witnessed this event fear greatly, but Luke states, “More and more men and women believed in the Lord. They joined the other believers” [ACTS 5:14].⁴

So, believers were added to the church and people did not attempt to join the church in order to become believers. Christ sets those who believe in Him where He chooses. It was not a matter of attending the “synagogue of your choice” for these believers, but it was rather an issue of entering into the work where the Master settled them. Nevertheless, it is equally evident that they were not compelled to unite with the church, but having accepted the reign of Christ in their lives, they voluntarily accepted baptism, identifying with Him, and they were counted as members of the church.

Baptism is not an act that is performed by proxy, but rather those who believe are baptised as result of their own determinate choice. When the Ethiopian official heard of the life that is offered freely in Christ, he believed, and in confirmation of his belief, he asked Philip, “See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptised” [ACTS 8:36]?

Baptists certainly agree with Scripture concerning **the voluntary nature of baptism**. We emphasise freedom in Christ, and freedom in Christ begins with freedom to believe, or even not to believe. However, we temper this emphasis on freedom with insistence upon responsibility that accompanies freedom. Choosing Christ, one is saved and assumes responsibilities within the community of faith. Choosing not to believe, the individual accepts the judgement of God as one outside the precincts of grace.

Under no circumstance can a Baptist steal the right of an individual to openly identify with the Saviour. Therefore, we do not baptise our babies, nor do we perform a rite for those who are unable to openly confess faith in Christ as Lord. We believe that only those who are able to make a personal decision should be members of the church. Accordingly, we cannot accept that those who were baptised as infants are properly members of a New Testament church, whether or not they are now believers!

THE ROLE OF MEMBERSHIP — “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.”

Membership in the congregation of the Lord does confer benefits and privileges. Some benefits conferred on members are immediately apparent, and other benefits are less evident. Among the privileges that are immediately seen is the right to have a voice in the conduct of church business. Of course, we are bound to obedience to the Word of God, but because of our fallen nature, we recognise that there must be discussion and prayerful thought given to decisions for the congregation as we seek the will of God.

⁴ **The Holy Bible: New International Reader’s Version** (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 1998; 2007)

However, there are less readily apparent benefits associated with church membership. There is a protective element conferred through membership in the Body of Christ. Writing the Corinthian Christians, Paul reminds them of their responsibility to maintain the moral purity of the membership. There was in that particular congregation, a man whose actions had become a grave offence even to pagans. Paul counselled, “when you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord” [1 CORINTHIANS 5:4, 5].

Outside the church, unaffiliated saints assume a new title—**victim**. Peter warns, “your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” [1 PETER 5:8]. It is immaterial whether the believer wanders outside the assembly through ignorance or whether the Christian deliberately walks away from fellowship, to wander about without the protection of fellow believers is to expose oneself to destruction.

A short while ago, I spoke of the **joyful acceptance of responsibility** whenever the child of God enters the church. Each Christian receives spiritual gift(s) given by the Holy Spirit. Christians are gifted people, and the congregation is to be a continual expression of God’s grace because the membership continually reveals the goodness of God through exercise of their various spiritual gifts. Those gifts have been entrusted to us as individual Christians so that we can invest them one another as we build up the assembly. The local congregation is referred to as the Body of Christ, and it is only as we invest our gifts in one another that we strengthen each other and ensure that the Body fully reflects the character of our Lord Jesus, who is the Head of the Body. When we refuse to affiliate with the congregation where God would set us, we are guilty of prostituting the gifts God entrusted to us because we waste these divine gifts, consuming them on our own desires.

United as a body, Christians not only are able to build one another up, but they also protect one another. Multiple eyes see danger before it is imminent. Multiple hands lift the fallen and encourage the weak. This is one very good reason for urging Christians assembled as a church to be “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit” [EPHESIANS 4:3]. The unity that is sought, therefore, is not an artificial unity—a unity of name or association—but it is a practical unity. There is a mystical union of believers, but throughout the New Testament, the unity expected from believers is concrete and it is determined by shared truth.

Our Lord deliberately refers to Christians as sheep. The Master sent His disciples on mission, referring to them as “sheep in the midst of wolves” [MATTHEW 10:16]. Christians are Christ’s sheep—wise as serpents, but gentle and harmless as doves. United, we have a measure of protection since we are a flock and under the leadership of the Chief Shepherd. Alone, we surrender all protection afforded through unity because we have voluntarily removed ourselves from the oversight of Christ’s shepherds.

The believers baptised at Pentecost joyfully accepted responsibility to practise the Faith within the context of the assembly. This is evident from the latter portion of the text. The new Christians, together with the one hundred twenty that were first assembled, “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need” [ACTS 2:42-45].

Those added to the church were **devoted to apostolic teaching**. They did not merely attend the preaching services, but they incorporated what they learned into their lives. For these saints, doctrine was living and vital, not boring and esoteric. They wanted to know the will of the Lord, and they were committed to the concept that God was revealing His will through the teaching of the Apostles. We have the teaching of the Apostles today. We have received that teaching as the Bible. Just as the first believers were committed to the teaching of the Apostles, so believers today are to be committed to apostolic doctrine—apostolic doctrine is presented as sound biblical teaching.

The first Christians were also **devoted to worship and prayer**. One grave weakness among evangelicals is that we are a people of extremes. I observe that either we are strong on doctrine, neglecting worship and prayer, or we are strong on worship, but weak in doctrine. The first church enjoyed a balance of worship and doctrine. They did make the effort to know the mind of God through listening to the teaching of the Apostles, but they also put that teaching into practise through worship, evangelism and fellowship.

They **worshipped the Lord** through observing the Lord's Table, and they prayed. They were marked by infectious joy, and who can doubt that accompanying that joy were multiple expressions of praise to God who gave them His Spirit. They worshipped, and I rather suspect from their Jewish heritage that their worship was noisy and scintillating.

These first church members were **committed to maintaining the unity of the Spirit**; but the unity they sought was not artificial. Rather, the unity they experienced was doctrinal in nature. They did spend time together, they were generous toward one another and they did love one another deeply from the heart. Consequently, they cared for one another—they ministered to one another, and they strengthened one another in the Faith of Christ the Lord. Above all else, they lived as though Christ the Lord was among them, as He truly was and is to this day.

Perhaps there was a liturgy for worship, but adherence to biblical truth was of greater importance than mere form. Unfortunately, we tend to fall into a rut of going through a particular ritual and calling it worship. However, just because we jointly participate in the identical rite does not mean that we are united. Unity of the Spirit means that with one heart and mind we embrace the Risen Son of God as Master of our lives, seeking to honour Him through serving one another with the gifts He has entrusted to each of us.

The truth I want you to take away is that the church is composed of twice-born men and women. Those who are saved are the living stones by which the church is built. Those who do not know the Lord, who do not openly and voluntarily confess Him through a holy life, should not seek to be counted as part of the congregation of the Lord. Perhaps such people are good people, but they are not redeemed people and they are not marked as belonging to Christ the Risen Lord.

Would you be marked as a child of God? Would you be counted as belonging to the Master? The way in which you are marked is through belief of the message of life, followed by open confession of Jesus as Lord of life. This is the Word of God that teaches, "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**]. Amen.