“God’s Word on Church Membership”

Hebrews 13:12-25

November 6, 2016

Please turn with me to Acts 2. One of the questions that I, along with each of you, has had over the years since becoming a Christian is this. Am I really learning to believe and to rely on and to follow the teachings of the Bible --- on any and every subject?

Today’s question is this. Does the Bible teach Church membership? As you know my heart always goes back to the Bible when it comes to any matter. Why? Because if God has spoken about it, we have the responsibility as Christians to submit ourselves to Him in that particular area. Your Bible is your instruction manual on what to believe and what to do. It’s not a smorgasbord that you can pick and choose what you’ll accept and what you’ll reject. But, oftentimes, some-thing we have all been guilty of, is this. When we do see and understand what it teaches, our previous thoughts come into play. And we begin to debate our obedience to the LORD because, for some reason, we think we know better. And what sometimes happens is this. We begin to read into the Bible what we believe rather than just let the Bible speak to our hearts.

So, what does the Bible say? What does it teach? What did the early Church do when it came to the matter of membership? I’ve titled today’s message “God’s Word on Church Member-ship.” Shall we pray?

What’s really on my heart is this. I’d like to look at the matter of membership from the viewpoint of the New Testament Churches. The first time the word “Church” is used in the Bible is in Matthew 18 where Jesus said “I will build My Church.”

That promise was fulfilled on the first Pentecost after the Resurrection when some 3,000 people responded to the Gospel and began that first NT Church. So, let’s begin at the very beginning of the Church. That beginning is found here in Acts 2. Look with me at the first Church, the Church at Jerusalem; Acts 2:40.

Acts 2:40 *“And with many other words did he [Peter] testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation. (41) Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls. (42) And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.*

*(43) And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. (44) And all that believed were together, and had all things common; (45) and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need.*

*(46) And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, (47) Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.”*

“Now 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, because \_\_\_\_\_\_\_.” 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 build a house! 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!”

I found this in Spurgeon’s sermon “Joining The Church” preached “AT THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE, NEWINGTON, ON LORD’S-DAY EVENING OCTOBER 24, 1869.”

Acts two is the first Church history. It was compiled by a doctor; Doctor Luke. And, it was inspired by the Holy Spirit.

What does Luke tell us about the first NT Church, the Church at Jerusalem? What might it have been like to be in the first Christian Church? Here’s what we find. What does this first NT Church teach us about Church membership?

The first thing you notice is this. The Word was pre-eminent. Look with me at verse forty-one. Acts 2:41 *“Then they that gladly received his word…”*

Specifically it had been the preaching of the Apostle Peter who delivered the Word that day. Peter had just preached the prophecies of Joel. He preached Psalm 16. He preached Psalm 132 and the 110th Psalm. He preached the crucifixion, the resurrection and the exaltation of Jesus to the Father’s right hand. He’d preached the LORDSHIP of Jesus Christ. And the Jewish crowd responding to the preaching of the Word, gladly received his word.

Do you think it makes a difference when you “gladly receive His Word”? Gladly refers to “how” they received the Word that day. Gladly is a term that describes how the heart responds to God.

And who had preached? Who had taught God’s word? It had been the Apostles; specifically Peter. Verse forty. Acts 2:40 *“And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine…”* Notice the term Dr. Luke uses to describe it; “the apostle’s doctrine.”

The Apostles were the ones Christ had chosen to lay the foundation for His Church. Ephesians 2:19 *“Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God; (20) And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; …”*

What the Apostle’s did; what the Apostle’s taught is what Christians do; and what Christianity is. We, the Believers in Christ, have only one foundation; the teachings of the Apostles. You see, the Church at Jerusalem had, not just the preaching of Peter. They had the Apostle’s “doctrine.” This word “doctrine,” as you know, is “teaching.” This first NT Church was built upon the Apostle’s teaching.

First, the Word was pre-eminent in the Church at Jerusalem.

Second, Luke records for us a number. The people that day who identified with Christ and His salvation and His Church became part of “the number.”

How could anyone distinguish between the Christians and the Unbelievers? The Believers; those people who received Peter’s preaching, became members of this first NT Church. And, later, the Apostle Paul would clearly command that no widow under the age of sixty was allowed into the number. I Timothy 5:9 *“Let not a widow be taken into the number under threescore years old, having been the wife of one man.”*

This term “number” gives you a clear and unmistakable sense that the Believers in the NT Churches were “members” of a Local Church. The term “number,” as a verb, means “to be set down in an official list.” [See Robertson’s Word Pictures of the New Testament.”]. Maybe you’ll remember this word given to us about Jesus. “He was numbered among the transgressors” (Luke 22:37). Practically speaking, today we would say a “list.” On the list of transgressors on the day Jesus was crucified was Jesus of Nazareth.

And what does Luke tell us about a number in the first Christian Church? Look back with me to Acts chapter one and verse fifteen. Acts 1:15 *“And in those days Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples, and said, (the number of names together were about an hundred and twenty,) (16) Men and brethren, this scripture must needs have been fulfilled, which the Holy Ghost by the mouth of David spake before concerning Judas, which was guide to them that took Jesus. (17) For he was numbered with us, and had obtained part of this ministry.”*

The one “numbered” with the Apostles had been a man named Judas. One of the things a historian like Luke was responsible to do was to verify facts. And what was the one numerical fact that Luke has left to us about that first NT Church. There were about 3,000 who quote “were added” to the Twelve Apostles and to the 120 who had met in the Upper Room at that first NT Church. Acts 2:41 *“Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls.”*

So, first, the Word was pre-eminent.

Second, there was a record of the number; an official list of those who became Church members.

Third, only those who were saved and baptized were added to the Church.

Look with me at verse forty-seven. Acts 2:47 *“And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.”*

To be “added” means “to be joined together with others.” Anything that is added is added to a previously recorded number. Those who became Believers that day were added to the Church at Jerusalem. These people became active, serving members of the LORD’s first Church.

So, folks, when you hear people say *“Oh, I’m already a member of Christ’s Church. I don’t need to be on any official list of a Local Church,”* let me remind you of this. When you are on a quote list, you have made a break from being unaccountable. And you are identifying with a particular group in a particular location. And you’ve placed yourself inside a group that you want to see grow. And you are now a quote “member” of a Local Church.

Now, the greatest word in the world is “saved.” The greatest experience anyone can have is to be “saved.” The sole purpose in Jesus coming from Heaven to earth is that we might be saved. So, it goes without saying that anyone who becomes a Church member must be saved.

But that’s just a beginning; as we all know. First comes salvation; then comes a public testimony that you have died to the old life and are now joined to Jesus Christ and His body. That public testimony we know as baptism.

Note Luke’s words in verse forty-one. Acts 2:41 *“Then they that gladly received his word were baptized:…”* Only those who were saved and baptized were added to the Church.

As you read through the rest of the Book of Acts, you find that there are at least a dozen references to people who had been saved; being then baptized. It was the normal thing for a newly saved person to do. It was the next thing you did once you were saved.

You see, when someone was saved, he submitted to Believer’s baptism. First, they heard the Gospel. They, then repented. They trusted in Christ and only then were they baptized. Every Believer in the NT declares his allegiance to Christ by a public baptism. And, as is plainly taught here by Dr. Luke, those who came to Christ for salvation were baptized.

Do you remember the Ethiopian eunuch who had been a treasurer for the Queen of Ethiopia? He, after reading Isaiah fifty-three, was instructed by a man named Philip. Philip taught him Isaiah 53. It’s a prophecy of Jesus Christ. The eunuch believed and here’s what we read about him.

Acts 8:36 *“And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water: and the eunuch said, See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized? (37) And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.*

*(38) And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him.”*

And, do you remember Crispus in the city of Corinth? Acts 18:8 *“And Crispus, the chief ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his house [family]; and many of the Corinthians hearing believed, and were baptized.”*

Baptism by immersion always follows faith in Christ. Those who were saved were baptized. And the first item of business for each one who believed the preaching of Peter in the Jerusalem Church was baptism. Acts 2:41 *“Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls.”*

Folks, the same word holds true for you who read and study and hear and learn the word of God on baptism. If you know what God says about it, it’s not a question of “should you be baptized.” It’s a question of “when can I be baptized?”

Can you see with me what this first NT Church teaches us?

So, first, the Word was pre-eminent.

Second, there was a record of the number; an official list of those who were members.

Third, only those who were saved and baptized united with the Church.

Fourth, the Church members in this first NT Church, now united to each other, gathered themselves around four main things. You’ll find them here in verse forty.

Acts 2:40 *“And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.”*

Folks, this is the Church at Jerusalem. They adhered to the Apostle’s doctrine. They joined together in fellowship with each other. They shared Communion together. And they prayed together. Teaching, fellowship, communion, and prayer; these four. Yes, they advanced the Church through the preaching of the Gospel to the lost. But the Church of Jesus Christ; the Church at Jerusalem, was focused: teaching, fellowship, communion, and prayer.

We have teaching; every Sunday in Sunday School and in the Worship Hour. We join in fellowship both in each other’s homes as well as here at our Church building. We share in the LORD’s ordinance called Communion. And on Wednesdays we join our hearts together to pray together.

That’s the focus of the Church at Jerusalem. And shouldn’t that be your focus as a Church member here in Old Saybrook?

Folks, the words here are true. They are God-inspired. They are here for your obedience. They are not to be neglected or tossed aside. These words are God’s plan for the NT Local Church.

Who here is ready to disregard the words of the Bible? Who here is ready to hold them in highest esteem and do what God says?

As I close today, and as we come together at the Table of the LORD, I have one more excerpt from Spurgeon’s “Joining The Church” sermon. *“Mind this, then! Mark it as the first step in all public acts of religion—you must give yourselves first to the Lord! You have no right to talk about joining a Christian Church until you have done that—“first to the Lord.” You have no right to be baptized until you have done that—“first to the Lord.”*

*You have no right to sit at the communion table until you have done that—“first to the Lord.” Give yourselves first to the Lord with unfeigned repentance for sin and simple and hearty confidence in Jesus!*

*And then, as a complete giving-up of yourselves to the Lord—you may come to every hallowed act of service, to every privilege-feast of love—but not until then! Oh, sirs,*

*it is a mockery of God, an insult to Him— until first your heart surrenders itself to Jesus and your manhood becomes the rightful property of God by your willing yielding of it to Him!”*

Yes, we’ve all sinned and we’ve all come short of God’s glory. Yet, in love, the Father has reached out to us by giving us His Son to die as our Substitute for sin. Now, you belong to Him by faith. You are His and He is yours.

What then is your calling? Is it not to unite with a group of God’s children and serve Him together? Shall we pray?

Please find with me hymn number # 506 “I’d Rather Have Jesus”