

THE CHURCH: A UNIQUE ORGANISM

Membership in the Church

Acts 2:41-47

Introduction

→ Illust. – “Restored” – Acts 2:36-47

In 1984 experts began the long and tedious process of restoring the paintings of Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel in Rome. The process took 10 years to complete. Over the centuries grime, soot and dirt had collected on the paintings, obscuring their beauty. They looked flat and dull. The colors looked almost like shades of gray, and many details had become invisible. Only after a paste of solvents was applied, allowed to dry, and then carefully brushed away, did the original art once again sparkle with the beauty it once had.

Those masterpieces remind me somewhat of the church. Many times over the centuries, God’s original design has become cloudy and gray as the dust and grime of sin and tradition has collected. The beautiful living colors of the “original” are sometimes hardly discernible. There have been periods in history when the beauty of God’s design for the body of Christ has almost disappeared. Perhaps, even now, in this 21st century, we need to apply the solvents of repentance and faith to once again restore the church.

I believe that a good place to start would be to discover, or rediscover, the qualities that made the first-century believers stand out from the world. What was the NT church really like? What does it mean for us today to be a part of the church – the body of Christ?

Mention the two aspects of the church:

Universal church ↔ Local church.

The key passage that we need to look at this morning is Acts 2:41-47. We begin by looking at the basis for membership in the church. On what basis does one become a part of the church?

I. Basis of Membership 2:41

There are 3 things mentioned or suggested in this verse about the way people affiliated themselves with the church.

1. They received the Word – they received and responded to the message of the apostles that day. In Romans 10:17 we read, “Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.” (NIV)

2. They were baptized – discuss the role of baptism – a way of saying to the watching world that I have changed my direction in life. I have made a commitment and I am not going back. It was a public confession of the decision to follow Jesus Christ. Baptism was a normal step in the decision to become a Christian.

3. Added to the church – Upon the response to the Word - receiving the message of Christ, and the step of baptism as a confirmation of that decision, the Scripture simply says they were added to the church - see also v. 47b.

Membership in the church was just assumed. By virtue of the decision to become a Christian one is automatically a member of the body of Christ, the universal church, and it is assumed in the Scripture that one also becomes a part of the local fellowship.

So, what does one do as a member of a local body of believers?

II. Activities of the Membership 2:42

In v. 42 there are 4 specific activities given. These were the primary activities of the early church.

1. Teaching – the teaching of the apostles. Remember that at this time they had no written documents outlining the doctrines and teachings of Jesus Christ. They depended on the teaching of the apostles to give them the truth they need to live and to grow as believers. Today – the Word, We don’t have apostles in the same way, but we have the Word, from Christ, written by the apostles.

2. Fellowship – they spent time together, enjoying each other’s company, building up one another, encouraging and challenging each other. Fellowship is a relational kind of ministry. It is a critical part of ministry in the body of Christ.

3. Breaking Bread – a couple of possible references. It could refer to part of the fellowship aspect, sharing meals together, either as larger

groups, or one family with another. More likely, this is a reference to the regular practice of what we call communion – breaking bread and sharing the cup together. This was a constant reminder of the Lord's sacrifice. The early church practiced this very regularly, usually every time they met together. There are churches today that still do this every week.

4. Prayer – was not a sideline to the early church, and it ought not to be for us either. Prayer is the very lifeline of the church.

→ Illust. – Five young college students were spending Sunday in London, so they went to hear C. H. Spurgeon preach. While waiting for the doors to open, the students were greeted by a man who, said, "Gentlemen, let me show you around. Would you like to see the heating plant of this church?" They were not particularly interested, for it was a hot day in July. But they didn't want to offend the stranger, so they consented. The young men were taken down a stairway, a door was quietly opened, and their guide whispered, "This is our heating plant." Surprised, the students saw a room full of people bowed in prayer, seeking a blessing on the service that was soon to begin in the auditorium above. Softly closing the door, the gentleman introduced himself. It was none other than Charles Spurgeon.

Prayer – a central part of the life of the early church.

III. Commitment to the Membership 2:42-46

We need to look for a few moments at the question of what is expected of the members of the church. What sorts of commitment do we see in these early believers?

1. They were devoted to their church body – v. 42, 46

Verse 42 – they devoted themselves

2. They were witnessing to their world - v. 43

Verse 43 - their life was a witness to those around. People saw the things that were happening in their fellowship, and they were in awe, because they saw the hand of God at work.

→ Illust. – A church building in a particular community caught fire one day. Several neighbours showed up and were helping to carry out pews and other items before the flames completely consumed the building. The pastor came alongside a man he had spoken to only a couple of times, and he commented, "I've never seen you in this church before." The man replied, "I've never seen this church on fire before."

One of the amazing things is how a fire attracts a crowd. Wherever there is a fire, people will gather to see what is going on. Are there things happening in our congregation to attract others? There were certainly things occurring in the early church which caught the attention of people.

3. They were caring for the needs of one another – v. 44-45

They shared what they had to help each other. Remember that during those early days there was a lot of persecution and suffering, and they willingly shared whatever they had for the benefit of the body.

Commitment to the Membership. As a member of the church, worldwide and locally I need to be committed to the body of Christ. If we could summarize the attitude of those early believers it would be simply that they were:

- Faithful to the Word, and loyal to each other.

IV. Growth of the Membership 2:47

What about the growth of the body? Look at v. 47. New souls were becoming a part of the church on a regular basis.

Growth is natural in a healthy body.

Conclusion

So, what of us? How does our body compare to that of the NT church? Where do you fit in?

Membership – Have you become a member of the church by faith in Christ? Have you ever been baptized?

Activities of the membership – teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer. Are you regularly involved in these important activities?

What about commitment? Are you committed to the body? Devoted to the fellowship and teaching? Ready and willing to give whatever is required to support others in the body?

The church is a glorious body, a living and unique organism. It is made up of believers in Jesus Christ who are committed to Christ and to one another. Are you a part of that body?