

Joining God's Community
Acts 2:41

August 19, 2012

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^A 1 Corinthians 11:18, 1 Timothy 3:15, Ephesians 5:25, 1 Corinthians 12:28

^B 1 Peter 2:4-5, Ephesians 2:19-22

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^D Acts 2:38, 2 Timothy 4:1-2, Matthew 28:19-20

^E Acts 2:42-47, Revelation 4:11

A. Introduction

1. Our Text, 'So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls.' (Acts 2:41)
 - a. is the same as last Sunday when I spoke about baptism
 - b. but today I would like to address the subject of joining a local church

2. What Is the Church?
 - a. NT Greek uses the word *ekklesia*, which means 'an assembly; those who have been called out', and it was regularly used by Greeks in that sense
 - b. Greek-speaking Jews also used it for their congregations or assemblies
 - c. but in Scripture it has a very special reference to those whom God has called out to be his people, those who are the called according to His purpose – and in that sense encompasses both OT and NT saints
 - d. so then, the church
 - (A) is not an organization, though it has an organizational structure
 - (1) with Jesus Christ as its Head
 - (2) elders and deacons as its servant leaders
 - (B) it is not a building made of bricks and mortar
 - (1) though it may erect such a building for its ministry, and,
 - (2) it seems that this may properly be called 'a church', as in the following passages where the AV gives the literal translation
 - (a) 'For first of all, when ye come together in the church, ...' (1 Corinthians 11:18 AV); see verse 22 in any translation
 - (b) '... thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.' (1 Timothy 3:15 AV)
 - e. yet in its widest sense it is used in the Scriptures
 - (A) such as in Ephesians 5:25, '... as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her ... '
 - (B) and in 1 Corinthians 12:28, 'And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets,

third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues.'

- (C) church is used to describe the citizens of the 'kingdom of God' or the 'kingdom of heaven', and refers to ...

3. The Universal Church

- a. that is, the church of God which includes all believers of all ages; both the saints on earth, and the saints in heaven
- b. some of you may have learned the Apostle's Creed, and the line
 - (A) 'I believe in the Holy Spirit, in the holy catholic Church, ...'
 - (B) where the word 'catholic' is used in its primary, fundamental sense
 - (C) which a good dictionary will tell you is, 'universal or general'
- c. in this sense, when a person comes to faith in Jesus Christ, he or she immediately becomes a member of the holy catholic church of God
 - (A) this doesn't depend upon examination by the elders
 - (B) this doesn't depend even upon baptism, for the dying thief on the cross was immediately accepted in with full membership privileges
- d. that being said, most of the time in Scripture, 'church' refers to ...

4. The Local Church

- a. verse upon verse of Scripture makes reference to
 - (A) the church in such-and-such city or province
 - (B) or to the church in the house of such-and-such person
- b. those called out by God in a particular town, region or community
 - (A) to form a community of God's people
 - (B) a community representing God
 - (1) before neighbours and friends
 - (2) in front of a world that does not recognize God
 - (3) a lighthouse to the truth, the gospel of our salvation

- c. Scripture uses two figures in describing the church of God
 - (A) illustrations primarily referring to the universal church
 - (B) but also applying to every local church as a part of that church

B. Pictures of God's Community

1. As a Temple

- a. this is the picture in 1 Peter 2:4-5, 'And coming to Him as to a living stone which has been rejected by men, but is choice and precious in the sight of God, you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.', and Christ is the Cornerstone in verse 7
- b. and in Ephesians 2:19-22, speaking to the people of the church at Ephesus, the picture is applied first to the church universal, and then specifically to that local church: 'So then you (plural) are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you (plural) also (as a local church in addition to the universal) are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.'
- c. so when the 'stones' are assembled into the local 'temple', God meets them there – but maybe you don't like being called a stone!

2. As a Body

- a. with each believer being individually a 'member' in exactly the same sense as it is used of the human body
- b. a picture that portrays the interdependence of the parts of the body on each member of which that body consists
- c. in some NT passages it is very clear that this picture of the body and its members is being applied to the church universal
 - (A) as the pronoun 'we' emphasizes in Romans 12:4-5, 'For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in

Christ, and individually members one of another.'

- (B) or, as stated in Ephesians 4:4-6, 'There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.' – emphasizing the unity of all believers
- d. but in other NT passages it is equally clear – at least to my mind – that it is being applied to the local church as a microcosm of the whole
 - (A) for example the people in the church at Corinth are specifically singled out and told, 'Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it.' (1 Corinthians 12:27)
 - (B) and in verse 25, Paul instructs that each member should have equal care one for another regardless of what position they have been assigned in the body– clearly speaking of the local church
 - (C) he is not talking of the universal church, for how is it possible for me to show the same care to a saint that I will never know in this world, and may have died centuries ago, as to one I know?

3. The Standard

- a. the church universal is a perfect church
 - (A) it consists only of those who have truly been saved
 - (B) in ultimate and eternal terms, are the newly created nature – the new man – of those truly born again
- b. the standard set in the NT for the local body of believers
 - (A) is that they too should have that same purity
 - (B) and all that implies can easily be seen if you read through the two letters by Paul to the church at Corinth
 - (C) or the seven letters from Jesus Christ to the churches in Asia
- c. this standard has, therefore, a direct bearing upon a person ...

C. Joining God's Community

1. The Responsibilities

- a. of being a member of, of being in the fellowship of, and of being part of a local church – each expression

- emphasizes some aspect – are
- b. firstly: as covered directly in our text: *'So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls.'* (Acts 2:41)
 - (A) these received Peter's message: *'... Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'* (Acts 2:38)
 - (B) the local church is made up of baptized believers
 - c. secondly, the willing submission to its spiritual leaders as they carry out the mandate given in 2 Timothy 4:1-2, *'I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction.'*
 - (A) implying submission to the teaching of Scripture
 - (B) implying submission to discipline by the church,
 - d. and thirdly, commitment to their part in carrying out the commission of our Lord to the church, *'Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.'* (Matt. 28:19-20)

2. The Benefits

- a. flow out of those same responsibilities; the two cannot be separated
- b. let us continue past our text to Acts 2:42-43, *'They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles.'*
 - (A) the first benefit – and responsibility – was the receiving of teaching
 - (1) in order to be saved, we do not need to know or to understand a great deal: simply that we are sinners, and that Jesus Christ died to save us from the guilt and penalty of our sin
 - (2) but the studying and application of God's holy Scriptures, the learning to walk with God in a manner well-pleasing to Him are matters that will take the rest of our lives
 - (3) and God places in His church servants who assist us in these
 - (4) so that one generation of Christians can disciple the next

- (B) the next benefit – and responsibility – listed here is fellowship
 - (1) we tend to use this term as a reference to gathering socially, and I shall speak to that in a moment
 - (2) but the word used in the original has almost a business sense
 - (3) the sharing together in an endeavour or cause, participation through one's efforts and finances in a common effort and goal
 - (4) Lord willing, in 2 weeks we will speak about giving, but I think you can see how it applies already
- (C) the third benefit – and responsibility – is the breaking of bread
 - (1) now this term very early in the NT church, has a technical meaning, one that you all probably know: the Lord's table
 - (2) but in the early church this was but a special part of a larger practice, that of table fellowship or the agape feasts
 - (3) there Christians met together to eat, particularly for those who were needy, as is described in Acts 6:1, where some of *'their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food.'*, such a community meal included the breaking of bread
 - (4) which we note in Acts 2:46, *'... breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart,'* – Christian table fellowship is important, as
 - (5) a part of the worship, of *'everyone kept feeling a sense of awe'*
- (D) the fourth benefit – and responsibility – is prayer
 - (1) public prayer is important – for the early Christians, who were mainly Jews, that prayer took place in God's house of prayer – Acts 2:46, *'day by day continuing with one mind in the temple'*
 - (2) prayer of the church as a whole; prayer as people meet in small groups or even pairs; but also the practice of private prayer – how the church needs people who will labour in prayer in these days! – prayer for one another; prayer for God's kingdom
- c. the fifth benefit – and responsibility – is sharing with those in need
 - (A) let us read on in Acts 2:44-45, *'And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all,*

as anyone might have need.'

- (B) we do not have in this time and place – at least not at the moment – the same problem that faced many of these early believers
 - (C) the religious rulers of that day carried out the threat that any who followed Jesus were to be put out of the synagogue
 - (D) for many that meant being abandoned by their families – this is the case with Jewish and Muslim converts even today – so there was a real need for practical support, particularly of widows and such
 - (E) but we do have this ministry of supporting the Lord's needy
- d. the sixth, and final for today, benefit – and responsibility – is worship
- (A) Acts 2:47, 'praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.'
 - (B) Revelation 4:11 tells us, 'Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honour and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created.'
 - (C) so man was created to worship; and the believer, as a person who has been re-created by God, is one who can truly and spiritually give worship to God – the local church gives a venue for worship
- D. Conclusion – we are a community of God made up of Christians who are still growing, and therefore not perfect; but joining such a community provides the greatest fellowship this side of heaven and, if you have not already done so, we urge you solemnly to consider it.

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