

November 5, 2017
What's "Membership" got to do with it?
Acts 2:36-47

I'll be honest. This is a topic I wanted to delegate to someone else. But then I felt God saying to me, "No, Bruce, you need to think this through a bit more ..."

The thing is this: we (like every other Baptist church I know, and most other churches of other denominations) have "membership." You choose (or don't choose) to become an official "member" of the church. In our church that means you speak with one of the staff, we bring your name to our church Council, we vote, and then on a Sunday morning we formally "welcome" you into the church. The criteria for membership is that you believe in Jesus as your Saviour, you desire to follow Him as Lord, and you have been baptized (some time, in some way) because in Scripture baptism is a step of obedience to Jesus (Matthew 28:19-20), and a public affirmation of our faith in Jesus.

So, what's the problem? The challenge is that many of us believe in Jesus, love Jesus, desire to follow Jesus, we've even been baptized, but we don't want to "join" the church by becoming official "members."

Why not? (you can add to my list)

- *We're not "joiners."* Some of us just don't join things like service clubs or anything else – including church – anymore.
- *We don't want to be asked to do something.* We're afraid if we become a member we'll be asked to be on a board or committee. FYI for what few committees we have, it doesn't matter if you're a member or not, except for our Church Council.
- *We don't want to be told what to give.* We're afraid that if we "join" the church we'll be asked for our tax information and billed a certain amount. We don't do that.
- *We don't want to put down roots; we want to be free agents.* "Joining a church" implies you're going to stick around. We want to be free to move if we don't like the preaching or the music.
- *We can spiritualize it: "I don't see 'membership' in the Bible."* You could make that case. But as you read passages like Acts 2 the refrain is that, when people believed in Jesus, they *"were baptized and added to the church that day."* God continues to *"add people to the church."* It may not quite look like a membership list, but just like us, if you believed in Jesus back then, you were baptized, and you were added to the church. It wasn't a choice. It was a statement of objective fact.

Let's think about this a bit more deeply. Let's think about what the church (that God-ordained entity with the members) really is ...

The church is people who love Jesus: Read Acts 2:36-47. The church is not a building, club, or institution. It's **US** – people who love Jesus, are learning about Jesus, are asking questions about Jesus. So, becoming a "member" is saying you are part of US – this quirky, crazy, imperfect community of people who want know Jesus, worship Jesus,

serve Jesus, care for one another, and share Jesus with our world, just as early believers did. People are not saved by baptism, or communion, or formal church membership. We are saved by our faith in Jesus: *"It is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast"* (Ephesians 2:8-9). We live that faith out in community with one another and in the world.

By the fact we believe in Jesus, we are members of His church; our only choice is whether we will actually own that identity publicly. We can choose to be secretive about our faith in Jesus and thus our identity as members of His church. Or we can choose to publicly identify ourselves with Jesus. Like it or not, church, a community of people who love Jesus, is part-and-parcel of the blessing God gives us when we know and love Jesus.

The church is the family of God. "Family," specifically "the family of God," is one of the big metaphors the Bible uses to describe church. After Paul talks about being saved by grace through faith, he writes, *"you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his **household**"* (Ephesians 2:19). *"To all who did receive him (Jesus), to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become **children of God**, children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God"* (John 1:12-13). We are sons and daughters of God, and, therefore, brothers and sisters in Christ. *"Because you are **his sons and daughters**, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father" (an Aramaic word we could translate as "Dad" or "Daddy")* (Galatians 4:6).

Becoming a "member" of the church family is a public way of celebrating that you are a member of God's family. I like to use a metaphor from my childhood. My parents went to work early and came home late. Early they would drop me off at the Hobsons; about 6-6:30 at night they would pick me up from the Hobsons. In many ways, I was an honorary Hobson. But when push came to shove, I knew – and they knew – I was not a real Hobson. Now if the Hobsons were to formally adopt me, perhaps I could have become a bit more of a real Hobson, but I really would never ever be "real."

The Kingdom of God isn't like that. When you accept Jesus, you become a full, complete, total member of the family of God. You are not an honorary member of the family. You are a full-blooded, born-into-the-family son or daughter. How do you feel about that?

In the old days, being part of a family/clan/tribe really meant something. It was your fundamental identity. Scots had distinctive tartans, crests, badges, and battle cries. Your clan identity defined you. What about us? How comfortable are we being identified as members of the family of God? Does our faith in Jesus define us?

Some of us may wear crosses as a sort of badge. For many people that is highly significant; for other people it is just meaningless jewelry. But joining a church? Being willing to be publicly seen as part of God's family? Allowing our faith to define us? Are we secure enough, "proud" enough (in a healthy way) and sure enough of our faith in Jesus to identify with the family – our family - our brothers and sisters in Christ?

The church is the community of the Spirit. Earlier in Acts 2, the Holy Spirit comes in power on those who love Jesus. A small group of cowering, uneducated, confused cast-offs are filled with power and confidence to talk about Jesus, to love people in the name of Jesus, to worship Jesus, to care for one another in the name of Jesus, to pray in the name of Jesus, to heal in the name of Jesus, to talk about Jesus far and wide.

That Spirit who calls out to God, "Abba, Father" is in us, all of us who love Jesus (John 14-16). He gives us wisdom. He gives us strength and power. He corrects us. He teaches us. And He unites us, drawing us together as that family of God we just talked about. Paul writes, *"Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."* (Ephesians 4:2-6). The Spirit is in us. By definition, we are members of His church.

The church is a body, the body of Jesus in our world. We are intimately connected one with another in His body, the church. *"Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others"* (Romans 12:4-5).

"Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body – whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink ... Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it." (1 Corinthians 12:12-27). Just like a human body, each one of us needs one another. And everyone else needs us.

As the body of Christ, we are also the only Jesus that our world sees. This is not just a challenge for us individually to live as Jesus would live if He were in our place (though it includes that). It is also a call that, as a body of many members – all of us here together – are to live as Jesus would live if He were in our community. What does that mean? It shapes how we treat one another. How we care for one another. How we forgive one another. How we serve one another. How we encourage one another. And how we work with one another to love our community, in Word and in deed, in the name of Jesus.

WE – you, me, everyone around you – are the church

If you believe in Jesus, you don't have a choice. You are a member of the body of Christ. You are a member of the people of Jesus. You are a son or daughter of God, a member of His family. God's Spirit is in you, drawing you into His community of faith. You and I together, are the church. We are members of the "Big 'C'" church – the global family of God, body of Christ, and fellowship of the Spirit. Get over it.

Your only choice is how you will express that locally. Will you acknowledge that by being part of a local body of Christ?

We are a family. I don't get to choose my family. My kids are my kids, my parents are my parents and, as a member of my family I have responsibilities that come with that. One of the ways we formalize family relationships is when we get married. We make a covenant with one another. We make vows to one another. While marriage vows are specific to marriage, what they express, the love and commitment they express, ought to characterize all healthy family relationships. These are the traditional marriage ceremony words: *"to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I pledge my troth."* Without saying it, that is the kind of love that defines my relationship with my parents. With my kids. With my brother.

Does it describe my relationship with people in the family of God? What if it did?

The biblical words we often use at weddings are these: *"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails"* (1 Corinthians 13:4-8). These were not actually written about romantic love at all. They were written specifically to describe relationships in the church, the family of God. This is how members of God's family, the church, relate.

He has blessed me with relationships that matter. Living out 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 is a real challenge for me; it does not come naturally. But I try to live it out. And I have been so blessed by people who have been patient, kind, forgiving, generous, and loving to me.

Does this describe my relationship with my brothers and sisters in Christ? What if it did?

Jesus saves me **by His gift of grace**; now, by His grace, He blesses with a family, a community, a people. Jesus saves me by His grace **into community, His church**. God doesn't give me a choice. I am a member. And I need to deal with it. Rather than seeing that as a liability, I need to see it as a gift. Being a member of God's church is a blessing, a gift from God, right up there with my salvation. I am a member of His family, a body with a purpose, with connections, with support. I need to "own" that in a healthy, constructive, life-giving way.

So ... if you believe in Jesus and are baptized you are a member of the family of God. Welcome. We could just write your name on the family tree. It's not really your choice. Or our choice. For good or for bad, we are not that brash. But we do invite you to claim publicly your right as a son/daughter of God and allow us to celebrate with you. You are a child of God, a member of the body of Christ, filled with His Spirit. You are one of us.