



## **MEMBERSHIP OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH**

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Good morning and welcome to Let the Bible Speak. We're amid a series about the church as it is described in the New Testament. So far, we have learned about its divine origin, its form, and, last week, we talked about the type of organization and government the Lord gave it. Today, we wish to look at its membership. What constitutes a member of the church? How do you become a member of the church of the New Testament? Who does Christ consider a member of His church? The only place we can find the correct answers to those questions is the scriptures. Humanly devised creeds may describe members of the denomination as one thing, but the scriptures may describe members of Christ's church as something else. We defer to the scriptures in this matter as we should in every matter.

Let's begin today with our scripture text found in Ephesians 2:19-22. Here, the apostle Paul writes: "Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit."

Here, Paul describes the household of God (which he defines in 1 Timothy 3:15 as the church) as a spiritual structure made up of people. It is not a building or physical temple. It is not a club, society, or human organization such as people seek membership in within the community. It is a spiritual organization of people. Each person makes up a living stone in this spiritual house built upon Christ and His apostles and prophets who revealed it and govern it yet today through their sacredly inspired writings. But what makes one a member of this household? Can anyone be a member and how do they become a member? We're going to look at several descriptions given in the New Testament of those who make up the church and learn how you and I can know we are numbered among it.

The church of the Lord Jesus Christ is the greatest institution in all the world. That's an incredible and even ridiculous statement to worldly minded people, but in the eyes of God, it's true. It is not the numeric size of the church that makes it the greatest, for even the bible admits that the way to the kingdom is narrow and relatively few will find it (Matthew 7:14). It is not the political power or influence of the church that makes it the greatest because it is not a political organization nor did the church of the New Testament concern itself with the inner workings of the kingdoms of men (John 18:36). It is not the monetary value of the church that makes it supreme because the message of the church tends to attract the poorer and lowlier of society and not the rich and elite (1 Corinthians 1:26). Nor is the nationality or ethnicity of the church what makes it the greatest because first, God is no respecter of persons and He values men and women of all colors and ethnic backgrounds the same. Second, His church is made up of people from every color, every nation, and every ethnic and socio-economic background.

The church is superior to all other institutions because it is Christ's. God planned it, Christ established it, the Holy Spirit revealed it, and the divine Three indwell it and work through it. It has the greatest message in all the world – the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the salvation He offers to all who will believe and obey the gospel. It does more to make the world a better place because it is the “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world”. That is because the power of the gospel transforms the character of people to make them like the wonderful Christ.

It also has the greatest future of any institution even though the world often predicts its demise and doom, and the powers of evil are always looking to destroy it. It has withstood the Satanic assaults of two-thousand years and Jesus promised that it would remain until He comes again and takes her to heaven. You will never become part of any other organization that possesses those qualities. I might add, churches which are the product of the teachings and practices of men are also inferior to the Lord's church. Jesus said, “Every plant which my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up.” (Matthew 15:13) and the Psalmist said, “Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it...” (Psalm 127:1) With that in mind, it is a sacred and exclusive privilege to be part of God's society – the church. Who are the members of the church as it is described in the New Testament? What makes them members of it? How did they become members of it? And – how can you become part of it?

It is possible to consider yourself a member of the Lord's church and not really BE a member. Some are under the illusion that they hold membership in the church of the New Testament when that is not the case because they don't meet the requirements of membership and the Lord has not registered them as a member of it. By requirements, I don't mean money, societal position, self-worth, good deeds, or any such thing but rather the **scriptural** requirements described in the word of God. By being registered, I am not talking about a roll or piece of paper on earth but rather, God's book in heaven. (Hebrews 12:23) That's what we need to be concerned about.

Let me first say that one is not a member of the church because he or she claims to be. We don't self-identify as part of the church and therefore God sees us as numbered among it, nor should the church itself consider such a person part of its number. The bible says in 2 Timothy 2:19 that “the Lord knows those who are His”, but that doesn't mean that the church is some mysterious and secret society because God has described who the members of His church are how they became part of it. There is a door to the church and Jesus said that “He is the door and if a person enters by Him, He will be saved.”. (John 10:9) Well, Christ is the door to the sheepfold and there is a way to enter that door and if we have not done so, we're still outside, regardless of whether we claim we are inside or not.

Second, one is not a member of the church by birth. In other words, being born into a family of Christians doesn't make YOU a Christian. As others have said: "you can be born in a garage but that doesn't make you an automobile."

Third, one is not a member of the New Testament church by pedigree. It doesn't matter what lineage you descend from, what nation you are a citizen of, what color your skin is, or what part of society you represent. The church is made up of people from every walk of life. Jesus told Nicodemus that every person had to be "born again" to enter the kingdom. (John 3:3-5) Our natural birth doesn't place us there.

And fourth, you're not a member of the church by association. Assembling with the church, socializing with members of the church, doing things to contribute to the church doesn't make you a part of the church. I have been acquainted with several people through my years of preaching who were so closely associated with the church; they attended its services more faithfully than some actual members; did many generous and sacrificial things for the good of the church; but they were not actually members of the church. How can that be? Because association, family ties, good deeds, good intentions, well-wishes, attending worship... none of those things make you a member of the church of Christ! You must become part of the church through the means of entrance the Lord appointed. What is that?

First, the church is made up of the saved – or baptized believers. The New Testament scriptures are very plain about this, and I want us to notice carefully what the bible says. Acts chapter 2 records the beginning of the church of Christ on the Day of Pentecost. There were multiplied thousands of people in the city from all over the Jewish world that day because of its importance on the Hebrew calendar. None of these people, save the apostles and relatively few others, were part of the church when it began. They had not yet believed on Christ and been obedient to the gospel. In fact, just 50 days before, many of them had been clamoring for Jesus to be crucified. They may have been religious, but they were lost because they were unbelieving sinners. But the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the apostles and the events of that hour impressed those who saw it and served as a sign and a fulfillment of prophecy that the kingdom of Christ had finally come. This provided Peter with the opportunity to preach and convince them, from the scriptures, that Jesus was the promised Christ. By the end of his sermon, they were convicted of that fact and convicted of their sins and wanted to know what they had to do to be saved. That's the first question that any person who comes to understand who Jesus is and wants to be a member of His church needs to ask! Acts 2:37 says "Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" Verse 38: "Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Notice carefully how Peter responded to their question. He didn't call on them to come and kneel at an altar. He didn't ask them to bow their heads and follow him in praying a pray. He didn't say, "just ask the Lord to come into your heart to save you." He had reminded them back in verse 21 of what the prophet Joel had said about that day: that "IT SHALL COME TO PASS THAT WHOEVER CALLS ON THE NAME OF THE LORD SHALL BE SAVED." But in verse 38 he tells them how they were to call on the name of the Lord. It's the exact same thing Ananias told Saul to do to call upon the name of Christ to save Him in Acts 22:16. Peter said "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission (forgiveness) of your sins..." Now then, look at their response in verse 41: "Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them." Alright now, these people believed what Peter preached about Jesus, were convicted of their sins, turned away from their sins and embraced the truth, and they were baptized that very day.

Now, my friend, that's how the bible shows Christ saving people and the result was they were "added to them" that same day. Added to what? Look at verse 47: "praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved." Do you see who was being added to the church? Those being saved. Do you see when they were added? Each day people were being added as they were being saved. Do you see who did the adding? The Lord added to the church those who were being saved. What the bible doesn't say is that the church took a vote to see if converts could be part of the church. The bible doesn't say that the church added people to their own number. The bible doesn't say that people were being saved and then later (perhaps at the summer revival or on "baptism Sunday") were joining the church through baptism. That's foreign to the bible. It doesn't even say that people were "joining the church" when they were saved. And neither does it say that people were being saved and then choosing a denomination to join. There were no denominations in the church of the New Testament. There was only the Lord's church. And people didn't join it as a separate transaction after they were saved but rather the Lord added them to the church AS they were being saved. Friend, the New Testament church is a body of people who have believed on Christ, repented of their sins, and been baptized to receive the forgiveness of their sins That's what the bible says, regardless of what creeds written by men and church by-laws enacted by man might say.

Now then, the bible uses another description of the church and those who are part of it and that is "a body and its members". This was a favorite metaphor of the apostle Paul in describing the church. In Romans, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, and Colossians, Paul employs these terms referring to the church sometimes universally and sometimes locally. Now this implies several things about the church and what it means to be part of it.

First, it implies that Jesus is the head of the church. To be part of the church, we must be connected to Christ. The bible says in Galatians 3:27 that as many as are baptized into Christ, put on Christ.

Second, it implies a relationship to one another. Paul reminded the divided church at Corinth in 1 Corinthians 12 that one part of the body serves a purpose in the context of the whole body. A hand or a foot detached from the body is a useless piece of dead and rotting flesh. The same is true of a professing Christian who is not attached and part of the life of the body of Christ, the church. To be a member of the church means more than just being saved from past sins, it means living in Christ and that life is enjoyed when we are attached to the body of which Christ is its head.

Now then, Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:13 tells us how we become part of that body. He said, "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit." That's not talking about the baptism OF or WITH the Holy Spirit which the apostles received on Pentecost; it's talking about the baptism we are led to submit to by the teaching of the Holy Spirit in the gospel. As we saw in Acts 2, when the words of the Holy Spirit which Peter preached led people to faith in Christ, they were baptized for the forgiveness of their sins and the Lord added them to the church. Well, Paul reminds the Corinthians that by the Spirit, they were baptized into the body of Christ.

In Acts 10, there was still skepticism about whether Gentiles could become members of the church, and God orchestrated a series of events to convince Peter and other Jewish Christians that they could be and when they beheld those evidences, Peter asked in Acts 10:47, "Can anyone forbid water that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit as well as we." By receiving the Holy Spirit, he was referring to the miraculous signs unique to that occasion that were manifested to show that

Gentiles could enter the kingdom on the same terms of faith in Christ as the Jews. It was when they were baptized in water that the Gentiles entered the body of Christ and became one with Jews in Him.

And then, look at another description of those who made up the church, found in Acts chapter 11. When Barnabas and Saul spent a year with the church there, the record says in verse 26: "And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch." Notice, the disciples (which means learners or pupils of Christ) received the name Christians (which means followers of Jesus). You see, being a member of the church at Antioch was not holding some nominal membership in an organization, but rather meant to be an active learner and follower in practice of the Lord Jesus Christ. To be a member of the New Testament church today means to be one who is following Jesus and endeavoring to serve Christ with other disciples and to daily live the Christian life.

Now, if you look at the Great Commission as Jesus gave it to His apostles in Matthew 28:19, notice that He said "Go ye therefore and make disciples of "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." How did they make disciples? By preaching the gospel to them, according to Mark's account in Mark 16:15. And what else was involved? "Make disciples...baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit... then, teaching them to observe the ordinances of the church and of the Christian life. Baptism was not an ordinance for the Christian. Baptism was the means of accepting Christ's teaching and becoming a disciple and thus becoming a member of the church. Then, one begins to serve Christ IN the church and live for Him.

Does this describe you? Are you a member of the New Testament church? There is no greater institution to be part of and I hope you will let the Lord add you to it today by obeying the gospel of Jesus Christ.

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