

CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

January 13, 2013

Luke recorded that “the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved” (Acts 2:47). About what church was Luke referring? As we study the scripture, it becomes clear that there is only one church spoken of in the New Testament. It is the church that Jesus said He would build. Jesus declared His intentions after the good confession made by Peter, “And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus answered and said unto him, **Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed *it* unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it**” (Mt. 16:16-18).

However, the word “church” is used in two senses when spoken of by the inspired writers. There is the universal church that Jesus built, which consists of all those that have obeyed the gospel plan of salvation, and then there are local churches or congregations of those believers that work together to fulfill the Lord’s commands.

The universal church is the church that Jesus promised to build (Mt. 16:13-19). It is referred to by various names such as the church (Acts 8:1), the church of God (Acts 220:28), the church of the living God (1 Tim. 3:15), the church of the firstborn (Heb. 12:23), the churches of the saints (1 Cor. 14:33), the churches of Christ (Rom. 16:16), and the body of Christ (Eph. 1:22-23, Col. 1:18). This one body (Eph. 4:4) is made up of individual members (Rom. 12:4-5; 1 Cor. 12:27).

With membership into the one church that Christ established comes various privileges. Those that are in the church are saved (Eph. 5:23) and enjoy all spiritual blessings which can only be found in Christ (Eph. 1:3). However, not only do we have privileges, but we also have obligations. Members of the churches of Christ are obligated to remain faithful to the Head of the church, which is Christ (Jn. 15:1-8). In addition, we are to fulfill our duties as members of the body (Eph. 4:15-16), we are to be willing to assist in any way we are able in the work of the church (Rom. 12:4-8), and we are obligated to love the brethren in every place of the world (1 Pet. 2:17).

We become members of the one body, the universal church, by being added to it by God (Acts 2:47). This happens after we understand the teachings of Jesus and have faith (Rom. 10:17), repent of past sins and dedicate ourselves to Christ (Acts 2:38), make the good confession that Jesus Christ is the Son of God (Acts 8:37), and are immersed in water for the forgiveness of sins (Mk. 16:16; Acts 2:38; Acts 22:16).

The second sense in which the word “church” is used in the New Testament is when it is referring to the local congregation of the Lord’s people. Various local congregations are named in the writings of Paul. He speaks of the church of the Laodiceans (Col. 4:16), the church of the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 1:1), the churches of the Gentiles (Rom. 16:4), the churches of Galatia (1 Cor. 16:1), the churches of Macedonia (2 Cor. 8:1), the churches of Judaea (Gal. 1:22), and the seven churches in Asia (1 Cor. 16:9; Rev. 1-3). Are we to assume that Paul was talking about different and distinct churches? Of course not, he was talking about the various congregations of the one church that met throughout the world!

Notice the privileges associated with the membership we have with the local congregation. We can rely upon the local church as our spiritual family (Mk. 10:28-30; 1 Tim. 5:1-2), we gain strength from more mature Christians (Rom. 15:1; Gal. 6:1), we receive mutual comfort from those of like precious faith (2 Cor. 1:3-5), and we benefit from the prayers of our brethren (Js. 5:14-16).

Just as there are in the universal church, there are obligations that are to be met in the local congregation. We are to bear one another's burdens (Gal. 6:2), we are to exhort each other (Heb. 3:12-14), we are to assemble together for corporate worship (Acts 20:7; Heb. 10:23-25), we are to care for each other (1 Thess. 5:11-15), and we are to withdraw from those that walk disorderly (2 Thess. 3:6-15).

Is it necessary to "place membership" with a local congregation? If we are to fulfill our obligations to Jesus, there is no other way to do it than by committing ourselves to a local group of Christians. We cannot be in subjection to those that "rule over" us if we have not placed our membership with an individual congregation (Heb. 13:7). Authority in the church does not extend past the local level. In order to submit, we have to be in a local group. We must be a part of a flock overseen by a local eldership (Acts 20:28) and that cannot take place if membership is not placed with them. The elders are to watch over the souls of the local members and that cannot happen if they don't know who their members are (Heb. 13:17).

If we are going to labor successfully, we must do it at the local level under the oversight of faithful elders. There is only one church of the New Testament, but many local congregations of the Lord's people throughout the world. If we desire to grow the church, it must be done at the local level. The hard work and dedication required can only be attained when each Christian places his or her membership with a local congregation and engages wholeheartedly in the work there.