

Members Of The Church

This is an unscriptural subject! The Scriptures do not speak of members of the church!

Is that an oversight of Inspiration? Is it a translating error? Is it a matter of indifference? Am I just being picky to draw attention?

The first use of the word “church” after its beginning on Pentecost is in Acts 2:47 in the King James Version. It says, “*And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.*” But the word “church” was supplied by the translators. Other versions are similar to the American Standard Version in stating, “*And the Lord added to them day by day those that were saved.*” But the ASV has a footnote on the “to them” explaining that the Greek word is “together.” THE LORD ADDED TOGETHER THE SAVED.

To what did God add the saved? Nothing! They, by accepting Christ, became the “ekklesia,” the called out, the saved, the congregation, the assembly of God. God did not add them to an organization. The saved people do not comprise an organization. An organization has members and may be joined, or expelled from, but people do not join salvation. They are saved when they receive remission of sins like those added together on Pentecost (Acts 2:38-47). They are “joined to the Lord” (1 Cor. 6:17). That is accomplished when one is baptized into Christ (Gal. 3:27; Rom. 6:3). Thus the center is Christ, not an organization of people, and emphatically not a denomination. People are not baptized into the church but into Christ, though it is commonly believed that persons are baptized into a church organization.

It is a serious misunderstanding to think a person is saved and then may join the church by meeting requirements for baptism specified by a denomination. If a person is saved, he is already included in the “ekklesia” so it becomes presumptuous to try to join the church later and establish membership.

If belief puts one into Christ, then it would be impossible to be baptized into Christ. As a person who is already in a house cannot then enter into the house; so a person already in Christ cannot be baptized into him. If faith alone saved those on Pentecost, then they could not be baptized for the remission of sins like Peter instructed them. God has chosen faith to change the mind, repentance to change the life, and baptism to change the relationship.

God adds together universally those whom he saves. He does not add them to the Baptist Church, the Presbyterian Church, the Catholic Church, the Church of Christ, the Unitarian Church, or any other. The saved comprise the universal church, or congregation of God, which has no organized form. These disciples may assemble in local groups designated by location, like the church at Corinth, without distinguishing themselves from other disciples.

Those who are saved usually join a congregation which is organized by “identifying” with it or “placing membership” in it, but the Lord does not add them to it. Some of those congregations are independent groups of disciples meeting together while others are parts of a structured denomination or sect. Any group, claiming to be a part of the whole church, which gives itself a name to distinguish itself is a denomination. To denominate means to name. Any association of congregations claiming to be the whole church, that is, “the one true church,” is a sect. God does not add believers to them but they are joined by sincerely misguided people. A person is not saved by being a member of a church but may be saved by grace in spite of it.

For many years I correctly understood that I was added to the universal congregation of the saved. I made the claim, however, as many sincere people do, that I never joined a church. I concluded, therefore, I was not a member of a denomination! True, I never joined the universal church, but I joined various organized groups in different cities that were distinguished from other organized groups. That was done after the Lord had added me to his congregation. We even had a multiplicity of choices of Churches of Christ that recognized no fellowship with each other for me to choose from. The Lord did not add us to those various Churches of Christ; we joined them. We became members of them! We identified with them. We called it “placing membership” so as to avoid the idea of joining the groups. But we were fooling nobody but ourselves.

The popular concept of church membership has fostered another subtle misdirection -- that our worship and work is centered in organized religion. And that is associated with a physical building and an organized program of a group meeting there. Too easily we come to think of assignments in the assemblies as our spiritual work and the corporate worship as the extent of our worship. We can do this while giving lip-service to the concept of whole life worship and service. This church-centered concept of ministry has led many to disparage private ministry as being a form of rebellion against the congregation.

Having been nurtured in the idea, I taught for many years that one’s good deeds should be done “in the name of, or through, the church” so Christ would receive the glory. But Jesus told disciples, not churches, to give a cup of cold water in his name. However, we as individuals do not have time and money to extend merciful aid because we have expended all our time and money supporting the burdensome system on which we have come to depend to extend the merciful aid -- if there is any money left and hired personnel to do it. We cannot help because we have already “given to God” our resources like those rebuked by Jesus (See Mark 7:8-11). The monstrous organized system has eaten up our resources and pirated our ministries. Even if that be judged as an over-statement, the point still stands.

After my wife’s recent death, I received numerous cards, notes, and loving expressions from you and also some from my insurance company and a few other social and service

agencies. Do I have to tell you which were more meaningful to me? Point made! Must I argue further?

Admitting that some worthy causes are too big for individuals without cooperation with others, we must ask if the glory goes more to the church name under which the work is done than to Christ. Are good deeds done by the organization intended to advertise the church or Christ? If they are done to advertise Christ, why do we not just do them in the name of Christ? It is hardly proper to prostitute good works to promote organized partisan religion.

Classes are taught, seminars are conducted, and books are written instructing us as to how to make the church grow. Wonder why Paul did not write an epistle on that theme? These teachers are promoting the growth of an organization. Luke tells us how the church grows. He said the Lord added daily to the saved others that were being saved. That is the secret of church growth!

Because we have come to depend upon the super-market for our food, most of us do not bother to try to raise any of it ourselves. Likewise, because we have come to depend upon an organized system to evangelize, our tendency is to abandon individual responsibility for evangelizing. Then we wonder why the church does not grow.

Organized religion tries unsuccessfully to conceal its ugly underbelly of church politics -- the perpetual power struggle among its leaders, both in local groups and in structured denominations..

Now, do you agree that there is sufficient reason why “members of the church” are not mentioned in the Scriptures?

“But wait!” you may be objecting, “The church is called the body of Christ, and the Scriptures speak of ‘members of the body.’” That is true, but let’s deal with that in our next lesson, if the Lord wills.

(Cecil Hook; July 2003) []