

What should a church member be? (1) Someone Who Believes.
31st August, '03 Isaiah 40:25-31 /Acts 17:16-24

School's back – tomorrow, in case you didn't know!
And Church is back to!. Even though we never really close, this time of the year is really like the beginning of term in church life, as well as in school – Soon we'll be right back to the full programme of all our services, organisations and activities. Therefore, I thought that this would be a good time for us to remind ourselves about the basics of being church members. *What should a Church Member be?* is the title of the little leaflet which is in your seat today. It has been produced by PCI, and it covers the most essential aspects of being a church member. My idea is that we'll think about the various headings in this leaflet over the next month – morning and evening – and that it will be a good start to the church year for all of us – that it will help us to think about our church membership. So I hope that you will take one of these leaflets, read it and use it during this series of services. We'll try to have some available next week and beyond – only please don't take a new one each week!
So today, we want to think about the first heading –:

A Church Member is Someone Who Believes.

I want us to ask ourselves 3 simple questions about this:

- *Believes in Whom?*
- *Believes in What Sort of Way?*
- *Believes How Well?*

1. Believes In Whom?

Nearly everybody believes in God in some sort of way – they have some kind of belief about 'God', about 'Life', about 'the Universe' – but this does not necessarily make their beliefs 'Christian', and it certainly doesn't always make them church members in any meaningful way. When we talk about 'believing' we need to be a bit more definite about what we mean.

If I went down the street in Ballyclare, doing a survey, I don't think I would meet so very many people who said that they definitely did not believe in 'God' – but they might have a great

variety of ideas about God, and many of them might not be particularly active members of any church.

- In any town, I could certainly find people whose 'believing' mainly comes to the fore at the key moments of life – the birth of a baby, a marriage in the family, the shock/sadness of a death. At those times, most people usually want there to be a religious dimension that brings God into their situation.

- Or I might meet some people who would say, "Yes, I believe in God, but I have my own personal ideas about Him, and they don't always involve church life and worship.

- And, of course, in our increasingly multi-cultural society, we are much more conscious of the other, great world religions, with their very different ideas about 'god'.

So when say that *a church member is someone who believes* we really do need to pin down what we mean. We need to be a bit more definite. We need to answer this question which is our first heading for today, ***Believe in Whom?***

It's a bit like saying, 'Yes, I believe in healthy eating', because for that statement to have any meaning or value, we need to spell out what we mean by healthy eating is it eating lots of fruit and veg, is it eating organic food, is it the Atkins diet etc etc?

In an even more important way, while we may say that 'we believe in God', we need to go on to clarify what we mean – we need to be clear about who this God is that we say we believe in – what are the essential things we need say about him – because our modern world gives us many alternatives and possibilities, and sometimes the most common approach is to keep it all very vague - sometimes 'god' can be almost anything you want him to be!

However, people have always had many and varied notions about 'god'. Our reading from Acts told us about all the varied religious ideas in ancient Athens, when Paul, the great Christian missionary, came to that city. What he found and what he had to say may very well be helpful to us, as we think about 'Believing'. In Acts 17, Paul tells us about a city that was absolutely full of religious signs and symbols. Everywhere he went in Athens, it

was very apparent that religion was extremely important in the lives of the citizens; there were religious buildings and signs of religious loyalties all over the city. So therefore, it is maybe worth listening again to what he said to the people in the great central city square:

Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: 'To An Unknown God'. So there wasn't much doubt about it – people in Athens certainly 'believed'.

However, from what Paul went on to say to them, it is clear that he felt that there was something very important missing from their believing – he didn't want them just to continue with this vague and varied sort of believing. It was almost a sawn-off shotgun approach to 'god'! If you had enough different altars and idols you were nearly sure to hit the right one!

Here is what Paul God said to them:

What you worship as something unknown, I am going to proclaim to you.

And so Paul began to speak to them about one particular God, one clear way of thinking about God – one true way of believing in God.

He told them that there were a whole range of different 'gods' who were mainly the creation of the human imagination, but that there is one God who has created everything, who is sovereign ruler over all, who *gives all men life and breath and everything else.*

He began to speak to them about how this true and living God has declared his reality and his truth in one key person, and in the events and achievements of that one key person's life – the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – *the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.* He tried to get them to understand that believing that was going to be any good had to be believing in this God, and in this man, Jesus Christ.

This is a very important point that we are thinking about. In lots of ways, it is quite attractive to think that we all have to work out our own thoughts about 'god' and our own ideas about 'believing'. On the surface it is attractive to say that all religions and all 'gods' are really the same – that there are just cultural variations in the way we think about god and worship him. But the Bible, if it is to be our guide – and surely it must be – simply does not allow for this approach. It is clear and firm in telling us that there is one God, that he is known and believed in through faith in Jesus Christ, and that we need to believe in him in the proper way. It does not allow for a DIY approach to believing, or for a 'pick and mix' style of religion.

Let me just 'hammer' this point home by mentioning a few of the multitude of places in the Bible that makes this point.

- In the OT, we read the very strong words from Isaiah 40, which match those in Ps.96:5 *for all the gods of the nations are idols, but the Lord made the heavens* - No room for doubt or vagueness there!
- In the Gospels, Jesus' final command to his disciples is that they should preach the Christian Gospel of God, and seek to make people, in all nations, disciples of Jesus – No suggestion there of leaving everyone to their own ideas and their own religions.
- In Acts 4:12, Peter proclaims this unambiguous and uncompromising message: *Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven, given to men by which we must be saved.*

So I think the basic point is very clear and strong in the Bible – when we say that we 'believe', it can't just be 'any believing', it must be 'true believing' in the true God

This is almost certainly where we must begin when we run the test on our believing. What are the marks of true believing?

In Paul's preaching at Athens, they were these:

1. True Believing is believing in the God we meet in Jesus Christ.

2. True believing is believing in the God who raised Christ from the death of the Cross.
3. True believing is believing in the God who has appointed Jesus as the final Judge of all the world.
4. True believing is believing in the God to whom Jesus points us – the God of Creation, the God of Love, the God of Hope.

Any other sort of believing is not really Christian believing at all. We must not play down or miss out on these vital ingredients. When the ancient words of the Apostles' Creed begin, *I believe in God.....*, these are the essentials which it lists. Of course there are, and always will be, many secondary matters on which Christians will have differing points of view – but here are the foundations. Here are the markers by which you and I must test ourselves when we say 'We believe'. This is the God in whom members of the Christian Church believe.

Apostles' Creed.

Part 2

2. We need to believe the right things about God, but there is a further very critical question that we need to think about. When we say that a church member is *someone who believes* in the way that we've already outlined, we need to go on to ask ourselves: ***Believes in What Sort of Way?***

Think about this silly illustration: I might believe, with absolutely no doubts, that Portrush is a great place for holidays, but if my believing this about Portrush does not persuade me to actually go to Portrush for my own holidays, it won't matter terribly much what I believe.

In the same way, only at a much more serious level, what I believe about God must impact my life at a personal level. Believing the right things about the God who has declared himself in Jesus Christ, must persuade me to commit myself personally to Jesus Christ.

Believing involves personal faith and life commitment – otherwise, even though I genuinely believe the right things about

God, I remain my own man or woman, whereas the Bible teaches us that someone who believes in the Christian way is Christ's man or woman.

Put yourself, for a moment, in one of the great crowds that often surrounded Jesus when he was teaching and preaching and healing. There weren't too many in those crowds who were not greatly impressed by what they saw and heard from Jesus – they *believed* in him at that level. However when it came to the stage, as it often did, when Jesus called people to make up their minds about following him, many in the crowd quickly and quietly drifted away – only some made the crucial personal choice to follow Jesus.

This is the crucial personal choice that everyone, since Jesus' first disciples, has to make. Do you remember how he put it to them: *The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news ... Come, follow me.*

Each of us has to hear this personal call from Jesus, and we have to make our own personal response. It is a response that involves us in careful thought with our minds, but it is also a response that comes from the deepest places of our hearts, and it is a response which leads on to practical commitment of our everyday lives.

Over and over again, the Bible pages, which are our foundation for believing in Jesus, make this call very clearly and very strongly:

Do you remember the occasion when Jesus asked Peter, *Who do you say that I am, what do you believe about me?* And Peter said that he believed Jesus to be the Christ from God, to which Jesus replied, *If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me* i.e. Anyone who says that about me, needs to start to follow me.

There is a clear sense of making it personal and making it definite. And this is a very critical matter for everyone of us. It couldn't be put more plainly than in the famous 3rd chapter of John's Gospel: *God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son so that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.* From these verses, of which this is the most famous,

it is clear that personal trusting in Jesus as Saviour, is the make or break issue upon which our eternal well-being depends: *Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him.*

This is about personal believing and trusting in Jesus, and it is vitally important. We all know our own position – really nobody else knows fully, outside ourselves and God. We need to make sure that we have answered the call of Jesus upon our own lives. It may not always have been an outwardly dramatic deciding moment in our lives, but it needs to be inwardly definite, as the Holy Spirit helps us to see and understand and put our trust in Jesus.

When Paul, the early Christian preacher, taught the Gospel the climax to his message was always an urgent call to people to make their believing personal – like this one: *We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God We urge you not to receive God's grace in vain.* (2 Cor.5-6)

It is possible to believe the right things about God, but to miss the right way of personal trust – that is what Paul means by *receiving God's grace in vain*. A church member needs to be someone who believes through personal trust in Christ.

It is so very important that we get this right in our own lives. Have I? Have You?

2. There's one last, quick thought for today. We need to believe the right things about God; we need to believe in the right way, but so often we find ourselves **wondering if we have really believed well enough**. This is our last point about a church member being someone who believes. **How well do we have to believe for it to be true believing?**

I can't think of any better place in the Bible for an answer to this question, which troubles most of us at times, than Mark 9: 24. A man has come to Jesus for help with his Son's epileptic-like illness. As Jesus speaks to him about believing, the man says, *I do believe, help me overcome my unbelief.*

Isn't that how we sometimes feel about ourselves – we do trust sincerely in Jesus as our saving helper and hope from God, but we know only too well that we often don't trust in him very well and we often let him down very badly. We know ourselves only too well. We feel exactly like that man, *I do believe, help me overcome my unbelief.*

The good news is that that man's simple but sincere believing was all that Jesus looked for – the honest, humble trust of his heart, the recognising of his sinful life and his need of Jesus' help. This is good news indeed – for this is all that Jesus asks of anyone.

Through simple trust in Jesus, anyone and all of us may come to God, like another man that Jesus once spoke about. In contrast to other people who felt reasonably happy with their lives and religious credentials, this man simply came before God with the following prayer: *God have mercy on me a sinner.*

God is merciful to everyone who comes to him like that – looking to Jesus as their forgiveness and their help and their hope. A church member is someone who believes in this way – even though, of course our believing should always make us want to learn to worship and pray and know something more of the Bible, so that we will be able to trust and follow Jesus better.

So there it is: A Church Member is Someone who Believes:

- Believes in the God who declares himself in Jesus.
- Believes in this Jesus in a definitely personal way.
- Believes, often not very well, but always with a committed desire to follow Jesus better.

Am I this kind of church member? Are You?

If we get this right so much else will fit into place, and everything else will sort itself out.