

What should a church member be? (4)

14th Sept. '03am

Someone Who Belongs.

Psalm 122

Ephes.4:1-16

One summer during the years when I was a ministry student, I worked in a seaside congregation that is not a million miles away – but it wasn't Portrush or Portstewart! As well as helping the minister, generally, my main job was to visit the numerous caravan sites, making contact with the holiday folk, trying to encourage them to come along to the Sunday Services in the church. It was a great summer which I thoroughly enjoyed – I soon got to know the people who came down to their caravans nearly every week-end, because I was round all the sites most weeks, and many of them every Friday and Saturday. As I talked to people, I heard about all the various churches they belonged to at home, and I met people from many denominations, and I was usually able to tell them where they could find their particular kind of church – and almost without exception, I received a good welcome and words of appreciation for calling, and lots of cups of tea. And, of course, it made it all the more worthwhile when I saw some of the folk I had visited during the week at church on the Sunday!

There was one particular man whom I met during that summer - I remember him quite clearly because he had ideas about belonging to a church that I had never really come across before – he was friendly and we had a long conversation over a cup of tea - I'm not at all sure that he had the right idea about belonging to a church – but I probably didn't give him a very good answer at the time – I'm the sort of person who often thinks about what I should have said about 3 hours later!

He felt that he didn't need to belong to any church – that he was a Christian and that was all that really mattered. He may have gone to services in various churches or halls, but he was inclined to see problems with them all, and therefore he didn't join any particular church. He was content to have his own personal faith

and to feel that he belonged, in a general sort of way, to the Church of Christ in heaven and on earth – ‘the church of the firstborn’ were his words.

Now I’m pretty sure that he hadn’t got it right – that he’d made quite a serious mistake in his understanding of Christian faith, and the Christian Church. Probably not too many people are quite like him, but maybe we don’t always think through what it means to ***belong to the church*** – and that’s the title for today’s section of this leaflet, *What should a church member be?* (Copies still available today if you haven’t yet got one.)

It says that they should be *someone who belongs*.

And the basic idea is that we need to be part of an actual local church – a church that is our church – a church where we belong, where we worship, where we are committed together as part of a Church family, where we are actively involved, to which we give our basic first loyalty. Although we are probably not like the man I met on the caravan site, maybe we sometimes do need to think this through properly.

A church member should be someone who belongs.

1. Firstly, we need to say that ***Belonging is not always the same as ‘Belonging’*** - - there’s an Irish sermon heading if ever there was one! But it is true to say that ‘belonging’ to a church can mean different things to different people.

a) Sometimes people say that they belong to such and such a church, and what they mean is that this is the church that they are connected to, the church that they maybe have envelopes for, and the church that they would contact if they were in hospital etc, but this doesn’t necessarily mean that they are regular worshippers or involved members in that church – ‘belonging’ for some people is essentially about a general connection with a church and with membership on its records and lists. There is probably quite a lot of ‘belonging’ to churches that falls into this sort of category to a greater or lesser degree.

b) For many other people, ‘belonging’ to a church means

being a regular worshipper at that church, and being very much part of the church family, with a fairly high level of loyalty, and some degree of active involvement in its activities. Thankfully, we can say that there are a lot of people in our church who fall into this category.

So ‘belonging’ doesn’t always mean the same thing. And the question is, *if a church member is someone who belongs*, what sort of ‘belonging’ are we talking about?

When the Bible is speaking about the Church there isn’t really one main Bible section that we can turn up for the answers, but there are lots and lots of places where the answer crops up, intertwined with other teaching and topics. The Bible often uses picture language to describe the church.:

- It speaks about the church as a Family (1 Tim.3:5), in which people belong in a significant way, like the members of our own families – you don’t normally just belong to your family as a name on a list! And, as in ordinary families, the members of the church family should meet together, often, for worship (Acts 2); it should be a family where there are caring friendships of practical love and support, and those who belong to the church family should be growing together friendships of faith.

- Sometimes the Bible refers to the church as a Building, in which the people are like the stones in the walls, all counting, all needed. Indeed Ps. 122 which we read describes the people of God, the Church, as a city, greatly loved by its people – people who have a deep commitment to it and to its needs.

- One of the most common pictures of the Church is the picture of a Body – a human body, closely connected together (the old song about the bones joined together), where each part of the body has a unique importance and significance. Out of all the ‘body’ passages, we read Ephes. 4, which is a description of life in the church at Ephesus, and of the way Paul wanted the church to be. He tells them that their faith is very much about belonging together in this body, the church – in his words, *so that*

the body of Christ may be built up, until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God, becoming mature ... the whole body joined and held together... growing and building itself up in love.

So you can see that this picture of ‘belonging’ doesn’t really match the idea of simply ‘belonging ‘ to a church on paper! This kind of belonging just isn’t much good – to us, or a Church, or to God. Maybe our church membership system has a weakness here – maybe it works too much on the basis of names on books and envelopes issued. I think I’m right in saying that in Scotland, in Presbyterian churches (C of S), the people who are called ‘members’ are only the Communicants – those who have made profession of their faith – and other people are called ‘adherents’ i.e. there is a clear distinction between belonging and being connected. Maybe that is better – for *belonging*, in any proper Biblical sense really means regular worship, glad involvement and lively commitment in the family of the church – the gist of the promises that all Communicants must accept.

Now obviously, much of this doesn’t really apply to us here in church – our belonging means more than having our names on a list somewhere. However this matter is a challenge for us:

- It’s a very concerning challenge about the many other members of our church, or other churches, who are content with a belonging that is not much more than a name on a list. Maybe we have family or friends and neighbours who are in that category. Maybe, underneath the surface of their inactive church membership, there is quite a serious matter of Christian faith that is not real or alive in their lives – maybe their lives are outside the true hope of Christ. If we care about them, this should be a real challenge for us – something for us to try to do something about.

- Maybe there is even a challenge for us. Is our ‘belonging’ like the belonging that Paul encourages the Ephesians to aim for – where they really were wanting to grow in faith and in loving

support for each other, and in service. Maybe sometimes, our belonging is a bit too limited and a bit too outward.

I am always delighted when new people ask to belong to our church – it's always great to have the privilege and opportunities of contact with them, and it is wonderful to see new people who join our church coming to belong in this proper sense.

However maybe we need to emphasise to some folk who are happy to settle for a weaker form of belonging that it really needs to mean worship and involvement in the family of the church, more than putting our names on the books.

If we can help friends or neighbours to make a start in church life – encouraging them to come to activities and services around the church, helping them to get to know people and feel that they are very much among friends who belong to a big family, it will sometimes be the case that these are the crucial steps in helping them to 'belonging and 'believing' in a deeply real and personal way – it has been shown in church studies *that 'belonging sometimes comes before believing'*, and leads on to it – but for this to be happening, we who do believe and belong need to be very active in our welcomes and our friendship towards new people.

2. So the first point this morning is that we need to make sure we know what we mean by 'belonging'. A church member is someone who belongs, and there is a second point about this that is important for us to think about:

Believing is not quite the same as Belonging .

'Believing' people really do need to be 'belonging' people – being a Christian is about coming to a personal, inward trust in Christ as Saviour and Lord, but such believing ought always to involve belonging – it doesn't stop with us as individual Christians – we need to become fully part of a local family of the church – benefiting from such belonging and putting something into such belonging.

Remember my caravan friend – he felt that his personal Christian believing did not need to lead on to any definite belonging to a local church – and I think he was wrong.

Take a minute to think about how the Bible refers to the Church.

- Sometimes it is talking about the whole church of Christ; past, present and future; in heaven and on earth – Matt. 16:18 *‘I will build my church, said Jesus, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.’* Or, Ephes. 4: 4 *‘one body, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith one baptism*

- But, as well as this ‘big picture’ of the Church, the Bible also talks about ‘the church’, as being local, the church in one particular place, and in which the Christian people of that place are to ‘belong’. If you have a chance, sometime, look up the opening verses of most of the letters of Paul – you’ll find that they are addressed to particular local churches, and they go on to address the people in that particular situation – so the implication is that individual Christians ought to belong to a church in their own particular community.

- like the beginning of 1 Cor. where Paul writes to *the church of God in Corinth*, or in Philippians 1, to *the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi together with the overseers and deacons* – he is clearly referring to a local church to which people belong, to which they are committed, and in which there are leaders who carry responsibility.

- and in our reading from Ephesians 4 where we’ve already noticed him talking about *the body of Christ being built up in faith and in love*.

- or at the end of Romans where Paul actually mentions the names of many of the people who belonged to the church at Rome, and who were involved in its life and work.

So that while it is crucial for us to be able to say that we believe in Christ as Saviour and Lord, and are therefore part of the Church of Christ in heaven and on earth, the Biblical pattern seems to indicate that such believing ought to lead us into

belonging to an identifiable local family of the church, in a tangible, practical way – like the very first beginnings of the Church in Acts 2 where the Christians were committed to each other for worship, as well as in Christian friendship and caring. Now I think that we sometimes need to think about this more than we do.

Maybe sometimes we can be a bit too individualistic about our Christian faith – we are glad to be people of Christian faith, and we love to worship with other people – but sometimes we don't commit ourselves to a particular church. Sometimes there are maybe special reasons for that, but being a Christian is not meant to be so individualistic – it's meant to be about belonging – it's a corporate, 'together' thing as well as an individual thing – a church is meant to be a family to which we commit, not just a place to which we go for worship.

Maybe what stops us from committing wholeheartedly to a particular local church is that we're never quite sure which one – we see some strengths and aspects that attract us in almost all of them, but we also see weaknesses and ways of doing things that we aren't so sure about – and so we don't commit ourselves to any! Maybe indeed, some people never really settle into a church family where they give their loyalty and commitment.

Ministers need to be the first to recognise that churches are not perfect – far from it. Most churches have their blind spots and weak areas, and Ballyclare Presbyterian Church is no different from the rest! But whatever church we are talking about, if we wait until we find the church that seems just right in nearly every way, we'll probably wait a very long time. You know the old wise-crack that when we find the perfect church and join it, it will no longer be perfect because we've joined and brought our own imperfections and flaws with us!

Maybe this point about believing people needing to be belonging people is a helpfully important one at this time of the year.

- i) It's a reminder to us all about the importance of really

being part of the church family – don't stay on the edge as an individual – it's far better to become part of the Christian friendship and encouragement that comes to us when we commit ourselves as part of the church family. I think that many of us have proved this for ourselves. It's important that we who are in the family make it as easy as possible for you to be part of the family also – churches must never be little 'in-groups of friends' – but it is also necessary for you to take accept the encouragement and take the opportunity – and I promise you, you'll get so much more for your faith and life as a Christian by doing so – that's the way it's meant to be, as the family of the church, the body of Christ.

ii) This point about believing needing belonging is also an encouragement, an invitation, to you if you been thinking about belonging, but have not done anything definite yet. I fully recognise that it is important to think carefully before we commit ourselves to any church family. We need to decide on the right one for us to belong to, and often it takes a while to commit to a church family when you move into a new area – but I don't think that it is something anyone should put off indefinitely – I hope that here in Ballyclare we are reasonably welcoming to those who come to our church, and we are keen to encourage people to become part of the church family – to 'belong', without ever putting anyone under pressure.

iii) And, if we are people of faith in Jesus – maybe have been for a good while – we need to make sure that our believing is moving us on to belonging in the full sense – as Communicants – they are not people who are special Christians – they are people who are definite believers – and definite believers ought to belong fully to Christ's church so let me encourage you in this way, so that the next time we have a Communicants/Church Membership class, you really give it serious consideration Or if you were a communicant member in a previous church, you take steps to become one here by the transfer process.

So a church member is someone who belongs :

i) 'Belonging' is not just the same as 'belonging'.

ii) Nor is 'believing' quite the same as 'belonging'.

We need to 'belong and believe'; we need to 'believe and belong'. Whether belonging or believing comes first will vary from person to person, but both are very important for us and for our families.

If we had time we should go on to talk about how belonging is also about more than receiving benefit for ourselves and our families from our belonging – that it is about putting something back into the life and work of the church family – just as Ephes. 4 talks about everyone using their gifts and abilities within the body of Christ, the Church. We haven't time to talk about that today, but it's covered in other parts of the leaflet, and we'll mention it in other sermons.

Meanwhile, today, let's go home thinking about what kind of 'belonging' describes us.

- let's make sure that it isn't mainly *the name on the lists sort of 'belonging'*, but something much better, more significant, and more enriching for faith.

- Let's make sure that it's not *believing but not really ever committing to a local church sort of 'belonging'* - but rather really becoming part of the church family – the body.

- Maybe even think about why we are not belonging fully as Communicant members, if we are people who are believing by faith in Jesus.

This leaflet suggests that, *'we live in an age where commitment to the local church is not a high priority for many Christians.* Let's make sure that is not true of us. Instead let's be like how it suggests it should be: *Christians have fellowship with one another. Their local congregation will have their first and greatest support, because that is where god has placed them.*