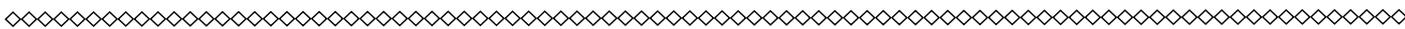




Pastor of the
International
Baptist Church
in Cologne Ger-
many.

Sermon Brief
Text: Acts 2:41-42
Title: Joining the Church
Lorin L. Cranford

Seeking to faith-
fully proclaim
the whole coun-
cil of God in
scripture!



INTRODUCTION

“How does one join the church?” This is a question that has been asked of me quite a number of times over the past year. Quite frankly, I must confess a bit of surprise, because from my background in Baptist churches in the United States, this is a seldom asked question. The reason: virtually everyone already knows the answer, whether one is a church member or not. There’s a certain way one joins the Catholic Church; another very different way if one is joining a Lutheran church. And a very common way if one is joining a Baptist, Methodist or Presbyterian church in the US. Over the past year or so while living here I have come to realize just how much confusion exists in European life about church membership, and especially about how to join a church. Within the established Free Churches, such as Baptists, Methodists etc. the process is somewhat similar to that in the United States. But public awareness of that process hardly exists here, in contrast to the US.

Consequently, I will be touching on the theme of church membership from time to time from the pulpit in order to throw as much light on the subject as possible. Today, we focus on how to join a Baptist church. And in particular, how to join the IBC church Cologne. Our process is spelled out in detail in both the church constitution and in the official church policy manual. It is based upon biblical principles and Baptist heritage. Hopefully from the sermon today, a much greater understanding of this will come about.

The Christian church had its formal beginning during the Jewish festival of Pentecost in AD 30. The group of disciples that Jesus had pulled together over three plus years of ministry numbered 120 individuals. They formed the core of the church that God used to start the Christian movement in Jerusalem. On Pentecost, God exploded the church with three thousand new members in just a few days. When the apostle Peter finished his sermon (Acts 2:14-40), a large number of individuals responded to his preaching. Luke summarizes this in two short verses, vv. 41-42. Listen to his summation:

41 So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. 42 They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.¹

What a beginning! But it was for a specific purpose. The majority of these people were not residents of Jerusalem. They were Jewish pilgrims who had come to Jerusalem in order to celebrate the Jewish festival of Pentecost.² They would be in Jerusalem only for a brief period before returning back home. But now those who were among the five thousand Christian converts would return home with a totally new religious experience and outlook. They would become critically important agents to plant new Christian congregations in many places within the Roman empire. Most scholars, for example, are convinced that the church at Rome had its beginning with Jewish Christian converts returning home from Jerusalem after the festival of Pentecost. So these new converts would need a crash course in discipleship in order to be able to carry the gospel back home with them. But also a large number of these new converts were residents of Jerusalem and thus would form the ongoing Christian community in Jerusalem with the 120 disciples under the leadership of the apostles. They also would need a lot of training in order to understand the implications of this new religious movement they had joined.

From these verses there are two points about joining the church that I want to emphasize this morning. Each of these points will be supplemented from sources out of our Baptist heritage and history that help understand how Baptists have traditionally understood church membership.

The idea of church membership has taken on more precise definition over time, in large part after

¹GNT: 2.41 οἱ μὲν οὖν ἀποδεξάμενοι τὸν λόγον αὐτοὺς ἐβαπτίσθησαν καὶ προσετέθησαν ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ ἐκείνῃ ψυχὰι ὡσεὶ τρισχίλιαι. 2.42 ἦσαν δὲ προσκαρτεροῦντες τῇ διδαχῇ τῶν ἀποστόλων καὶ τῇ κοινωνίᾳ, τῇ κλάσει τοῦ ἄρτου καὶ ταῖς προσευχαῖς.

²Note vv. 9-11 which lists fifteen different regions in the Mediterranean world from which these Jewish pilgrims had come from:

9 Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, 11 Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.”

Christianity became a legalized religion³ in the Roman Empire in the 300s under Emperor Constantine with the Edict of Milan in 313. The impact of now being able legally to own property, to receive financial support from the government etc. forced Christianity to define more precisely and, often times legally, exactly what was meant by church membership, and the process of joining a church. In most countries of the world today, in order to gain legal status as a church the congregation must spell out in precise terms who a member of the church is, and how one both joins the church, and how membership in the church is terminated. In Germany this is required mainly through the church belonging to an officially recognized Christian denomination. Apart from this, the church can't buy property, enter into legal contracts etc., and individuals donating to the church cannot count their donations as tax exempt contributions to a church.

For our church, this means membership in two Baptist denominations. Because our church was founded by, and has been financially and otherwise supported by, the International Baptist Convention since its beginning over twenty years ago, we hold membership in this Baptist denomination.⁴ But membership in the IBC does not within itself give us legal standing in Germany.⁵ It is our membership in the German Baptist Union, der Bund Evangelisch-Freikirchlicher Gemeinden Deutschland (BEFGD), that gives us legal standing as a congregation under German law.⁶ This is what enables us to own property, enter into legal contracts, count donations as tax deductible etc. But the demands of German law have an impact on the defining of church membership and the process of joining a church. German law does not dictate who a member of the church is, or how one joins the church. But it does require that a church have these matters clearly spelled out in its constitution and by-laws. Each church is free to define membership according to their denominational heritage and beliefs; but they are required to spell this out clearly in the legal chartering of the congregation in order to obtain legal standing in Germany.

We have the essence of this done in our church, although more work on aspects of this still needs to be done. And over the coming months this will be done, under the guidance of the Church Leadership Team.

Today I want us to focus on two scriptural principles of church membership set forth in Acts 2:41-42.

BODY

I. Church membership is based upon public confession of Jesus in believer's baptism, v. 41

41 So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added.

2.41 οἱ μὲν οὖν ἀποδεξάμενοι τὸν λόγον αὐτοῦ ἐβαπτίσθησαν καὶ προσετέθησαν ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ ἐκείνῃ ψυχαὶ ὡσεὶ τρισχίλιαι.

Luke doesn't spell out the exact procedure for adding these new converts to the believing community in Jerusalem. But he does make it clear that they were added (προσετέθησαν) to this emerging church group. And also, he makes it abundantly clear that it was their public confession of faith in believer's baptism that was the basis for their coming into the Christian community. This was the prerequisite for coming into the Christian community: public confession of Jesus through water baptism. That this practice became the standard is made clear by Luke repeated in Acts. For example, the Ethiopian eunuch asked Philip after receiving instruction on how to become a Christian about being baptized (Acts 8:36-38),

36 As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" 37 38 He commanded the chariot to stop,

³Officially a *religio licita*., in the language of the Roman Empire until the middle ages. Modern German legal regulations are adapted from this ancient pattern in the Roman Empire.

⁴Without this support from the IBC, there would be no English language Baptist church in Cologne. We owe a huge debt of gratitude to the International Baptist Convention. Gladly I can say that we have begun acknowledging that obligation through growing support of the IBC by our church in the past year or so. This support was present during the early period of our church in the 90s, but pretty much died until the past year or so.

⁵The IBC, although with headquarters in Wiesbaden Germany, is not a German based religious organization. With member churches in 27 different countries, it is a global religious organization, rather than a national organization of any single country. Through affiliate relationships with national Baptist denominations and with global Baptist organizations such as the European Baptist Federation and the Baptist World Alliance, its churches have recognition in the various countries. This recognition varies according to the legal regulations of each country. In Germany, for example, the IBC churches in Germany have legal standing through the German Baptist Union, the BEFGD.

⁶The BEFGD is a legally recognized religious organization by German law: "Der BEFG hat die Rechtsform einer Körperschaft des öffentlichen Rechts (K.d.ö.R.)."

and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.

The norm in early Christianity of the apostolic age was that an individual confessed personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and this was made official in the public action of believer's baptism. Clearly from Luke's description in Acts, the early church was made up only of individuals who had publicly confessed faith in Jesus Christ and had followed through on that in believer's baptism. From our text in Acts 2:41, it is clear that such was the requirement before being 'added' to the church.

From our very beginning over 400 years ago in Amsterdam, Baptists have been insistent on a 'believers' church made up only of properly baptized individuals. Historically our roots are in the Anabaptist movement of the 1500s and 1600s on the European continent. The name itself reflects the primary identifying mark of this movement. The insistence was adamant: legitimate baptism as taught in the New Testament was exclusively believer's baptism. Water baptism must be a public confession of one's personal faith in Jesus Christ; this confession can only be made by a believer who understands the redemptive work of Jesus and personally expresses commitment to Jesus as Savior and Lord. No one, including parents, can make a 'proxy' confession for the individual, such as was practiced through 'infant baptism' in the state churches of the time. Although very unpopular at the time, Anabaptists stood unmovable in this conviction even in the face of persecution that led to the execution of some of their leaders by the authorities in western Europe.

Coming out of this stance then was the parallel conviction that a New Testament based church can only be made up of properly baptized believers in Christ. Apart from such confession an individual cannot be a member of the church of Jesus Christ.

Thus in the early 1600s the movement in the English speaking world that came to be called "Baptist" evolved from this beginning in the so-called Radical Reformation.⁷ The first congregation of Baptists was founded in 1609 in Amsterdam and was made up primarily of English refugees who had fled England to avoid persecution from the government and the Church of England. The name 'Baptist' became the primary identifying label of this group, also because of their adamant insistence of believer's baptism as essential for church membership. From this tiny beginning in 1609 under the leadership of John Smyth and then Thomas Helwys, the Baptist movement expanded and grew so that today there are over one hundred thirty five million people world wide who call themselves Baptist. Although many differences in minor aspects of belief exist among this very diverse group of Christians, one of the universal convictions is that of believer's baptism being essential for church membership so that the biblical congregation is a believer's church.⁸

This has been affirmed and reaffirmed repeatedly through the many different 'confessions of faith' adopted by different Baptist groups over the past four hundred years.⁹ Two or three of these confessions have been more widely adopted and have helped shape Baptist thinking more extensively than the others. The Second London Baptist Confession in 1677 (1689) laid a major foundation for Baptists in the United Kingdom early on. In the United States, the so-called Triennial Convention which formed in Philadelphia in 1814 for promoting mission work adopted a short confession of faith as the definition of beliefs to be used in evangelization of the American colonies. It has come to known as the Philadelphia Confession of Faith. The New Hampshire Baptist Confession of Faith adopted in 1833 has played a very influential role in shaping Baptist thinking on the western side of the Atlantic. In the past two centuries the emerging groups of Baptist denominations have typically developed their own confession of faith for use by their distinctive group. The listing of belief topics will mostly be the same, or else very similar. And the statement of belief will be generally similar in the basic expression of belief. The differences normally surface in the detailed depiction of a par-

⁷The nature of this connection between Anabaptists and Baptists is debated among scholars. The heart of the debate is not whether a connection exists; this is universally assumed. The central point of the debate is whether the connection is a ideological or theological connection alone, or whether a historical connection between Anabaptists and Baptists can also be established.

⁸To be certain, in the early years especially different Baptist groups did not always agree on whether the proper mode of baptism was immersion or whether the New Testament also allows for sprinkling candidates. But in either view point, one's baptism was to be a confession of personal faith in Jesus. Among Baptists worldwide today, the virtually unanimous viewpoint is that biblical baptism is only by immersion under water. The sprinkling of candidates does not constitute legitimate believer's baptism. This is even stronger in the rejection of the sprinkling of infants as a supposed baptism.

⁹A Baptist 'confession of faith' looks much like a creed set forth in either Roman Catholic or Protestant tradition. Historically, however, the major difference is that while creeds typically prescribe orthodox belief mandated for members, (inward focus), a 'confession of faith' attempts to explain Baptist belief to those outside the church (outward focus). And in most Baptist groups internal adherence to the parameters of the confession are voluntary rather than mandatory. The expectation is that if a member comes to believe doctrines significantly in conflict with the adopted confession of faith, he or she will have the integrity to disassociate themselves from the Baptist church.

ticular belief, e.g., the nature and role of scripture.¹⁰ Among the official documents of the International Baptist Convention is the “Summary of Basic Beliefs.” The statement on baptism is as follows:

Believer’s baptism as an act of obedience and an expression of a personal commitment to Christian discipleship. The baptism of the believer into and under water “in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit” is symbolic of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ; the end of an old way of life; and the beginning of a new life in Christ. It affirms the Holy Spirit’s work that is already experienced by the believer and this public baptism is an outward visible sign of the ongoing and life-long sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit;

Also set forth is the declaration that “church membership is only for those who can testify personally of God’s saving grace.”

All member congregations in the International Baptist Convention are expected to adhere to these basic guidelines in their belief and practice. The statement of faith in the German Baptist Union is very similar and affirms the same essential historical stance of Baptists.¹¹ The same expectation upon member congregations in the German Baptist Union as in the IBC exists. Congregations holding membership in both Baptist groups then are required to practice believer’s baptism as the foundational requirement for membership in a believer’s church. If a church comes to a different stance and practice, it is expected to have enough integrity and honesty to disassociate itself from these two Baptist groups. Procedures, especially in the German Baptist Union, exist for the denomination to expel congregations from denominational membership when they cease to be Baptist in their practice.

What about the IBC church in Cologne? Are we Baptist in our conviction and practice? The answer to this question is yes! Our church constitution states

Membership is open to all who confess the Lordship of Jesus Christ, who are in agreement with the purpose of this church, and who affirm the spirit of its Covenant. One may join the IBC as a Regular Member or as a Covenant Member. Both are considered “church members”.

As is a common practice among member churches in the International Baptist Convention, our church distinguishes between two levels of membership: that of ‘regular member’ and that of ‘covenant member.’ On this our church constitution states:

Regular Membership

Individuals are received as a Regular member in one of the following ways:

1. By profession of faith in Jesus Christ followed by believer’s baptism;
2. By transfer of membership from another Baptist Church;
3. By affirming that one has personally accepted Jesus Christ and was baptized by immersion as a believing Christian.

Those who wish to transfer from churches which do not observe believer’s baptism will be offered instruction in the meaning of this baptism. Those who feel that to receive believer’s baptism would imply a refutation of their former experience with Jesus Christ may join IBC as Covenant Members on the basis of their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord.

Covenant Membership

Covenant members enjoy the privileges and responsibilities of Regular Members with the exception of voting concerning the dissolution of the church or concerning changes in the Constitution and Bye-Laws. One may become a Covenant Member by declaring his/her intent to participate in the support of this church and its activities without severing relations with another church.

The point of the Covenant Membership status is to allow for limited participation in the life of the church by individuals who have confessed faith in Christ and were sprinkled rather than baptized by immersion on their confession of faith. Also, it helps those who may be living in our region only temporarily such as students and who do not wish to sever ties with their home church. But full membership in the church requires confession

¹⁰Compare the 10 point statement about scripture in the 1814 Philadelphia Confession, to the same topic in the 1689 English Baptist confession, to the 1833 New Hampshire confession, to the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message confession, to the 2008 International Baptist Convention confession.

¹¹The Baptist Principles

Was Baptistengemeinden weltweit verbindet, fassen die Baptist Principles, die baptistischen Grundsätze, zusammen:

- * Die Bibel als Gottes Wort, daher alleinige Regel und Richtschnur für Glauben und Leben.
- * *Die Gemeinde der Gläubigen, daher die Notwendigkeit von Mission und Evangelisation.*
- * *Die Taufe auf das Bekenntnis des Glaubens, daher Verbindung von Taufe und Gemeindemitgliedschaft.*
- * Das allgemeine Priestertum aller Gläubigen, daher keine Ämterhierarchie (Rangordnung).
- * Die Selbständigkeit der Ortsgemeinde, daher kein mit besonderen Befugnissen ausgestatteter kirchlicher Überbau.
- * Glaubens- und Gewissensfreiheit, daher Trennung von Kirche und Staat.

of faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord to be followed by believer's baptism through immersion under water. This is the goal for every member in our church.

From the beginning of our church in 1991, this has been the basis of membership in the church. Unfortunately, the church went through a period from 2001 to 2008 in which we betrayed our Baptist heritage and we abandoned our commitment to New Testament principles. Out of the betrayal came God's judgment upon the church that brought the church very close to closing its doors in March of 2008 with less than ten people left in the congregation. But God used the leadership of the International Baptist Convention to bring us back to our roots in Baptist heritage and biblical principles over the past two years. God's blessings have showered down upon our congregation consequently and the church has experienced miraculous growth and renewed stability in its reaffirmation of biblical principles and its Baptist heritage. Hopefully from this experience we have 'learned our lesson' about the dangers of betraying God's Word and our heritage as Baptists. Should we make that mistake again, I firmly believe that God would permanently close this church as His judgment upon it. Certainly in the current atmosphere of both the German Baptist Union and the International Baptist Convention, disciplinary action against the church would be taken by one, if not both, denominational groups.

Consequently to join the IBC church in Cologne one must profess faith in Jesus Christ as personal Savior and Lord. This confession is made officially through believer's baptism by immersion under water. The symbolism of baptism is to affirm one's belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the basis for salvation. Also it affirms the individual's own personal death to sin and a resurrection to new spiritual life in union with Christ Jesus, as Paul declares in Rom. 6:3-5 (NRSV):

3 Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4 Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. 5 For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

Thus we gladly say to the world, "Come join us, as committed believers in Jesus Christ who boldly confess faith in Jesus Christ through believer's baptism." We take pride in our Baptist heritage, because a major center piece of that heritage is unwavering commitment to follow the teachings of the Word of God.

II. Church membership is a serious commitment to involvement in the church, v. 42

42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

2.42 ἦσαν δὲ προσκαρτεροῦντες τῇ διδασκίᾳ τῶν ἀποστόλων καὶ τῇ κοινωνίᾳ, τῇ κλάσει τοῦ ἄρτου καὶ ταῖς προσευχαῖς.

The second insight from Acts 2:41-42 comes in the second verse with the emphasis upon active participation by these new converts in the life of the church in Jerusalem. The verb 'devoted themselves' used by Luke in the original writing ἦσαν προσκαρτεροῦντες is a special verb construction¹² that underscores dramatically ongoing action. Their confession of faith in baptism launched a vigorous and ongoing participation in the life of the church in Jerusalem. Such participation by baptized believers was the norm and expectation in apostolic Christianity during the first century. Considerable admonition was given to believers to be involved as is reflected in Heb. 10:23-33 (NRSV):

23 Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.

24 And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, 25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching. 26 For if we willfully persist in sin after having received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, 27 but a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. 28 Anyone who has violated the law of Moses dies without mercy "on the testimony of two or three witnesses." 29 How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by those who have spurned the Son of God, profaned the blood of the covenant by which they were sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of grace? 30 For we know the one who said, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay." And again, "The Lord will judge his people." 31 It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. 32 But recall those earlier days when, after you had been enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, 33 sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecu-

¹²In Koine Greek grammar it is known as a 'periphrastic imperfect tense' verb expression. Even more dramatically than the Greek imperfect tense, which in itself stressed continuous action in past time, the periphrastic imperfect construction emphasized the continuous action of the verb. This is what Luke used here.

tion, and sometimes being partners with those so treated.

It wasn't easy to be a Christian in that world. One faced opposition and hostility because of faith in Jesus Christ. The fellowship and encouragement of the church was absolutely essential for a growing and maturing faith. John made it clear that abandoning participation in the church signaled serious spiritual problems; note 1 John 2:18-19 (NRSV):

18 Children, it is the last hour! As you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. From this we know that it is the last hour. 19 They went out from us, but they did not belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us. But by going out they made it plain that none of them belongs to us.

To be a church member from this example clearly means to make a serious commitment to be involved in the life and ministry of the church. This is the expectation of God as is made clear in the Bible. He holds each of us accountable to serve Him faithfully in His church. There is no such thing as 'part time Christianity'! To attempt such is spiritual suicide! And also there is no such thing as Christianity outside church participation! The New Testament accepts no claim to being Christian that is not willing to serve God through His church. This doesn't mean that church membership saves you, as some have mistakenly concluded. But it does mean clearly that true Christianity is serving Christianity and that this can only be done through a community of believers. Lone Ranger Christianity only exists in the heresy of some deluded minds thinking that they don't need a church in order to serve God.

Thus when one becomes a member of our church, the expectation is that this person joins the church in order to actively serve Christ through the ministries of the church. If such is not the case, then the individual should not join the church.

Modern Christianity is often crippled by the presence of large numbers of 'inactive' members. That is, people holding membership in the church but seldom, if ever, show up in the worship services and do little or nothing in serving. This is a huge problem in American Christianity and has made the churches often unable to move forward in real ministry under God's blessings. But in Europe with the long-standing tradition of the state church, the problem is even worse. Though a majority of Germans belong to some kind of church less than ten per cent of them show up at church with any regularity. Even fewer are active participants in the life of the church. According to a recent poll, less than 13% of Germans consider religion of any kind to play an important role in their life.

In the New Testament active participation was expected and required. The pages of the New Testament contain extensive admonitions to serve and honor Christ through active participation in the community of believers. Failure to serve faithfully and movement into improper actions as a Christian could and did bring about disciplinary actions by the church against such members. Although not widely practiced today, it is unquestionably a mandate from God to His church. Most Baptist groups worldwide practice a strict pattern of church discipline. If a church claims to be following the teachings of the Bible seriously, then every effort will be made to keep its members faithfully serving Christ. And this includes disciplinary action when unfaithfulness is present among its members.

This is something our church must seriously consider in the coming days. The Church Leadership Team is considering the teachings of the New Testament at this point, and how to correctly follow the Bible at this point.

CONCLUSION

How then can you join the church? The answer is rather simple, but has profound implications. You must confess personal faith in Jesus Christ. This confession must then be publicly acknowledged through believer's baptism by immersion. The IBC church Cologne is a believers congregation made up of baptized believers in Jesus Christ. This is our heritage as Baptists; this is our conviction of the teachings of the Bible; this is our promise to maintain by our membership in both the International Baptist Convention and to the German Baptist Union.

If you have never publicly professed faith in Jesus and have followed Him in believer's baptism then we invite you today to consider doing this very thing. If at some point earlier in your life these two things you have done, then we invite you to become an official member of our church on this basis by transferring your membership to our church from the one you now belong to. The process is simple and can be done today.

Come, follow the Lord with us! Serve Christ here where you live and work! Be an active, growing Christian in His church.