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Anyone remember the building song, sung to the tune of the, *Here we 'round the Mulberry Bush*, which goes like this?

This Is the Way (We Build a House x2) ..., so early in the morning

Verses: ... hammer the nails ... lay the bricks,
 ... put down floors ... put up walls,
 ... build a roof ... paint the house
 ... we move inside

Anyone remember the Sunday School song:

The foolish man built his house upon the sand, the rains came down, as the floods came up, the foolish man's house went SPLAT!¹

The wise man built his house upon the rock,
the rains came down...as the floods came up,
And the wise man's house stood firm.

There is a Sunday School song with more positive lyrics which reminds us, ***We are the bricks and stones, Lord put us in place where we belong!***

We started with the first set of building blocks, the Holy Spirit, the damp-proof course which protects the building from being destroyed from within, then the second set of building block used in building a Church, **prayer**, the cement, the glue which holds bricks together, preventing the building being destroyed from the outside.

Last Sunday we picked up the third set of building blocks ***We, the Body of Christ***, starting with the role of ***Fellowship*** in the Body of Christ. The dictionary distinguished between a "*community in fellowship*" and a

¹ Matthew 7:24-27

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"Church fellowship", and mixed up their definition. We agreed the former is about preserving the institution of the community, while the Church fellowship is less concerned with institution, and more concerned with people in need.

This distinction is important today, as we examine the role of Membership and Belonging.

Before I go on, I want to make it perfectly clear that I am not leading a rebellion against other denominations of the Christian faith. I value my life and enjoy it very much, and my neck is not long enough to fit a hangman's noose.

Let's also remind ourselves, we cannot amend or change, anything that has happened in history. The past, is in the past; the road from the past to the present is littered with human errors, and when people in the future look back at our time as being in the past, they will also see it littered with human errors.

As a matter of historical record, let's look, *very briefly* at other Church's views of membership.

The core of Catholic Doctrine is that *there is no salvation outside of the Catholic Church*. "Since the latter part of the sixteenth century, the teaching of the best theologians of the (Catholic) Church (is this): the doctrine that the Catholic Church itself is definitely and actually necessary for the attainment of eternal salvation ..."2. Membership in the Catholic Church is attained through the baptism of infants, confirmation as a late teenager, and participation in Catholic Church life including regular

² The American Ecclesiastical Review pp. 39-57. PUBLISHER & DATE: The Catholic University of America Press, July 1961. Found at <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?id=1357>

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church attendance, marriage and, death and burial. To break these laws of membership requires restitution by **doing** things.

The Church of England traces its roots back to the early church, but its specific Anglican identity and its links to the State, date back to the Reformation (1517-1648).

The Church of England has a not too dissimilar stand: you belong to the Church of England by virtue of living within the boundaries of the parish. "The parish structure means that the church is there for everyone. Ideally, everyone in England has a parish priest to whom they can turn. Everyone lives in a parish. This means it's an organisation for everyone, not just believers."³

The Pentecostal Church is an expression of Protestant Christianity, which emphasises the work of the Holy Spirit and the direct, personal experience of the presence of God by the believer. Faith must be powerfully experiential, and not something found merely through ritual. Being present at a Worship gathering where demonstrations of Holy Spirit at work is visible, is as close to membership as they can get.

Reading the book of Acts as a guide to the building blocks of God's Church, is very revealing.

First, the word **membership** is not found anywhere. The idea that those who come into the Christian faith should become members of a Christian institution, is absent.

³ http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/cofe/cofe_1.shtml

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Where the word **member**⁴ is used, it is mostly to identify persons who belonged to one of the Temple's hierarchy power groups: Sanhedrin, Council, Synagogue, pharisees, teachers of the law... member of the army.

It was also used in the context of family, where for example, Cornelius and all the **members** of His family were baptised after him.

Second, the word we **do** find in the book of Acts and several references to it, is the word **belong**, which describes a personal relationship, with a person or an object. A person *chooses* to belong in a relationship with another person or an object/thing. No person or even institution can claim a person to belong to them; to do so is to set up a relationship for abuse. For example, in a marriage relationship, if one partner considers the other to **belong** to them, the potential for abuse is considerable.

To belong is **not** to **possess**; the two are often used interchangeably. To possess expresses the desire to *acquire for the purpose of holding onto; to have and to sit on it (may be not literally!)*.

One of the early mentions of the word **belong**, refers to Saul (before he was renamed Paul) asking the high priest in Jerusalem for letters of introduction to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who **belonged to The Way**, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.⁵

The Way was not an institution, it was more of a movement. In order to identify themselves as followers of Christ, without being obvious and revealing one's identity, **The Way** was an abbreviation of Jesus' declaration to the disciples Thomas and Philip, *"I am the way and the truth and the life.*

⁴ Acts 4:13; 5:17; 6:9; 7:54; 21:38; 22:30; 23:6.

⁵ Acts 9:2

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*No one comes to the Father except through me.*⁶ The Disciples **belonged** to “The Way”, leading them into a deeper relationship with Father God, through Jesus. This is the very essence of the Christian faith. Neither Jesus nor God **possess** us in a way as to control us. The Father has given each of us a free will, and He would rather we choose to **belong** to “The Way” which leads us into His presence.

After the stoning to death of Stephen, the disciples scattered and in a very short time, the followers of Christ, who belonged to “The Way”, started gathering in Antioch, a strategic city in the nook where the southern coast of Turkey on the Mediterranean, turns south. On hearing this news, the elders in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to find out what the bothers and sisters needed. What he saw both frightened him with awe and also encouraged him, so he went off to Tarsus to look for Saul (his hometown), and brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.⁷

From belonging to **The Way**, to being called Christians (people who identified with, followed Christ), and then we read in Acts 12, ... *King Herod arrested some who belonged to **the church**, intending to persecute them.*⁸ The first time **the Church** is used to identify those who gathered as the followers of Christ, living as He taught them, and doing what He asked them to do. Herod caught two disciples, James, the brother of John whom he beheaded, and Peter whom he threw into prison hoping to conduct a similar open, public trial to what Pontus Pilate had done with Jesus. We read, *Peter was kept in prison, but **the church** was earnestly praying to God*

⁶ John 14:6-7

⁷ Acts 11:26

⁸ Acts 12:1

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*for him,*⁹ not a building and not an institution, but people who identified themselves as followers of Christ.

And so it goes through the book of Acts till the end when Paul is being transported back to Rome as a prisoner and the ship hits a horrible storm and the guards think the prisoners will cut loose and flee, Paul tells them, *Last night an angel of the God **to whom I belong** and whom I serve, stood beside me and said, "Do not be afraid, Paul.* Paul chose to belong to God through Christ who saved Him.

The book of Acts is very clear. Jesus did not invite us to be members of a Church; He did not ask us to subscribe to a membership creed, nor to perform rights and rituals in a detached or meaningless fashion. As He did to three fishermen, Peter and James and John, Jesus calls us to follow Him. In obedience, we walk **The Way** we have been shown, which leads us to Truth and the Light of the World.

If each of us were to say, *I **choose to belong** to God through Jesus, because He first loved me,* we would not be wrong. We can then safely say, *"We are members of the Church, because we belong in the Church."* It's not the other way around: first membership, then belonging; for all the right reasons, we **choose** to become members, **because we belong in the Church.**

When you become a member, it's not about what you can get from your membership; you can safely go to Alan and say to him, *I belong in this Church, and I want to exercise my rights of **belonging**, by tithing and giving, all that God has blessed me with - my time, my gifts, my resources and my income.*

⁹ Acts 12:5

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You can safely go to any of the Deacons and say to them, *I belong in this Church; I want to exercise my rights of belonging by helping the Church in any way I can.*

Those who want to become **members** of the Church, have to do things to qualify to be members; we who **belong** in the Church because of our relationship with God through Christ, have nothing to do to qualify to belong. Jesus qualified us by dying on the cross for us.

The Church **doesn't exist**; the Church **lives!** It has life, which is the totality of our lives being lived in the Church, because we belong in the Church, and it is based on the firm and stable relationship we have with God through Jesus. **AMEN.**