

Questions about Membership

Matthew 4:18-22

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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¹⁸As Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. ¹⁹And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” ²⁰Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. ²²Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. (NRSV)

Today Marilyn and I begin a series of three sermons on the topic of church membership and belonging. We’re doing this series with the encouragement of Berkey’s Spiritual Leadership Team, which is a group of five elders who work with our congregation’s mission, vision, and pastoral staff.

Last fall the Spiritual Leadership Team, or SLT for short, began talking about the way we handle membership in our congregation. The impetus for this conversation comes from five places.

1. Our *Constitution* and *Handbook* have some oddities. For example, these documents say that you have to be a member of the congregation in order to serve on a commission or to serve as a JYF or MYF sponsor. Yet oddly, these documents don’t require you to be a member of the congregation in order to teach Sunday school. Why must you be a member to serve on the Fellowship Commission, for instance, but not to teach 3rd graders or high school youth?

2. You might suppose that membership is an open or shut case—you’re either a member of the congregation or you’re not—and that only the members are active in church life. The reality, however, is far more complex. Our *Constitution* allows for both full members and associate members. In practice we don’t distinguish between the two, but the category of associate member allows people to belong here and to another church, even a church of a different denomination. That means you can be both Mennonite and Church of the Brethren, Mennonite and Presbyterian, and so on.

Then there's the fact that we have at least 117 people who are still officially members of Berkey but who no longer participate in any way. Some of them attend other churches and some, I suspect, don't attend church anywhere. About 5-6 years ago the elders tried to "clean up the membership roll," as people call it, but for multiple reasons they soon gave up because the task is so difficult and so fraught with potentially tender dynamics.

We also have dozens of people—many of you sitting here today—who avidly participate in church life but aren't members. You are college and seminary students, maybe here for only 3 or 4 years. Or you're living in the area temporarily, perhaps not for the long haul, and you're not ready to settle into so serious a commitment as church membership. Or you're long-term participants at Berkey, well settled in Goshen, who doubt that official membership is biblically or theologically necessary. Whether you someday become members or not, we're delighted you're here and thankful for how you enrich congregational life. You play instruments and lead singing, read scripture, conduct worship, tend the nursery, teach Sunday school classes, cook meals, serve on ad hoc committees, help out with mission projects, and contribute to the church budget. In point of fact, some of you who do *not* hold membership at Berkey are way more involved in congregational life than some of our resident members.

The Spiritual Leadership Team wonders what to do about this diversity of ways in which people are connected to the congregation. We have members whom we haven't seen in years, members who are marginally active, members who are moderately or highly active, and a large assortment of students and active participants who make significant contributions to the vitality of the congregation. One idea the SLT has batted around is the possibility of holding an annual covenanting service where people commit to the life of the congregation for one year. Some other Mennonite congregations have had this practice since at least the 1980s.¹ The SLT isn't proposing annual covenanting services at this point; but it is an idea they're curious about.

¹ Harold S. Bender and Leland D. Harder, "Church Membership," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. 1989. Web. 16 Jan 2015. http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Church_Membership&oldid=86795.

3. Is membership biblically necessary? Does the Bible require membership as we Mennonites started to practice it sometime in the 20th century? Over the last century or so we've developed a logistical apparatus of maintaining membership rolls, along with informal rules about how official membership should be transferred from one congregation to another. We even have standard forms and procedures for making those transfers. But this logistical apparatus simply isn't in the Bible. Baptism is in the Bible, yes, as well as things like mutual address and accountability within the church. But membership as we currently practice it is not required by scripture.

4. Is membership theologically necessary in our Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition? Without going into a long historical detour here, and without trying to speak about history when I'm not a trained historian, I'll just say that it appears the answer to this question is no. In the words of Leland Harder, a former professor at AMBS, "As functional as the technical definition of church membership is for record keeping and statistical analysis, it is not the best indication either of a person's faithfulness or involvement in the ongoing Christian mission."² In other words, we have membership for organizational reasons. Membership categories give us a way to keep records and analyze statistics, but membership doesn't tell us very much about how committed to Christ a person actually is.

What our theological tradition does value are baptism and daily discipleship. For example, one of our early confessions of faith, the Schleitheim Confession of 1527, talks a lot about baptism into Christ and the necessity of following Christ in daily life, but as far as I can tell there's nothing at all about membership as we think about it today. To put it in different language, we Mennonites care a lot about the quality of our relationships—both our relationship with Christ and our relationships with each other. Compared to the quality of those relationships, the formal category of membership isn't nearly as important. As Jesus says to Simon and Andrew, James and John in Matthew 4, "Follow me!" What matters to us is following Jesus.³

² Bender and Harder, *op cit.*

³ Donald F. Durnbaugh concludes that while Anabaptists and their Mennonite descendants have spent much energy talking about baptism, they have not invested much energy in discussing membership. What

5. The fifth reason for the SLT's conversation about membership is this question. If membership as we've been doing it is not biblically or theologically necessary, then is it culturally necessary? In the last 40-50 years, North American culture has significantly changed. From the late 1800s through the mid-1900s, people in American society, including Mennonites, invested enormous energy into building institutions like colleges, hospitals, mission organizations, and so on. This was also an era when millions of new immigrants came to this country with their unique languages and cultures, including some Mennonites such as those who escaped Russia.

Robert Wuthnow, a sociologist at Princeton, says that this period of building institutions helped to create a "spirituality of dwelling."⁴ Christians, including Mennonites, I think, wanted to create a social and religious environment where things were predictable, stable, and relatively unchanging. A good example of this is my grandfather, Herman Schrock, who was born in 1905 and died at age 88. During his long life he had only one job, which was farming, lived on only one farm, and was a member of only one church, Olive Mennonite. He dutifully thought what his bishops and pastors told him to think. He acted the way they wanted him to act. He was loyal to his tightly-woven sub-group of Swiss Mennonites. He lived all his life in a stable, somewhat sheltered, relatively unchanging social, spiritual, and ethical world. He illustrates this spirituality of dwelling. Everything in grandpa's life worked to maintain a highly bounded world. In this sort of world, church membership as Mennonites practiced it made huge sense. Membership carried great responsibilities, had stringent requirements, and helped to maintain a sense that his life was safely embedded in this sub-group of people with its unique markers of plain coats and head coverings.

Wuthnow goes on to say that in recent decades that spirituality of dwelling has been replaced with a spirituality of seeking. Most Americans no longer live in one place their whole lives, nor do they often work for one employer their whole life. Young adults

matters for the tradition is conversion and lifelong commitment to Christ. See "Membership and Indoctrination in Anabaptist Churches," in *Anabaptist Currents: History in Conversation with the Present*, ed. Carl F. Bowman and Stephen L. Longenecker (Bridgewater: Penobscot Press, 1995), 212-213.

⁴ Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 1-18.

today know very well they will have to keep re-inventing themselves in the world of work to keep up with a rapidly changing marketplace. They may have to move from one end of the country to another, far from where they grew up.

The religious landscape has changed too. Our communities aren't just Christian and Jewish; they're also Buddhist and Islamic. We rub shoulders, even here in Goshen, with people of other faiths. For instance, a Sikh gentleman works at my local gas station, and it makes him happy when people recognize him for who he really is instead of confusing him with Muslims.

In general Americans, including most Christians, simply aren't as loyal to institutions as we once were. We're on the move geographically, intellectually, and spiritually. Most of us exemplify what Wuthnow means by a spirituality of seeking. We prefer looser connections over tight relationships, diversity over uniformity, and negotiation over authoritarian pronouncements. We are people on the way. The metaphor of walking on a spiritual journey appeals to us. In this new context, does it make sense to continue membership practices rooted in an environment that no longer exists?

Wuthnow says that what makes sense for our time is a spirituality of practices. Neither a dwelling spirituality nor a seeker spirituality is what we need. Instead we need a way of Christian living that emphasizes spiritual practices like worship, service, prayer, hospitality, caring for creation, peacemaking, and dozens of others. Wuthnow isn't Mennonite, but his proposal strikes me as consistent with our heritage. We have always been a people who value spiritual practices done in the context of daily life. Here at Berkey we've even changed our motto to reflect this. We used to say we were called to "*be* Christ's loving, caring, healing presence in the world"; but now we say we're called to "*live* Christ's loving, caring, healing presence in the world." Our new motto is oriented to spiritual practices and focuses more on following Christ in discipleship day by day.

Today is only the first of this series. Next Sunday we'll try to understand how the gospel of John thinks people get connected to Jesus, and in two weeks Marilyn will take us in another direction. Meanwhile, let us continue our passion for following Jesus.