

“Placing Fellowship”

**Baxter T. Exum (#1209)
Four Lakes Church of Christ
Madison, Wisconsin
April 7, 2013**



As Americans, we do a lot of moving from one place to another. Many years ago, it used to be that people would be born in a certain town, they would live their entire lives in that area, and then they would die there. In fact, more than a hundred years ago, it was quite common for people to be born and to die in the same house. Today, of course, that is no longer the case. As Americans, it seems that we are always moving. I have read that roughly 1/3 of all Americans will change their address during any given year, and that the average American will endure 8 major moves in a lifetime, and for many (especially for those in the Madison area), I would suggest that 8 moves is a rather low estimate. Just a personal note here: Whenever I am out and around and I see someone driving a U-Haul, I will often say a silent prayer – asking God to be with that family on such a horribly stressful day. If you have ever moved with U-Haul, then you know what I am talking about. We live in a transient society. We might hate the actual process of moving, but we do a lot of it.

We think about this congregation – here at Four Lakes, we have also been blessed as well as cursed by good Christian friends who do a lot of moving. Sometimes I think: If nobody ever moved away from the Madison area, our congregation would have at least 200 members. I think of the Christensens, and the Kiels, and the Fellers, and the Gumforys, and the Agyres, and the Oppermanns, and the Bubolz family, among many others who have moved away over the past 13 years or so. But on the other hand, we are also thankful for those who have moved TO the Madison area. From time to time we will ask God to send us help, to send us those who are willing to work, and He has answered that prayer in some powerful ways. We praise God for that.

As we think about the great turnover that takes place in our society, and as we think about the turnover that takes place within this congregation in particular, I would like for us to consider a question from one of our members concerning the practice of placing our fellowship with a local congregation of God’s people. That is a good question! In light of all of the moving that goes on around us, do the Scriptures give us any advice concerning what needs to happen when someone who is already a Christian moves into our area? Based on the Scriptures, how do we handle that? Do the Scriptures give us any guidance in this regard? As with any question, our goal (as with all questions) is to see what God has to say on the issue. It is never okay to answer a question just by saying that we have done something in a particular way for many years. There is some value to tradition, but tradition that comes from outside the Bible is not an adequate standard. Tradition in and of itself is not a valid source of authority. This morning, then, I would like for us to study a very important and

very basic concept – something very important for us to keep in mind, and then I would like for us to move on by studying the scriptural basis and benefits of being an active part of a local congregation.

I. **But first of all, as we get started, we need to have the very basic understanding that THE BIBLE RECOGNIZES THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH AND VARIOUS LOCAL CONGREGATIONS.**

On one hand, most of us understand that there is only one church, that the church is universal. We have a number of scriptures to consider, so I would invite you to turn with me to each of these, but we will be moving rather quickly, so I have put them up on the wall to let you get a little head start.

The first passage is found in Matthew 16:18. In Matthew 16, Jesus asked his disciples who they thought he really was. You might remember how the disciples started repeating things they had heard, ***“Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.”*** The Lord, though, said, ***“But who do YOU say that I am.”*** At that point, Peter spoke up and said, ***“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”*** That brings us to the Lord’s response in Matthew 16:18. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus said, ***“I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.”*** When the Lord said, ***“...upon this rock I will build My church,”*** he was not referring to a specific congregation, but he was talking about the church in a worldwide sense; that is, the body of Christ that all of us are added to when we first obey the gospel. When we are buried with Christ in baptism, and when that baptism is done properly, an immersion in water for the right reasons, for the forgiveness of our sins, at that point we are born into the family of God. At that point, we are added by God to the church. We notice in this passage that Jesus did not refer to building his “churches,” but he referred to building his ***“church.”*** The reference was to a single church, consisting of all of those worldwide who have been baptized into the body of Christ who remain faithful to the word of God.

Later on in the New Testament, in Hebrews 12:23, we read about ***“...the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven.”*** As Christians, we are ***“enrolled in heaven.”*** As Christians, our names have been written in the Lamb’s book of life. We might say that our membership is in heaven. As Paul said in Philippians 3:20, ***“our citizenship is in heaven.”*** Our citizenship is placed in heaven when we are baptized into the death of Jesus Christ. And so from this point of view, the denominational idea of getting saved independently of the church and then later joining the church by being baptized is something that is not found in the Bible. We do not become Christians by “joining a church.” But instead, when we are baptized, we become members of the ***“one body”*** that Paul referred to in Ephesians 4. So, first of all, we read in the Scriptures about the Lord’s church in the universal sense, the one body we are added to when we obey the gospel.

But then on the other hand, the Bible also refers to churches in a local sense. We think of the various greetings at the beginning of many of the letters addressed to various local congregations. We think of 1 Corinthians 1, for example. In 1 Corinthians 1:1-2, the apostle Paul addressed that letter to ***“the church of God which is at Corinth,”*** this would have been distinct from the church in Jerusalem. He does the same thing in 1 Thessalonians 1:1 as he refers to ***“the church of the Thessalonians.”*** Many times, the reference is to multiple congregations. We think about Revelation 1:11, where Jesus told John to send a message ***“to the seven churches”*** in the Roman province of Asia Minor. We also read in Romans 16:16, ***“All the churches of Christ greet you.”*** In that passage, Paul was not referring to multiple denominations all teaching different doctrines, but he was referring to various congregations of the Lord’s universal church that had unity in what they taught but were spread throughout that area.

Today, many times people will defend the idea of denominationalism by pointing to these references to multiple churches in the Bible, and they argue, "Well, if there could be multiple churches back then, then we can have denominations today and still be pleasing to God." We need to remember, though, that denominations first came about because of differences in doctrine, and those differences in doctrine are a problem. Those differences are offensive to God. God wants us to be united in doctrine, even among various local congregations.

The point of unity in doctrine is emphasized in 1 Corinthians 16:1-2. I would invite you to turn with me to 1 Corinthians 16 to notice that various local congregations were to be united in what they taught and in what they did. This passage deals with the weekly collection. Notice what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 16:1-2, "**Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so do you also. On the first day of every week each one of you is to put aside and save, as he may prosper, so that no collections be made when I come.**" So, we have an example: Paul gave an instruction to the churches of Galatia, and he gave the same instruction to the church in Corinth, hundreds of miles away, and all of those congregations were to agree. All of them were to take up a collection on the first day of every week. Unlike modern denominations who disagree on thousands of points of doctrine, the early congregations were united on God's word. While we are in 1 Corinthians, I would invite you to turn back to another interesting statement in 1 Corinthians 4:16-17, and as we look at this passage, please notice that there were multiple local congregations who were all being taught the same thing. This is what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 4:16-17, "**Therefore I exhort you, be imitators of me. For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, and he will remind you of my ways which are in Christ, just as I teach everywhere in every church.**" So, the message, the authoritative word of God from the apostles, was taught "**everywhere in every church,**" not only by Paul, but by all of his associates as well. As far as doctrine was concerned, the church in Corinth was the same as the church in Rome, which was the same as the church in Thessalonica, which was the same as all of the churches of Galatia, and so on. They were not various denominations, but they were sister congregations. We might say that they were local chapters of the universal church.

So, to summarize, I think we can see that there is a difference in the Scriptures between the church in a universal sense and various local congregations. We are added to the Lord's body when we are baptized, but we are actually involved with a much smaller group on a local level. Someone once told me that our membership is in heaven, but that our fellowship is with a local congregation. I think we can see the wisdom in that statement.

- II. **With these comments in mind as background, I would like for us to move on and to consider the SCRIPTURAL JUSTIFICATION FOR BEING A PART OF A LOCAL GROUP. We might refer to this section as being the SCRIPTURAL BENEFITS OF BEING AN ACTIVE PART OF A LOCAL CONGREGATION (instead of just being a part of the universal church and leaving it at that).**
 - A. And one of the first and most important reasons to be a part of a local congregation is that the local congregation is really God's only plan for church organization.

God's design for the church is that each Christian be a part of a local group. God's plan for church organization is focused on the local level. In fact, there is no plan for any organization above the local level. And so when we look around us and see denominational churches with headquarters, and world leaders, and popes, and cardinals, and yearly conventions taking votes on various doctrines to hand down to the lower levels of those organizations, those organizational structures are completely foreign to the word of God. In the Lord's church, according to God's original design, our organizational structure starts and ends at the local level. Each

congregation is self-governing. We are completely autonomous. As I said earlier, we share a common bond with our sister congregations as far as doctrine is concerned, but as far as church government is concerned, Biblically speaking, the local congregation is all that God has authorized. And so, as a congregation, we do not have any earthly headquarters, we do not answer to any kind of governing board, but we as a congregation are responsible for one another. There is some level of accountability. We are accountable to each other on the local level.

And so, in the Bible, we read about elders in every congregation. On Paul's first missionary journey, we read in Acts 14:23 about elders being appointed **"in every church."** When Paul wrote to Titus who was preaching on the island of Crete, Paul told Titus to **"appoint elders in every city"** (Titus 1:5). We can look at Philippians 1:1, and we find that the book was addressed to the saints in Philippi as well as to the **"overseers and deacons"** of that congregation.

I would invite you to turn with me to Hebrews 13:17. Primarily, this passage applies to elders, but there is a valuable lesson here even in our congregation where we do not have elders yet. In Hebrews 13:17, the Bible says, **"Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account...."** When it comes to God's plan for the organization of His church, we need to ask a question: For whose souls are the elders responsible? If someone were to fall away from the church here in Madison, would the elders down in Crystal Lake be held responsible for that? What about when we have elders here someday: will they be held accountable for someone falling away from a congregation down in Texas somewhere? Absolutely not! In a similar way, the elders from some other congregation have no authority over our congregation here in Madison. And when we appoint elders here, our elders will have no authority over any other congregation. But rather, the responsibility of the elders begins and ends with the congregation where they serve. They are responsible for the individuals in the congregation. Who are those individuals? That is the question we are discussing.

We have a somewhat parallel passage in 1 Peter 5:1-3. The apostle Peter was not only an apostle, and he was not only a gospel preacher, but he was also an elder. Notice, please, exactly who these elders were to shepherd. This is what he says in 1 Peter 5:1-3, **"Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock."** Two times in two verses, Peter uses the phrase **"among you."** For the purpose of our study this morning, Peter was telling these elders to shepherd not every Christian on the face of the earth, but rather, he was telling them to shepherd the local congregation. And then in verse 3, he refers to **"those allotted to your charge."** In other words, they were not responsible for every Christian everywhere, but they were responsible for those in their own congregation. We think about an actual shepherd. He is responsible for the sheep in his own flock. Now, if he is out with his flock and sees a sheep in distress that is not his, it is certainly okay for him to go take care of it (there is no prohibition on that), but his primary responsibility is for those sheep in his own flock. When he comes back to the barn at the end of the day, he will not be held accountable for every sheep on the face of the earth, but he will be held accountable for the sheep that have been entrusted to his care. In the same way, according to the Scriptures, elders are accountable for the souls entrusted to their care – not every Christian on the face of the earth, but the members of their congregation. There is a value to knowing who these people are.

And I would point out that this goes both ways – just as elders are responsible for their own sheep, so also the sheep are accountable to their own shepherds. And I know we don't have elders here yet, but the same basic

idea still applies. As members of this congregation, we have certain responsibilities that those who are not a part of us do not have. Our visitors should not be burdened with making decisions about the future of this congregation. This isn't to say that we don't accept input, because we do – very gladly – but in terms of a responsibility, this falls on our members. As an illustration, think about our own families. There is a big difference between visiting in someone's home and actually being a part of the family. I know when we have friends over for dinner, I do not expect them to go mow the lawn (if they want to do that, I probably wouldn't argue, but that is not their responsibility). If we sit down for dinner and the mailman delivers a bill for the new roof, I do not expect our guests to pay that (again, if they insist, I won't offend them by turning it down, but the responsibility falls on me and my family). In a similar way, in our local congregation, we have certain responsibilities that fall primarily on our own people. Sometimes we make exceptions, but as an example, usually those who serve in worship and those who teach our classes are members of this congregation. For this reason, here at this congregation we maintain a list of those who are members here. We are a transient society, and in all of this hustle and bustle as people move in and out of our area, we want to know who has made a commitment to work together with us at this congregation. We want to know 1.) Who we are responsible for, and 2.) We want to know who is responsible. There is a heightened level of accountability. When I am an active part of a local congregation, I have brothers and sisters who know me personally. Even without elders, when I am a part of a local congregation, I have brothers and sisters who will hold me accountable. If I don't show up for worship, I want somebody to notice that! And as a member of a local congregation, I also fulfill my responsibility to hold others accountable. And I can do this locally in a way that I cannot do with the church in a universal sense. This is hard to do if someone bounces around and visits a different congregation every week.

The practice of church discipline comes in here. We will get to this in more detail next week, but when it comes to church discipline, as I understand it, it always takes place locally. In other words, if someone slides into a life of sin down in Florida, it is not my job to take the lead on discipline in that case. Instead, that is to start down there. And in the same way, we are responsible for discipline within our congregation here in Madison. If we can remove somebody from our congregation (as we have done on several occasions in the past), then it stands to reason that we need to know who our members are in the first place. God's plan for church organization all goes back to the local congregation.

So, we learn first of all that the local congregation is God's plan for church organization. There are some good reasons for this – accountability, responsibility, and discipline. There is a value, then, to being an active part of a local church.

- B. There is a second Scriptural benefit to this arrangement, and that is: It also allows for greater involvement as well as encouragement and support.

I would invite you to look with me at Acts 9. You might remember from Acts 9 that the apostle Paul (known as Saul at that time) was persecuting the church. He was dragging people out of their homes and taking them to jail for being Christians. And yet on his way to Damascus, Saul met the Lord on the road and three days later he was baptized for the forgiveness of his sins. Well, in his zeal he immediately started preaching the gospel. The trouble came when he tried to go back to Jerusalem. Please notice Acts 9:26-27, ***“When he came to Jerusalem, he was trying to associate with the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took hold of him and brought him to the apostles and described to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had talked to him, and how at Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus.”*** We know that Saul had been added to the church in a universal sense when he was baptized, but when he came back to Jerusalem, he tried to ***“associate”*** with the Jerusalem

congregation. The KJV says that he tried to **“join”** himself to the disciples. Another translation says that he tried to **“attach himself”** to the disciples. The word used here means “to glue or join together.” Sometimes this word was used in the medical community to refer to the joining of a wound, just as stitches were used to join the two sides of a cut together. One leading Greek dictionary says that the word means “to join oneself as an associate.” In other words, Saul wanted to be a part of the Jerusalem congregation. That is what we are talking about this morning. If there was ever a reason not to be a member of a local church, Saul had a reason! He was not welcome. He had persecuted the Jerusalem congregation. And yet he wanted to join himself to that congregation. He wanted his brethren in Jerusalem to know that he was now a disciple and that he wanted to work together with them in the spreading of the gospel. He wanted them to know that he was on the same team. He wanted to be recognized as one of them. We notice, though, that the Jerusalem congregation was scared. They were nervous. Maybe they thought he was going undercover to try to do more damage. And so at that point, Barnabas steps in with a word of encouragement. I believe Saul knew that he could do more by being associated with the Jerusalem congregation than if he just went in and started preaching on his own. Imagine being in the military and being sent to a far off land. In a sense, I guess you could just show up and get to work, but there is also a value in “reporting for duty.” There is a value to showing up and checking in in some way, “I am here to work, or serve, or fight, or whatever, and I am here to work together as a team.” Perhaps in a somewhat similar way, being a part of the congregation in Jerusalem was a way for Saul to get involved in a way that he could not do on his own. As a church, we work together, and it helps to know exactly who is on the team.

We see something similar with Apollos in Acts 18. Apollos was a good public speaker, but he was mistaken on baptism, he was pulled aside and corrected by the husband and wife team of Priscilla and Aquila, and when he got everything squared away, he left Ephesus to go preach in Achaia (northern Greece), but before he left, the Bible tells us (in Acts 18:27) that **“...the brethren encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him; and when he had arrived, he greatly helped those who had believed through grace”** (Acts 18:27). So, Apollos wanted to get involved, and kind of like the situation with Barnabas and Paul, the brethren spoke up in his favor so that he would be accepted and fully put into service on the other end. Apollos certainly could have gone over there on his own, but he realized that it was best to plug in with a local congregation.

We have a good number of other references that are quite similar, where Paul writes to various congregations to encourage them to accept others who were moving into their area. We think about what Paul wrote in Romans 16:1-2 concerning a Christian woman by the name of Phoebe. In Romans 16, Paul said, **“I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea; that you receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and that you help her in whatever matter she may have need of you; for she herself has also been a helper of many, and of myself as well.”** Paul wanted this Christian woman to be accepted by the congregation so that she would be encouraged and so that the church would help her in the work that she was doing. It seems that Paul is doing for Phoebe almost exactly what Barnabas had done for him several years earlier.

We see from Paul, and Apollos, and Phoebe, then, that there is a special value in being “glued” or “attached” to a local congregation. There is a value to being received, and helped, and commended. In the local church we get involved and we receive support and encouragement.

- C. There is a third reason for being part of a local congregation, and this is mainly to explain the process we use here, but it helps protect the congregation from those who would come in and cause division by teaching things that are not true.

We see a number of warnings in the books of 2 and 3 John. We see in those two books especially that there were a number of very eloquent men in the First Century who were traveling from church to church depending on the support of those who were naïve and unsuspecting, spreading false teaching and tearing up churches as they went. Those of you who have been here for a while know that this danger continues even today. Before she died, I remember Ms. Katherine pulling me aside and sharing some of her wisdom. She said, “Baxter, every major false doctrine in the history of the church has made its way through Madison.” She was making the point that Madison must have some way of attracting these things, and her point was that we need to always be careful. In the same way, in the book of 2 John, the apostle John also tells us to be careful. In verses 11-12, he says, **“If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting; for the one who gives him a greeting participates in his evil deeds.”** In 3 John, the apostle encourages us to accept those who teach the truth. In verse 8 he says, **“Therefore we ought to support such men, so that we may be fellow workers with the truth.”** He then warns about an evil man who was to be rejected by the church. And so when people traveled from place to place, the church was to make a determination concerning what that person taught, and that determination would decide whether the person was accepted or rejected. The early church, then, was commanded to be at least a little bit cautious with those who showed up and claimed to be Christians. I’m not talking cautious as in terrified, but they were to keep their eyes open and they were to be aware.

Here at this congregation we love those of you who are Christians who move into the area, but we hope and pray that you will not be offended if we discuss a few things. And we believe this is good for several reasons. On one hand, we don’t want you being surprised down the road by something we teach, and in the same way, we would rather not be surprised either if we can help it. There are some strange things being taught out there, and we have a responsibility (just as they did in New Testament times) to protect this congregation. For this reason, we will have a brief meeting with any Christian who wants to be a part of us who comes here from another congregation, and we will talk at least briefly about some things we believe here. There are some things that you need to know sooner rather than later. And much of what we discuss comes from questions that we are asked many times. We give a brief history of the congregation and try to explain some of what makes us unique among other churches in the area.

And then, beyond this, we also try to make some contact with a person’s previous congregation – just a very positive and polite letter, or phone call or email – asking for some kind of help in introducing the person to this congregation. It is a very simple process, and a process we believe is modeled on what was done for Paul and Apollos and the others in the early church. Not only that, but when someone moves away from here, we also do the best we can to be proactive, to help them find a faithful congregation, to write a note to the church where they are headed – encouraging them to accept this family that we love so dearly. We let them know, though, that they are being sent out with our blessing.

Conclusion:

As we close and as we keep these things in mind, I would like to close with just a brief word of caution. When someone comes to us from another congregation, when we get together to talk, when we contact their previous congregation, and when we add them to our list of members, there is a human element involved. In other words, we have used our judgment. And the caution is: Whenever we use our judgment, it is possible to make a mistake. And in this whole process, there are times when we might make a mistake in either accepting or rejecting somebody.

Sometimes a local church will reject somebody who should be accepted. This is what the church in Jerusalem did at first with the apostle Paul. The Bible says that at first, they rejected Paul ***“not believing that he was a disciple”*** (Acts 9:26). And, if Barnabas had not stood up, they would have rejected someone that the Lord had clearly accepted.

On the other hand, sometimes a church will accept someone who should be rejected. Hopefully we'll be able to look at this a little deeper over the next week or two, but we have an example in 1 Corinthians 5 where the church in Corinth accepted a man living in sexual sin with his own stepmother, when that man had obviously been rejected by God.

So that brings us to a real caution this morning: Just because our name might be on a list of members at a local congregation, that is no guarantee that we are accepted by God. The danger is that we as Christians cannot see into another person's heart. In the entryway this morning, I have placed the most current list of our members, and I would ask for your feedback on that. Have we missed anybody? Is there somebody on there who should not be on there? Let me know. Our goal is to include whoever God wants us to include.

As Americans, we do a lot of moving. This morning, then, we have looked at the value of being an active part of a local congregation. We are added to the church by God when we obey the gospel. That is important. But it is also important that we plug in and get involved. If you have any questions about what we have studied this morning, I would invite you to let me know what you are thinking. My phone number and email are both listed on the front of this morning's bulletin.

The Bible teaches that in order to be saved, we must believe in Jesus, we must turn away from our sins, and we must allow ourselves to be buried with Christ in baptism for the forgiveness of our sins. If you were baptized as an infant, that is not baptism as the Bible describes it. If you were baptized in order to join a local congregation, that is not baptism as the Bible describes it. If you were baptized into a denominational religious group as a sign that you were saved at some point prior to baptism, that is not baptism as the Bible describes it. Biblical baptism is a burial with Christ for the forgiveness of sins. If you have any questions, let us know. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com