

Not Marching, but Dancing

BY LINDSEY BRIGHAM
AND WAYNE MARTINDALE

An ornery professor who went to church from no apparent personal desire, C. S. Lewis has much to teach us about the nature and practice of membership. He staunchly affirms that the Church has a place in the modern world because it alone can sustain the sort of membership in which human life is fulfilled.

On a summer morning in 1935, the newly-conscripted soldiers woke early. Dressed in uniform, eating identical food in equal proportions, held to one standard, they would spend the day training to act as a single body. This sameness was their strength and their safety, allowing them to battle with great efficiency and effect.

That same morning, miles away at a house nestled in the German forest, another group of men began their well-ordered day. Their birthplaces, ages, and experience varied, but they shared all of these for the enrichment of their common pursuit at the seminary. This day they would study, work, eat, and sing together, as they did daily.

Also on that morning in Oxford, England, a slightly balding, middle-aged professor made his way to the Magdalen College chapel for morning prayer. Once there, squeaking boots distracted him from the readings, and his patience was sorely tried by the music: organ was his least favorite instrument, and hymns he considered dismal. Their horrid sentimentality would surely have made John Milton turn in his grave! Before the last words of the benediction echoed and the after-church chatter began, he was out the door and back in the clear bright sunshine.

On this morning, in all these places, people gathered to work for a common purpose. They each sought a sort of membership, a coming together with others to share life in pursuit of a common goal. But in which contexts did true membership flourish? The soldiers of the Nazi Wehrmacht certainly achieved effectiveness. The seminarians at Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Finkenwalde have become renowned for their practice of Christian community. But that rather ornery professor who went to church from no apparent personal desire – the self-avowed “most reluctant convert,” and also a most reluctant churchman – might actually have the most to teach us about the nature and practice of membership. In his writings and in his habits, C. S. Lewis staunchly affirms that the Church has a place in the modern world because it alone can sustain the sort of membership in which human life is fulfilled.

NOT A RELIC, BUT A REFUGE

This ecclesial emphasis did not sit easily with the mood of Lewis's times. In the latter decades of Lewis's career, attitudes toward the Church changed from reverence to irrelevance on both sides of the pond. The church in America became a social club, the church in Europe a cultural relic. In a 1955 poem called “Church Going,” British poet Philip Larkin gives voice to the prevailing attitude when he speaks as a holiday bicyclist who stops inside an old church and reflects on its past glory and present ignominy. He notes the oddity of stopping at all, but asserts,

Yet stop I did: in fact I often do,
And always end much at a loss like this,
Wondering what to look for; wondering, too,
When churches fall completely out of use
What we shall turn them into, if we shall keep
A few cathedrals chronically on show,
Their parchment, plate and pyx in locked cases,
And let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep.
Shall we avoid them as unlucky places?¹

Larkin's faintly-mocking, elegiac attitude is by no means extinct today. Even those who do still stop in churches on Sunday morning often do so merely out of unthinking habit or tradition, not considering that the Church could offer anything significant. They value spirituality, but disassociate it from corporate gatherings, expecting to find it in solitude instead.

However, Lewis does not speak as the curator of a cathedral “chronically on show” when he argues for the necessity of the Church; rather, he addresses his comments precisely to the modern age. An astute analyst of his world, Lewis perceives that all attempts at membership outside the Church overemphasize either the individual or the collective, making true membership impossible.

Overemphasizing the individual makes membership impossible because it leads to a self-sufficient, self-centered confidence that regards other people

as largely irrelevant. As in Lewis's day, so in ours: this attitude underlies the countless magazine covers and TV commercials that highlight the story of someone who, by individual skill and determination, breaks free of barriers imposed by fear, expectations, or disabilities in order to reach a partly-predestined and partly self-defined potential. Such stories are problematic because they assume no one else – not even God – is needed for the individual's success and fulfillment. In Lewis's words, individualism begins with the assumption that "every individuality is 'of infinite value,'" relegating God to the position of "a kind of employment committee whose business it is to find suitable careers for souls, square holes for square pegs."² In the narrative of individualism, people become more valuable than God, who then exists to serve their needs and order their realities around them.

On the other hand, overemphasizing the collective undermines membership by leading to a callous insensitivity to the unique needs and gifts people carry. When individuals are massed in a collective, they are valued only for the characteristics that are useful in a greater system, while any unique traits that do not serve the system are ignored. Thus, in war, soldiers are mere cogs in a fighting machine; in consumer society, shoppers are only the desires associated with their social group; in party-politics, citizens are simply voters of a particular social class; in education, students are just empty receptacles ready to receive standardized curricula. As Lewis says, such a reductive way of viewing people is "an outrage upon human nature."³ Like work on a factory assembly line, or perhaps like the training of Wehrmacht soldiers, it does not allow them to exercise the full range of abilities (physical, emotional, moral, spiritual) that make us human.

Lewis writes with great concern against individualism and collectivism because he sees that conditions of the modern world exacerbate them both: as he comments, "one error begets the other and, far from neutralising, they aggravate each other."⁴

Our modern consumerism

illustrates this: advertisements are created with a collectivist attitude by considering a group of potential consumers, isolating their habits and tastes, and then appealing to these uniform, de-contextualized tendencies – yet consumers are often motivated to heed advertisements by their individualistic longing to define themselves by brand names, to design the perfect life setting, to construct a unique life story. The family also suffers from both tendencies. The family

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should embody membership in that “Each person is almost a species in himself.... If you subtract any one member, you have not simply reduced the family in number; you have inflicted an injury on its structure. Its unity is a unity of unlikes, almost of incommensurables.”⁵ But the family has become the severest casualty of the modern world. On the one hand, it is undermined by each member’s pursuit of individualistic independence

Lewis’s Pauline vision of true membership, in which members are “essentially different from, and complimentary to, one another” provides an alternate, ideal vision of human community, opposed to both individualism and collectivism, in which human wholeness flourishes.

(the teenager’s rebellion, the spouse’s workaholism); on the other hand, it is undermined by each member’s collectivist tendency to view the others as mere representatives of a stereotypical class (oblivious parents, impossible children). Even half-a-century ago Lewis could declare, “If a really good home...existed today, it would be denounced as *bourgeois* and every engine of destruction would be

leveled against it.”⁶ Thus, summarizing the dilemma of individualism and collectivism, Lewis states,

I feel a strong desire to tell you – and I expect you feel a strong desire to tell me – which of these two errors is the worse. That is the devil getting at us. He always sends errors into the world in pairs – pairs of opposites.... He relies on your extra dislike of the one error to draw you gradually into the opposite one.⁷

We are left between Scylla and Charybdis, and Lewis asserts that we must “keep our eyes on the goal and go straight through between both errors. We have no other concern than that with either of them.”⁸ We need a safe middle passage to prevent us from being continually tossed between the monsters – a passage that will allow each of us to function as a unique person, but in concert with other unique persons.

Lewis identifies this passage as *membership*, evoking Paul’s metaphor of the members of the body. As he explains,

The very word membership is of Christian origin, but it has been taken over by the world and emptied of all meaning. In any book on logic you may see the expression “members of a class.” It must be most emphatically stated that the items or particulars included in a homogeneous class are almost the reverse of what St. Paul meant by *members*. By *members* he meant what we should call *organs*, things

essentially different from, and complementary to, one another, things differing not only in structure and function but also in dignity.⁹

Membership provides an alternate, ideal vision of human community, opposed to both individualism and collectivism, in which human wholeness flourishes. Further, if Lewis states correctly that membership means participation in a body, then true membership needs a head. But any membership headed by merely human interests cannot endure. The membership's head must share in the body along with the other members; but, to carry the membership beyond time and transience, the head must also transcend the body.

Thus, Lewis turns to the Church. Far from nostalgically preserving the Church as an anachronism, Lewis presents the Church as the only context in which true membership can flourish, for its head is the incarnate God-man Jesus Christ. As "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation," Jesus Christ also became "the head of the body, the church," who could "reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross," as Paul states in Colossians 1:15-20. When we enter the membership of the Church, we do not come merely because of family connections, shared interests, or personal conviction; ultimately, we enter the membership of the Church because we have become members of Jesus Christ. This means, as Lewis says, that "His presence, the interaction between Him and us, must always be the overwhelmingly dominant factor in the life we are to lead within the Body, and any conception of Christian fellowship which does not mean primarily fellowship with Him is out of court."¹⁰ Expanding upon this theme, Dietrich Bonhoeffer declares,

Christian community means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this.... One who wants more than what Christ has established does not want Christian brotherhood. He is looking for some extraordinary social experience which he has not found elsewhere.... The more genuine and the deeper our community becomes, the more will everything else between us recede, the more clearly and purely will Jesus Christ and his work become the one and only thing that is vital between us.¹¹

Thus, because the headship of Jesus Christ sets apart the membership of the Church from all attempts to establish a membership outside it, persistently hopeful participation in Christ's mystical body proves the sanest response to the modern fragmentation of human wholeness.

BEING CHRIST'S BODY

Under the headship of Christ, the body's members are reassembled, their health is restored, and Spirit-life is breathed into their dry bones. As the body metaphor indicates, much of the vitality of the Church comes from the overwhelming diversity of its members. Lewis explains that "the Church

is not a human society of people united by their natural affinities but the Body of Christ in which all members however different (and He rejoices in their differences & by no means wishes to iron them out) must share the common life,"¹² for "all [are] necessary to the whole and to one another: each loved by God individually, as if it were the only creature in existence."¹³ This diversity inspires Lewis to contrast the "monotonously alike worldlings" with "the almost fantastic variety of the saints."¹⁴

But this diversity is harmonious rather than cacophonous because it is ordered by Christ the Head, who gives the members specific purposes within the Church. The members do not collectively do the same thing, but neither do they each individually do their own thing: within the Church, their diversity becomes a means both to serve and to govern one another. Indeed, Lewis argues that the release from the equality of democracy into the order of authority is the most liberating aspect of membership:

You have often heard that though in the world we hold different stations, yet we are all equal in the sight of God. ... I believe there is a sense in which this maxim is the reverse of the truth. I am going to venture to say that artificial equality is necessary in the life of the State, but that in the Church we strip off this disguise, we recover our real inequalities, and are thereby refreshed and quickened. ... Authority exercised with humility and obedience accepted with delight are the very lines along which our spirits live. Even in the life of the affections, much more in the Body of Christ, we step outside that world which says "I am as good as you."¹⁵

When diversity flourishes within the purposeful order of Christ's body, joy unlike any other joy in the world results. In his inimitable way, Lewis says, "It is like turning from a march to a dance."¹⁶

Now such lofty dreams of harmonious diversity and purposeful order in the Church may begin to sound naively idealistic, for they contradict many people's actual experience of church gatherings. Indeed, that phrase "church membership" causes many people to shudder for legitimate reasons. If we do not sense the euphoria of dancing rather than marching, has the Church failed?

Lewis's own experience addresses this very question and reveals a last distinctive of church membership. Lewis might in fact share the shudder at the idea of Church: he did not naturally enjoy it, and while he often waxes eloquent about the *idea* of Church, very rarely in his writings does he seem particularly enamored of any actual worship service. Yet he believed that all who claim to follow Christ are obligated to church membership. To be a Christian is to be part of Christ's body, and God has ordained that on this earth that body manifests itself in and through the Church. "The New Testament does not envisage solitary religion," he said: "some kind of regular assembly for worship and instruction is everywhere taken for granted

in the Epistles. So we must be regular practising members of the Church.”¹⁷ This conviction came to him early. Before he had even fully converted, Lewis began to attend church regularly, for, as he said, “I thought one ought to ‘fly one’s flag’ by some unmistakable sign. I was acting in obedience to a (perhaps mistaken) sense of honor.”¹⁸ However, he admitted:

though I liked clergymen as I liked bears, I had as little wish to be in the Church as in the zoo.... To me, religion ought to have been a matter of good men praying alone and meeting by twos and threes to talk of spiritual matters.... Thus my churchgoing was a merely symbolical and provisional practice.¹⁹

Lewis could not have foreseen that his churchgoing, though a “symbolical and provisional practice,” would begin to shape him and push him towards a fuller apprehension of Christianity. In letters exhorting others to attend church, he would later explain that the irritations themselves batter us into better shape as Christians:

If people like you and me find much that we don’t naturally like in the public & corporate side of Christianity all the better for us: it will teach us humility and charity towards simple low-brow people who may be better Christians than ourselves. I naturally *loathe* nearly all hymns: the face, and life, of the charwoman in the next pew who revels in them, teach me that good taste in poetry or music are *not* necessary to salvation.... Obedience is the key to all doors: *feelings* come (or don’t come) and go as God pleases. We can’t produce them and mustn’t try.²⁰

The obligatory nature of church membership means that, in some sense, those who faithfully participate in Church from duty may eventually receive more benefits from it than from any merely human

sort of Christian fellowship. Lewis’s seemingly half-hearted church attendance was no less (maybe more) a participation in membership than that of the seminarians at Finkenwalde, for when we faithfully practice church membership in obedience to Jesus Christ, true transformation and joy will inevitably happen. The marching can end, the dancing begin.

Lewis’s first church attendance was half-hearted and out of duty. But when we faithfully practice church membership in obedience to Jesus Christ, true transformation and joy will inevitably happen. The marching can end, the dancing begin.

NOTES

1 Philip Larkin, "Church Going," 1955; reprinted in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Twentieth Century and After*, ninth edition, edited by Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2012), 2782.

2 C. S. Lewis, "Membership," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, edited by Walter Hooper (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1965), 118-119.

3 Ibid., 108.

4 Ibid., 119.

5 Ibid., 110-111.

6 Ibid., 107.

7 C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1952), 185-186.

8 Ibid., 185-186.

9 Lewis, "Membership," 110.

10 Ibid., 112.

11 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, translated by John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1954), 21, 26.

12 C. S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, Volume 3, edited by Walter Hooper (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007), 68.

13 Ibid., 204.

14 Lewis, "Membership," 113.

15 Ibid., 113, 115-116.

16 Ibid., 116.

17 Lewis, *Letters*, 68.

18 C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1955), 233-234.

19 Ibid.

20 Lewis, *Letters*, 68-69.



LINDSEY BRIGHAM

is a freelance writer in Jacksonville, Florida.



WAYNE MARTINDALE

is Emeritus Professor of English at Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois.