

What Is Membership?

A Baptist Pastor's Petition to Local Baptist Churches

It is funny sometimes to realize how some of the most fundamental church practices are bereft of Christian theology! Why do we do what we do? How does that practice have anything to do with our decision to follow Christ as our king? Recently I've had to tackle one of these practices when I conducted my first "Membership Class" at my church. As I discussed my curriculum with friends, many of them leaders in their churches, I was surprised at the lack of clarity with respect to church membership. Consequently, I write this essay to help clarify the issue for both seasoned ministers of the Gospel as well as those considering membership to a local baptist church.

In order to discuss membership, we must first begin with baptism. Baptism is a physical act that publicly professes our commitment to Christ and by extension the universal church to which he calls us. Through baptism (and the repentance and submission that accompanies it), we become members of the universal church of Christ.

Local church membership is also a physical act by which we publicly profess our commitment. While baptism communicates commitment to the universal church, membership communicates commitment to our local church. We are saying, "For better or for worse, during the good times and the hard times, I am committed to each of you. I will not run away when things get tough, and I know there will be tough times."

This commitment goes both ways. I commit to the local church, and the local church commits to me. In this commitment, we find security to be ourselves. We do not have to worry about being cast out of the community if we confess our sins. We do not have to worry about being forced out if we disagree with the "power brokers" of the church. Our position as members is secure.

Local church membership tells the world that we Christians want to strive for unity and believe that unity is possible. We commit to one another through thick and thin, valuing unity more than we value a unanimity of voice or perspective. We may differ in many ways, but we will not let these things tear us apart. We accept the tension of living in community with people not like us. In this way, we model the kingdom of heaven.

Local church membership is also an outward sign of our commitment to communal living. American culture has grown more and more individualistic. An average American is more interested in the well-being of individuals, whether it be oneself or loved ones. Many commercials appeal to individual desires. We do not understand the significance of the family unit, let alone the significance of living as the family of God.

Though we should praise the beauty of our individual selves, we cannot lose sight of the fact that God has made us communal creatures. We need other people to be whole. We cannot understand our individual selves apart from other people.

The Christian life is a communal life. Scripture testifies to this with the countless encouragements that begin with “Let us...” and end with “... one another.” A few of my favorites are 1 John 3:16 and Romans 12:10. There are no “John Wayne” or “John McClane” Christians, walking the journey alone. We walk with Christ, and we walk with our brothers and sisters at our side. Local church membership is a proclamation that we commit to walking side-by-side.

Concerns About Membership

“Unfortunately, churches are often held together by committees rather than by commitment.” (Rick Warren, *Purpose Driven Church*, 343)

Recent generations are resistant to formal church membership, and I sympathize. I suspect, though, that they are resistant because they don't see a purpose to membership. The irony is that they are longing for community, but the churches are not showing them that the truest community can be found in the local church. If they saw the purpose of membership, a purpose that really answers a need in their lives, namely a lack of commitment to one another, I believe they would value membership.

Others are repelled by membership because they cannot sign on with everything the church teaches. I also sympathize with this. Sometimes it is the local church's statements of belief or ancillary agendas. Sometimes it is concerns with the denomination to which the local church is attached. I believe here that the baptist church has an answer.

The structure of baptist churches is different from traditional denominations. A denomination has a top-down authority structure. If one local church affiliated to the denomination disagrees with the denomination and acts against it, the denomination has the power to take action against the local church. It could oust the pastor, it could impose sanctions, or it could take away use of the property upon which the church stands.

Not so for baptist churches. Each baptist church is, for lack of a better word, autonomous. They own their own property. They call and release their own pastor. They discipline their own members. No higher denominational structure has authority over the local baptist church. These churches, however, have found it beneficial to form associations, fellowships, and conventions in order to pool resources for missions and other ministry activities. My church, for example, associates with Yates Baptist Association, the Southern Baptist Convention, and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship to further missions in Orange County and around the world.

Membership to my church does not convey loyalty to these associations. Because my church is a baptist church, our membership is a commitment to the church alone. In the end, membership is not a commitment to a constitution but to a congregation. Membership is not a devotion to some do's and don't's but to a family. Anyway, it would be impossible for anyone to agree with everything these associations believe, because frankly they contradict each other sometimes!

Baptist churches are like families. We don't agree with one another all the time. We voice our differences. But at the same time we value our differences. In the midst of disagreements, something deeper keeps families together. It is our fundamental agreements. We agree that Jesus is the Savior of the World. We agree that Jesus is our King. We agree that Jesus is all we need to be a united family. And so we commit to our brothers and sisters now and then begin "family discussions" about our differences. And who knows, maybe we will be won over by our sister, or maybe we can learn to love our brother despite our differences!

That saying, I would agree with those who say that formal membership to a church is not mandated in Scripture. Neither are paid full-time pastors mandated in Scripture. But we have paid full-time pastors because we believe they are beneficial to the health of our church. Likewise, formal local church membership is not necessary, but beneficial. I grew up with neither paid staff nor formal membership, so I appreciate both polities. Obviously, I lean towards these practices as beneficial to the local church.

We Christians are called to a new way of living. Tied to this new way of living is the church. It is a foretaste of the society of God, the kingdom of God. And we as Christians are the citizens. No, we do not have passports for this society. Our proof of citizenship is a profession, a baptism, and a new life in Christ made possible by the Holy Spirit. As Christians we say that this citizenship is more important than any other citizenship we may have, even of America. We don't just proclaim this new way of living theoretically, but physically in our commitment to a local church. Local church membership is an outward profession of an inward intention. We express commitment to our brothers and sisters. We accept commitment from our brothers and sisters. And we proclaim to the world that Christian unity is not just theoretical; it is right here, in the walls of our church.

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Questions

While baptism communicates commitment to the _____ church,
membership communicates commitment to our _____ church.

Circle all that apply

Local church membership is a decision involving:

- A) the new member.
- B) the local church.
- C) God.
- D) the church sanctuary.

Local church membership proclaims that:

- A) we all agree on everything.
- B) we are more interested in unity than unanimity.
- C) our bond in Christ prevents us from separating over minor things.
- D) we are communal beings, unable fully to live by ourselves.
- E) we are committed to one another, unless someone upsets us.

Membership at Mount Hermon Baptist Church requires:

- A) complete agreement with the church's constitution.
- B) complete agreement with the pastor.
- C) complete loyalty to the associations to which the church is affiliated.
- D) complete commitment to the other members.

Local church membership is:

- A) commanded by God.
- B) formally or informally, something all Christians must do.
- C) beneficial to faithful Christian living in most cases.
- D) a proclamation and challenge to a world scared of commitment.
- E) is an outward act that communicates my desire and hope for Christian unity.