

CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

Membership in the local church should be one of the most fulfilling aspects of Christian discipleship. For some people it is a natural progression to move from commitment to Christ confessed in believers' baptism to commitment to Christ, expressed in membership in the local church.

For others the question of church membership produces a negative reaction: "So long as I am baptised – that is all that matters."

"Church membership is not found in the Bible."

"I serve the church and give to the church – what difference would it make becoming a member?"

"I cannot stand church meetings – all they do is disagree!"

"I do not come from a Baptist background – so I do not need to consider church membership."

"When I was an Anglican Christian I was not asked to join anything apart from attending the services and house groups."

"Is it not possible to be a responsible part of a local Baptist church without becoming formally a church member?"

SEVEN REASONS FOR MEMBERSHIP

A proper understanding of the meaning and purpose of church membership should dispel these reservations and deepen a commitment to one of the most distinctive features of a local Baptist church.

Church membership is important for seven reasons:

1. IT SIGNIFIES A COVENANT RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

Church membership begins with an individual commitment to Jesus Christ and if someone is not confident about this personal relationship then that person is probably not ready to be persuaded about relating to Christ's church.

A Christian is someone who has entered into a right relationship with God through Jesus Christ. And by the Holy Spirit Christians have entered into a life-giving relationship which enables them to enjoy the responsibilities and privileges of the Christian life (Acts 2:37-38).

The Holy Spirit not only brings us into a right relationship with God but also admits us into the body of Christ where we are seen both as an integral part and as standing in need of the contribution of all other parts of the body. (1 Cor 12:13ff).

Covenant Commitment

This means we should never view church membership as joining a club or organisation. To know God is to belong to his family (Acts 2:47). He has added us by grace into a community of like-minded persons – the community of those committed to following Christ – where we express our love for God and for one another in a covenant agreement.

God makes his covenant with us through Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. We respond by making our covenant in repentance and faith and this is sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism.

The covenant is complete when we are incorporated into the local congregation and accepted into church membership.

Early Baptist covenants such as the one made by John Smyth and the congregation at Gainsborough in 1606 spoke of ‘the duties of love’ when Christians covenanted together: To walk in all Christ’s ways made known, or to be made known unto them, according to their best endeavours, whatsoever it should cost them.

2. IT SYMBOLISES A COVENANT RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD’S PEOPLE LOCALLY

One of the reasons behind our negative reactions to church membership is a failure to understand the importance of the corporate nature of the Christian life.

From earliest times Baptists held convictions about the gathered church. They termed it gathered because they believed the local church is gathered by the will of Christ and lives by the indwelling of his spirit. The Acts portrays the young church in Jerusalem in the early days after Pentecost, and concludes ‘The Lord added to their number daily such as should be saved’ (Acts 2:47).

When God gathers us into his family then we have no choice but to relate to our brothers and sisters. Once we recognise His authentic marks of the family in the local church then by a covenant commitment of membership we express our solidarity with those the Lord has gathered together in the local community.

3. IT ADMITS THE BELIEVER TO THAT PLACE WHERE CHRIST AND HIS AUTHORITY ARE MADE KNOWN TO HIS CHURCH

The question of authority in the church is one of the most hotly debated issues among Christians. Baptists believe in the priesthood of all believers. So authority is not found in a Baptist Rome or Canterbury or even Didcot!

The local Baptist church is independent from all external authority because the sole authority in the church belongs to Jesus Christ, the head of the body.

Whenever the local church gathers in his name, He is in the midst making his mind known to those who are seeking to know and do his will.

The meeting together is sometimes called the Church Meeting. If we read the sections on corporate decision making in the Acts of the Apostles (eg., 6, 13 and 15), the spirit of these gatherings is far from a shareholders meeting or a debating chamber.

A meeting of church members is a gathering of those who have mutually agreed to six things:

- To acknowledge the presence of the risen Christ
- To be at peace with those in the body of Christ,
- To submit themselves to the guidance of the Holy Spirit
- To stand under the judgements of God
- To expect to receive and understand the mind of Christ
- To submit, to Christ our King

Congregational independency in discovering the mind of Christ must never be equated with congregational individualism. We are incorporated into the one body of Christ, so our inter-dependency must also be stressed.

We distinguish these two aspects by saying:

The independence of each local congregation bestows on the members authority of membership, mobilisation, organisation, doctrine and practice.

The inter-dependence of each local congregation requires the surrender of independence and the voluntary uniting with other congregations for mutual advice, fellowship and the combining of resources.

4. IT ENABLES THE BELIEVER TO GROW AND DEVELOP IN THE FAITH

When Jesus calls us to follow him he never intends us to live the Christian life as loners.

When he called his first disciples it was in order that they might be with him for corporate fellowship and teaching prior to being sent out in mission (Mark 3:14).

The same pattern is seen in the early church. When Paul writes about practical things such as how to forgive someone who has grieved you, he recognises that only in the fellowship of believing community is it possible to express the forgiveness, peace and love which God intended for his people (Col 3:1-17).

The invitation to partake of the Lord's Supper has to be intimately linked with our membership in the body of Christ as symbolised by the one loaf of the communion table (1 Cor 11:27-34).

Isolating ourselves from deep commitment and involvement in the life of the local church will inevitably result in stunted growth in faith.

5. IT EMPOWERS THE LOCAL CHURCH IN WORSHIP, FELLOWSHIP AND MISSION

Our commitment to the local church is strengthened when we discover that the more we are together in worship and fellowship, the greater our effectiveness in mission.

The early days for the church in Jerusalem were characterised by four features (Acts 2:42-47), which show the power of togetherness as the people of God:

- Learning apostolic teaching
- Repressing fellowship with other believers
- Worshipping in the breaking of bread and through prayer
- Spreading the good news

The key passages in the New Testament on the purpose of worship all stress that the individual gifts of the members are given by God for the edification of the whole community – 'Let everything be done for the up building of the local church' (1 Cor 14:26).

We gather together for mutual benefit and support rather than private enjoyment. This in turn generates a renewed power to reach out in love to the needs of the world. The intention of Jesus is that our experience of togetherness in worship and fellowship in the local church should then express itself in mission and service to the world, locally and globally (John 17:23).

6. IT OFFERS THE BELIEVER THE POSSIBILITY OF POSITIVE CHURCH DISCIPLINE WHICH PROMOTES HEALTHY DISCIPLESHIP

The phrase 'church discipline' can sound harsh, rigid and loveless. Some have painfully experienced its abuse. But excesses should not prevent us from examining a topic which holds such a central place in the New Testament and which was a common practice amongst earlier generations of Baptists.

In the past those joining a Baptist church would be asked a question such as: 'Do you solemnly give yourself up to the Lord and to the church to watch over and be watched over, to perform all the duties and privileges of the house of God?'

Jesus teaches the importance of putting relationships right before contemplating worship (Matt 5:23-24) and he lays down principles for the settlement of serious disputes (Matt 18:15-20).

There are further passages which deal with forgiveness and restitution of the person who has grieved the local fellowship (2 Cor 2:5-11).

These passages from the Bible are recognition that no local community is perfect. The issue is not perfection but how we deal with imperfection.

7. IT LINKS THE BELIEVER WITH THOSE OF LIKE FAITH EVERYWHERE

Having argued that individual faith finds its proper home within the community of the local church it must finally be stressed that our membership in a Baptist church has far wider implications than the local. In 1948 the Baptist Union Council issued a Statement on the Church: 'It is in membership of a local church in one place that the fellowship of the One Holy Catholic Church becomes significant. Indeed, such gathered companies of believers are the local manifestation of the one Church of God on earth and in heaven.'

Church membership is no little matter confined to the local community. In the local church we express our part in the global church and every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper we testify to that eternal church which, one day, will be united with God himself (1 Cor 11:26 and Rev 21:1-4).

CONCLUSION

Any serious commitment in life calls for an examination of the issues involved and church membership is no exception. Just as becoming a Christian calls for a step of faith, so a commitment to the responsibilities of church membership may involve trusting God and his people to lead you into one of the most fulfilling aspects of Christian discipleship.

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