

The Membership of the Church

Part 1: Covenant

Matthew 16:13-20, 1 Corinthians 5:1-13

Justin Deeter – January 21, 2017



How did you become a Baptist? After all, there are lots of Christian denominations out there, some more faithful to Scripture than others, but here you are sitting this morning in a worship service of a Baptist church. Whether you are visiting with us for the first time today or you are long-standing member here, you've arrived at a Baptist church.

As we continue this series on the church, last week we discussed the foundation and the unity of the church. The foundation of the church is the word of God as written by the apostles and prophets of which Christ Jesus is the cornerstone. A local church unites together as one body centered around their confession of faith, a short statement that sums up what the church believes as derived from the Scripture. Because sometimes Christians disagree on how to interpret the Bible over some matters, different denominations often have similar but different confessions of faith. In an attempt to work together across denominations for the Gospel, which can be an admirable effort, in recent decades we've tended to reduce denominational distinctives. In other words, we just simply don't talk about the issues that we know we disagree on, in order to keep the focus on the Great Commission. Though the great commission efforts should be lauded, one of the unfortunate results has been a reduction of denominational identity rooted in biblical conviction. In other words, if I sat down and asked you, "What are the doctrinal differences between a Baptist and a Presbyterian, the Assemblies of God and the Anglican Church?" – chances are you could not give me an answer because you just don't know. You've never been taught! Unfortunately, this has caused us to forget our own denominational identity, as we've forgotten what it means to be a baptist.



So, how did you become a Baptist? There tend to be three different ways you've arrived at being a Baptist.

First, some of you are baptist by *conditioning*, meaning you have *always* been a baptist. It's all you know. You're not really sure why you're a Baptist, it's just simply how you've been conditioned by your upbringing. You haven't made an intentional choice to be baptist, you've simply been baptist by default.

Second, some of you are baptist by *convenience*, meaning that you sort of us just ended up here. Perhaps you liked the preaching, the music, or the activities. You are simply baptist because you attend a Baptist church. You could just as easily be happy being another denomination, you just happened to end up in a Baptist church.

Third, some of you are baptist by *conviction*, meaning that you have deep theological convictions that make you convictional a baptist. These people can't go to another denomination because they have baptist convictions about the nature and purpose of the church.

So, which one are you? I'll share my story. I was born and raised as a southern baptist. My father used to bring me to his seminary classes at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. I grew up as a preacher's kid running down the aisles after church and pigging out on the leftover bread after the Lord's supper. For me, I was conditioned to being Baptist. However, as I approached college, I began to really think about what I believed. I began to ask the question, "What does it actually mean to be baptist as opposed to another denomination? What are the doctrinal differences?" As I searched the scriptures, for me, my Baptist identity moved shifted from the conditioning of my upbringing. I became Baptist by conviction.

No matter how you ended up here this morning, whether your baptist by conditioning or convenience, I want to convince you from God's word to be baptist by conviction. There are many Baptist distinctives that mark us as unique, but for today's sermon I want to highlight, perhaps our most distinguishing conviction as baptists—regenerate church membership. Put simply, regenerate church membership is the belief that every member of a local church ought to be a born again believer in Jesus Christ. So this is the first of two sermons addressing membership specifically. This first sermon will address the nature of covenant membership. The second sermon will address the biblical expectations of members within the church.



1. The Church Binds its Members based on their Confession of Faith (Matthew 16:13-20)

In Matthew 16, we are given Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ. As they entered the district of Caesarea Phillippi, he asked his disciples a simple, but important question, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" After all, Jesus has been a lightning rod, attracting controversy and attention. Rumors whirled around the area as people whispered about Jesus identity. Some thought he was John the Baptist and others Elijah or one of the prophets. However, Jesus brings the question to bear on them, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter, the leader of the disciples, speaks up. "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus is thrilled with his response, commenting that flesh and blood did not reveal this to him, but the Father has revealed this to him.

Upon Peter's confession, Jesus tells Peter, "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." Jesus says it is upon Peter that he will build his church, however in what sense? Jesus doesn't mean that Peter has greater authority than the other apostles nor that he's infallible in his teaching. After all, we see both Jesus and the apostle Paul correct Peter in the New Testament (Matt 16:23 and Gal 2:11-14). However, as we discussed last week Peter, as one of the apostles lays the foundation for the church, which is the word of God. The apostles established the church's teaching about Christ. The apostolic rock rests upon Peter's confession, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Christ Jesus is the cornerstone.

However, for our purposes today, verse 19 teaches that the church receives the keys to the kingdom of heaven. In other words, the church has the authority, guided by its leaders, to grant entrance into the kingdom of God. Now the church isn't the dispenser of grace to individuals; only Jesus alone does that! However, it does mean that the church has the authority to discern the authenticity of a person's confession of faith. The local church possesses the keys to the kingdom, to welcome true believers into its membership, and it removes imposters. In other words, a local church ought to use the authority of the keys of the kingdom faithfully, so that every potential member has been examined to authenticate as best as possible whether they've truly been born again. Put another way, the membership of the local church should reflect the membership of heaven as



closely as possible. This doesn't mean we always do so perfectly, but every local church ought to faithfully pursue the ideal of a pure church.

This means that we believe in regenerate church membership, that every member of the congregation has been born again and is truly a Christian. We develop this conviction throughout the New Testament, where the assumption is that only believers make up the church. For example in Acts 2:47, "And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved." Also, Paul's letters all assume that the church is made up of believers. For example look at his introduction in 1 Corinthians in his address to the church. He wrote, "To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours" (1 Corinthians 1:2, ESV).

So we possess the conviction that only those who have been born again are granted access to the church. The new birth is more than just reciting the truth, but experiencing the truth, making Jesus your personal Lord and Savior. This is also how we get our namesake, "Baptist." Because of what we believe about church membership, we believe that baptism comes after saving faith. Baptism then is when a born-again believer enters into the church of Christ as they pass through the waters of baptism. Baptism isn't just about your individual salvation, but the door through which your granted access into the membership of the church.

Now, some of you may be getting uneasy at this explanation. Is this really what it means to be Baptist? Well, now you are beginning to see why early Baptists were so heavily persecuted, even by their fellow Protestants! The reason you may be uncomfortable with this is that it sounds like judging. And guess what, it is. But wait, you may say, doesn't Jesus say "Judge not that you be not judged!" Absolutely! So, why then do Baptists maintain such high standards for membership? Well, the answer to that is pretty simple. Baptists maintain voluntary church membership, meaning that no one is forcing you to become a member nor requiring that you become one. When Jesus tells us not to judge, he's stating that ultimately we cannot know whether someone is a believer or not ultimately. After all, only God knows. As individuals, we should not cast judgment on outsiders. However, as I hope to show you from 1 Corinthians 5, God expects us to judge those within the church. In other words, part of becoming a member of a Baptist church means that you give the church permission to probe your life and test the authenticity of your confession of faith.



Such examination has no intention of being mean-spirited. Rather, examining prospective members attempts to be faithful to God's word and to do good to one another and to the church. **First**, careful examination of potential members helps ensure that a person is spiritually deceived. Making sure every member candidate is a believer is ultimately for their good, to ensure that they truly know Jesus. After all, Jesus warns us that many will say "Lord, Lord" and Jesus will, in turn, say, "I never knew you." Having high standards for membership and being thorough before a person becomes a member is the highest act of love, ensuring that the person does know Jesus. If they do not, then what a perfect opportunity for evangelism and to lead them to the Lord! **Second**, careful examination of potential members protects the purity of the church. Wolves can easily come into the church and threaten the church's unity by questioning the doctrinal foundation of the church. Wolves in sheep's clothing are imposters who lead the church into heresy or stir up division amongst the body.

Preserving the purity of the church ensures the unity and health of the congregation. When church membership is taken seriously, the congregation is built up to maturity as a microcosm of the kingdom of God. Only when every member is born again can there be harmony and love in the church. Carnal, fleshly people who don't know Christ who sneak into the membership of the church will be carnal, fleshly people in the church. Because we as baptist believe in regenerate church membership, we must take seriously who we bring into our family. The holiness and witness of Christ's church are at stake, and the care of the souls God has entrusted to our church.

2. The Church Looses its Members based on their Rejection of Faith (Matthew 1 Corinthians 5:1-13)

Just as a local church has the authority to discern who will be apart of its membership, it also has the authority to remove members who are found in a pattern of unrepentant sin indicating that they are not truly born again. Church discipline is an important Baptist distinctive that has largely disappeared from Baptist life but needs to be recovered. Church discipline walks through the process of confronting sin that Jesus outlines for us in Mathew 18.

Membership in the church isn't something you purchase like a membership to Sams club. It's not like the Country Club where if you pay your dues you have full



rights and privileges. The requirement for membership in Christ's church is to be born again. The church has grounds to doubt the authenticity of any members conversion when they enter into a pattern of unrepentant sin. How do we know if someone is truly born again? They live a life of repentance. That doesn't mean they live a life of perfection, after all, in Christ, we all continue to sin. However, the difference is that a true believer is quick to humbly repent of sin and seek to put it to death.

As the apostle John outlines the marks of those who truly know Christ in his first epistle, he tells us this: "No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him; and he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God. By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother." (1 John 3:9-10, ESV)

This leads us to the situation Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians 5, where a member of the church had been sleeping with his mother-in-law. Paul chastises the church for proudly tolerating this situation rather than handling it. Paul makes it clear that this unrepentant man needs to be removed from the church. After all, a little leaven leavens the whole lump. Evil and sin are infections tainting the purity of the church and communicating to the world and to other members of the congregation that there this sort of behavior is permissible for a Christian. This man needs to be removed from the membership of the church because he's providing no evidence that he's been born again. You will know a tree by its fruit. This man needs to be removed from the membership of the church in hopes to wake the man up to his sin so that he might repent and truly come to know Jesus. The most loving thing the Corinthian church can do for this man is to remove him from the body. Giving tacit approval of his sin in the name of tolerance actually causes the man great harm. He must be awoken from his delusion—he is no Christian.

Now, some of you might be thinking, well this all sounds like a lot of judging! What gives us the right to make these judgments? Well, the Bible for one. As Christians we are called not to judge outsiders, people we don't know and have no relationship with. However, the Bible explicitly calls us to judge one another in the body of Christ, not as an act of malicious condemnation, but as an act of discerning love. Because we love one another and know one another, we lovingly confront sin, even if it means removal from membership. Paul the Corinthian church, "For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person



from among you.” (1 Corinthians 5:12–13, ESV) As Peter says, judgment begins at the household of God (1 Peter 4:17).

When you become a member of the church, you agree to live your life under this accountability and community. When you become a member of our church, you are agreeing to place your life under the spiritual care and supervision of that particular body. In other words, you are giving people permission: “Speak truth to me. Help me grow in Christ. Encourage me towards righteousness. Correct me in my sin. Ensure that I continue to faithfully follow Jesus and if not, confront me.” Put simply, when you choose to become a member of a church, you are giving permission for that church to judge you, to keep watch over your soul. After all, God takes sin seriously. As the Scriptures say, “the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God.” So then, the Church is an assurance of salvation co-op. We are all working together to ensure we cross the finish line. When one of us depart from the faith, we want to love them enough to remove them, with great sorrow, in hopes that they would awaken to their sinful state and come to Jesus. The church membership is reserved for repentant sinners redeemed by the grace of Jesus. Unrepentant sinners will not share in the kingdom of God.

3. The Church Covenant Outlines the Unity we Possess and the Responsibility we have towards one another.

This baptist distinctive of regenerate church membership is so important and at risk of being abandon. However, we must recover a robustly biblical and baptist vision for church membership. One of the ways Baptists have sought to emphasize the importance of church membership is through use of the church covenant. This is another oft-forgotten document in our churches, but vital nevertheless. The most important document in the church is not its constitution—it’s the confession of faith and the church covenant.

A Church covenant outlines the expectations and responsibilities of membership. It’s a voluntary agreement amongst the membership of the church. Many Baptist churches in recent years have sought to recover this document, reading it publicly or even requiring it to be signed before members join.



Over the last few years, I have not brought this document to the forefront of our Church's life together. Though it's a wonderful document, I do believe there is one section that needs to be amended due to legalism. Our church was founded in 1915, and you may remember that prohibition was a hot-button political issue at the time. Though well-intentioned, many churches around that time included lines forbidding the use and sale of alcohol. Regardless of where you land on that issue, restricting the membership of the church on that point goes outside the bounds of Scripture, and the issue ought to be left to Christian liberty. So, I think it needs a small revision, but I want to read it for you and I hope in the future to make this document central to our life together as members of Forest Hills Baptist Church.

Having been led as we believe by the Spirit of God to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior and, on the profession of our faith, having been baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, we do now in the presence of God, angels, and this assembly most solemnly and joyfully enter into covenant with one another as one body in Christ.

We engage, therefore, by the aid of the Holy Spirit to walk together in Christian love, to strive for the advancement of this church in knowledge, holiness and comfort; to promote its prosperity and spirituality; to sustain its worship, ordinances, doctrines, and discipline; to contribute cheerfully and regularly to the support of the ministry, the expenses of the church, and the relief of the poor, and the spread of the gospel through all nations.

We also engage to maintain family and private devotions; to bring up our children in the nurture and admonition of our Lord; to seek the salvation of our kindred and acquaintances, to walk circumspectly in the world; to be just in our dealings, faithful in our engagements, and exemplary in our deportment; to avoid all tattling, backbiting, and excessive anger, to abstain from the sale of and use of intoxicating drinks as a beverage; to use our influence to combat the abuse of



drugs and the spread of pornography; and to be zealous in our efforts to advance the kingdom of our Savior.

We further engage to watch over one another in brotherly love; to remember one another in brotherly love; to remember one another in prayer; to aid one another in sickness and distress, to cultivate Christian sympathy in feeling and Christian courtesy in speech; to be slow to take offense, but always ready for reconciliation and mindful of the rules of our Savior to secure it without delay.

We moreover engage that when we move from this place we will as soon as possible unite with some other church where we can carry out the spirit of this covenant and the principles of God's Word.

Final Thoughts

We will come back next week, in part two, and go over some of the biblical expectations for church members in detail, but much of those are outlined in our church covenant. The local church is a great gift! The Lord Jesus Christ purchased the church with his own blood and washed her clean. He's given the church the keys to the kingdom to bind and loose its membership, reflecting membership into the kingdom of heaven. We must take this responsibility seriously, guarding carefully the entrance to the church and protecting the purity of the church with church discipline. As those who have covenanted together, we must be able to attest to the salvation experience of our members and diligently keep watch over one another.

Healthy church membership is a wonderful gift as a testimony to the love and holiness of God. We need one another. The Christian life is not a solo journey. Rather it's a team effort. God has gifted us with brothers and sister to help us faithfully follow Jesus.

If you're here this morning and not a member of Forest Hills, I'm so glad you are here. I pray that you might pray about becoming a part of our membership,



whether you've been here for a few weeks or a few years. When you decide NOT to become a member somewhere, you are refusing to bring your life under the care of a congregation who loves you and looks out for you. Being a member of a church is not only biblically mandated, but it's an incredible gift. And, if you don't know Christ, we invite you to come and receive him. Simply turn from your sin and confess him as your savior and Lord. Come talk with me or another member of this church and we'd love to lead you to the Lord, disciple you, and bring you into the watching care of this congregation.

So, are you Baptist by conditioning or by convenience? I pray that as we've studying God's word this morning that we would all be Baptist by conviction.

