Baptist Basics

BAPTISTS TOGETHER

4 Church Membership

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The first people to hear the Christian message on the day of Pentecost and be baptised went on to devote themselves to the local community of believers (Acts 2:41-42). It was a natural thing for them to do. It was through that community in the form of the original one hundred and twenty believers (Acts 1:15) that they had come to hear of Christ and believe in him. It was in that community that they would continue to learn from the apostles' teaching, to experience the Spirit and play a part in an exciting enterprise. Becoming a Christian was not just a personal decision. It was a social event as the original Christian community extended its reach and incorporated ever increasing numbers within itself. Being a Christian is not just a matter of finding personal salvation. It involves becoming part of a project through which God is working in the world. That project is the Christian Church and it occupies a central part in God's purposes.

The people of God

From near the beginning of human history, God has been concerned to have a people through whom he can work. This work began with Abraham and Sarah and their descendants. God made a covenant with Abraham that was continued with his son Isaac and grandson Jacob, and led to the twelve tribes of Israel. They were specially chosen by God, not because there was anything special about them but because through them God would be able to display his wisdom and power (Deuteronomy 7:7-11). God preserved this people even in times of famine and captivity. God eventually delivered them

from slavery and oppression in Egypt in order that they might occupy the land of Canaan as the Promised Land. Here they were to be under God's reign and were to live out a distinctive communal life by observing the practices of circumcision, sabbath and temple worship and by adhering closely to the law given by God through Moses. Israel was to witness to the nations as 'my treasured possession out of all the nations' and was to be for the God of the whole earth 'a priestly kingdom and a holy nation' (Exodus 19:5-6). They were to be an example so that other nations would say, '"Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!" For what other nation has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is whenever we call to him? And what other nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today?' (Deuteronomy 4:7-8).

Jesus was born from the Jewish people and through him, the idea that there was a people set aside for God's purpose, spread to his followers in the Christian Church, both Jews and Gentiles. The apostle Peter could say to the churches, 'But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light' (1 Peter 2:9). The church, therefore, represents the continuation of what God began to do with the people of Israel. Through the church, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has come to be honoured and worshipped to the ends of the earth. It exists to live out under the reign of God, the way of life that came to be incarnated (or fleshed out), not now in the book of the law, but in the life of Christ. Its practices now include those of baptism and communion, and its calling is to live as a holy nation scattered among all the nations, bearing its witness to Christ, worshipping God through him and serving the nations by living out the way that he taught.

Believing and belonging

The Church is God's project. We can only become Christians and be baptised because the Church is already there exercising its witness. All Christians have the Church as their mother, as surely as they have God as their Father. We are indebted to it and to the people within it who have been

committed enough to hand its benefits on to us. When we become Christians we enter into the Church's life and become a part of it. We are like the parts of a body that are intimately connected to each other and are directed by the head, which is Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12-21). None of us can say we have no need of it or of each other. By believing in Christ we have committed ourselves to belong to Christ's people and this deserves the best that we can bring. Church membership is about committed belonging to the Church in general and to a local congregation in particular. But it is impossible to belong to the Church in general without belonging to a particular congregation. Some years ago a Peanuts cartoon showed Charlie Brown saying, 'I love humanity. It's people I can't stand!' Just as you cannot love humanity without loving people so it is not possible to belong to the Church in abstract, but only in real and committed relationships.

The challenge of covenant relationship

The word Christians use to describe the kind of relationship involved in belonging to the church is 'covenant'. God entered into a covenant with Abraham and with the people of Israel. Each church is a covenant community. When we share communion we refer to it as representing the 'new covenant' made through Christ's sacrifice. A covenant is a two-way commitment which is open-ended and unconditional. This is what we mean when we speak of the 'covenant of marriage', whereby marriage is meant to be a commitment of faithful love, one which endures and so, discovers new depths of love, not one that comes to an end when it becomes inconvenient. It involves both giving and receiving. Where there is covenant commitment, churches can become strong, they can endure through time and they can do good. Where this is lacking, churches are weakened. Just as marriage is designed to be a firm commitment which strengthens and supports a loving relationship between two people, so church membership is designed to be a foundation for strengthening the relationships within a congregation. When people commit themselves to a church in membership they are strengthening the inner life of the church in a way that will make it more effective in its mission.

There is no doubt that becoming a member in a local Baptist church is challenging. It involves commitment and this in turn requires sacrifice. This may mean the sacrifice of time and money and of emotional and physical energy. In return, there is the reward of belonging to a community of

people who strongly believe in what they are doing and who are working cooperatively to achieve their goals. Membership probably involves swimming against the tide of modern culture in which people have come to see themselves first and foremost as consumers rather than contributors. But this is a tide that needs to be resisted. If the role of the church is to offer alternative ways of living which arise from the covenant relationship we share with God, then committed church membership is worth entering into and commending to others.

Reasons for membership

The following reasons for church membership can be mentioned.

1. Church membership demonstrates that we have understood the importance of the church in the mission of God. The church is described in the Bible as the people of God (1 Peter 2:9), the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12-30) and the temple of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 2:19-22). Each of these images requires commitment from us as living parts of God's project. When you belong to a people, you take your identity from them. When you are part of a body, you are organically joined to it. When you are part of a temple, you are like a brick or a stone cemented together with others (1 Peter 2:4-5).

2. Church membership demonstrates the reality of our personal commitment as declared in baptism. It shows therefore, the sincerity of our commitment to Christ and to Christ's people because we are not holding back from people. Church membership follows on from baptism by showing that we have truly entered into a new way of life, just as the first Christians 'devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers' (Acts 2:41-42).

3. Church membership helps to build strong churches by making sure that each church is supported by a core of people who are prepared to commit time, energy, finance and their own Spiritual gifts and talents to the building up of the body of Christ. Being a member therefore means becoming a active participant in the crucial work of sustaining congregations and passing on the faith to new generations. It also means taking a responsible part in the church's government since church members share in the process of making decisions in Baptist churches.

4. Church membership means that once we have accepted the Christian way of life we have the support of other Christians in sustaining our discipleship and in enduring testing times of illness, bereavement and crisis when they come to us. It also means that we live out our lives under a degree of pastoral oversight that will enable others to correct and guide us should we begin to stray or deviate from a truly Christian lifestyle. This is what Paul means when he says in Galatians 6:1,'My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit, should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness'.

5. Church membership connects us to other church members in the local Christian community and more widely with other such communities. It is a solid bond that enables us to say that we belong to a movement and to take our place within the universal Church.

6. Church membership enables us to challenge the modern tendency to see ourselves as consumers rather than as contributors. Being a Christian is not a spectator sport but requires our personal and dedicated involvement in the things of God and of the church.

Entering into church membership

Each church has its own ways of accepting people into committed church membership but there tend to be common elements. A person entering into membership is interviewed and a report is made to the Church Members' Meeting which makes a decision to receive the applicant into membership or to delay this. Once received into membership by the Church Members' Meeting, this is symbolised by a welcome with the 'right hand of fellowship' in a service of worship, often at a communion service. In some churches, the welcome will be given at the same time or shortly after a person has been baptised. The reasons for this practice are as follows:

- Membership is something mutual, a covenant involving commitments on both sides. Existing church members are also entering into a commitment to new members and need therefore to receive them intentionally into the community.

- Membership is based upon personal commitment to Christ and the

public confession of Christ as Lord. Each person's testimony needs to be heard. Churches will want to understand the shape a person's individual pilgrimage has taken, when they were baptised, and, if they are coming from another Christian tradition which practises infant baptism, whether they have been confirmed and how they feel about believers' baptism.

- It is important that every church member should be able, with good conscience, to uphold a church's understanding and practice of the faith. If not, they might be happier in another congregation. It is helpful to clarify these things at the beginning so that they do not regret the decision later. Some churches have courses of introduction in which the commitments and values of the particular church are set out and opportunity given for questions to be asked.

- When somebody asks to become a member of a local church, the interview gives a good opportunity to talk about how they might contribute to its life and find the best ways to use their gifts and opportunities in God's service.

Some local Baptist churches insist that each person requesting membership is baptised by immersion as a believer before they can become full members of the church. Many Baptist churches are prepared to recognise that some people have become believers in another Christian tradition and will not insist on believers' baptism as a prerequisite for membership. However, this would probably need to be discussed and most Baptist churches would expect that whatever the shape of an individual's pilgrimage they would have been baptised at some time, even if this was infant baptism. Sometimes when a person has not been confirmed it is appropriate to explore whether baptism by immersion might be appropriate. In many churches new members are asked to affirm their faith when they are received into membership.

Church membership is a practice which helps to build strong churches and so, is good for individuals and good for the church.

Baptist Basics

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