
RETHINKING THE CHURCH: BAPTIST DISTINCTIVES

AN ASSEMBLY OF SAINTS

A message presented by Pastor Marc Minter
to First Baptist Church of Diana, TX on March 5, 2017

INTRODUCTION

Southern Baptists are historically a people of deep conviction. They tend to have strong feelings about things, and they tend to voice those feelings with boisterous arguments. Over the decades, it has become clear that Southern Baptists have some distinctive marks. One of those distinctives is a Southern Baptist definition of church membership. In this message, we will look at what Southern Baptists have understood the Bible to teach regarding church membership, and we will be challenged to consider our own practices in light of this teaching.

1 CORINTHIANS 1:1-9

1 Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes,

2 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:

3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

4 I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, 5 that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge— 6 even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you— 7 so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, 8 who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

THE POINT I'M AIMING AT TODAY

Christ is Lord of our church, for we are His church; so, we should do membership His way.

MESSAGE OUTLINE

- (1) WHAT IS A LOCAL CHURCH?
- (2) WHERE IS 'CHURCH MEMBERSHIP' IN THE BIBLE?
- (3) WHAT IS A BIBLICAL OR HEALTHY CHURCH MEMBER?
- (4) SOME IMPORTANT QUESTIONS WE SHOULD ASK OURSELVES

MESSAGE

An introductory statement:

Statistically, 6 out of 10 teenagers who regularly attend church will be totally uninvolved in any form of local church by the time they are 30 years old. Many people have tried to nail down the various reasons for this mass exodus, but there is often an assumption that things like style, methods, music, architecture, and other observable factors are primary.

However, in a book recently authored to consider what the Southern Baptist Convention will look like in the future, the statement was made, "**Mark it down: our children are not running from our lifeless style and form; they're running from something intangible, something that's more difficult to get their arms around. They're running from a lifeless Christianity. And they're so turned off by it that they're running to *nothing* as an alternative.** But the tangible— what we can see and touch and hear— always takes the rap."¹

I am part of the exodus generation. I remember what it felt like to leave home and realize that I would never have to go to church again if I didn't want to. I had grown up in church, I had gone through all the motions, I had been baptized before I was 10 years old, and I had no real understanding of the difference Jesus was supposed to make in my life.

I want to consider the question: ***Is Christianity (as we live it) lifeless?***

Or another way, ***Is our Christianity meaningful, weighty, serious, and vibrant?***

One way to measure this is how we treat church membership...

¹ Dockery, David S. (2009-06-08). Southern Baptist Identity: An Evangelical Denomination Faces the Future (p. 205). Crossway. Kindle Edition.

(1) WHAT IS A LOCAL CHURCH?

- The *Distinction* of a “Local Church”
 - From our passage:
 - The Local Church: “To the church of God that is *in Corinth...*” (v2)
 - The Universal Church: “together with *all those* who *in every place call upon* the name of our Lord Jesus *Christ*” (v2)
 - Our confession of faith:
 - The Universal Church: “*We believe that the Church is the invisible and universal Body of Christ, composed of all of those who have believed the gospel* unto salvation...”
 - The Local Church: “*We believe a New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the two ordinances of Christ, governed by His laws, exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth.*”²

- The *Definition* of a “Local Church”
 - An Assembly of Saints
 - The Apostle is not writing to a building, institution, or program...
 - He is writing to a *gathering* (assembly) of *Christ-followers* (saints).
 - An “Assembly” (or a local church) is further defined by Scripture
 - 1) *a group distinct from the world*
 - “*crooked generation*” and “*those who received his word*” [Acts 2:40-41]
 - 2) *a gathering of numbered and publically baptized Christians*
 - “*those who received his word – the Gospel – were baptized*” and “*there were added about 3,000*” [Acts 2:41]

² See the full Confession of Faith for FBC Diana at <http://www.fbcdiana.org/we-believe-at-fbc/>

- 3) ***a group devoted to learning and submitting to the Scriptures***
 - “devoted to the apostles’ teaching” [Acts 2:42]
- 4) ***a group devoted to one another***
 - “devoted themselves to fellowship” [Acts 2:42]
- 5) ***a group assembled under the leadership of pastors/elders***
 - “devoted to the apostles’ teaching” [Acts 2:42; cf. Eph. 2:19-22, 4:11-14]
 - We will get to *Number 5* on another Sunday.

(2) WHERE IS ‘CHURCH MEMBERSHIP’ IN THE BIBLE?

- No Single Verse
 - If you look for the “church membership” section of the Bible, you won’t find it.
 - This is also true of the Tri-unity of God, the divinity of Christ, the definition of marriage, the binary gender categories of humanity, the responsibilities of fatherhood and motherhood, and a host of other things.
 - Most of the teachings we hold dear are built upon a harmonization of many passages and the general instruction of the Bible as a whole.

4 Features of Church Membership as described in the Bible (& listed above)

1. Distinct from the world – “Ekklesia”³

- This common word for “church” comes from two words: *ek* – *out of* and *kaleō* – *to call*
 - Paul urges the Galatian Christians to “do good to **everyone**, especially **those who are of the household of faith**” (Gal. 6:10)

³ *Ekklesia* is in the Septuagint (LXX) to refer to the assembly of God’s people

- “*everyone*” implies universal humanity
- “*those of the household of faith*” implies an exclusive membership

2. A Numbered list & Publically Baptized

- Numbered roster
 - Acts 1:15 – the “*brothers*” numbered “*about 120*”
 - Acts 2:41 – “*there were added that day about 3,000*”
 - Acts 4:4 – “*many of those who heard the word believed, and the number of men came to about 5,000*”
 - Acts 4:32 – “*the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul*” and they demonstrated their unity by sharing their material possessions
 - The first known ‘transfer of letter’ came from Paul
 - Writing to Philemon, Paul said, “*I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment... if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me...*” (Philemon 10, 17)
- Baptism as entrance into church family
 - When Peter preached the Gospel to the Jews gathered in Jerusalem at Pentecost, “*those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls*” (Acts 2:41).
 - When Philip preached to the Samaritans, “*they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, [and] they were baptized, both men and women*” (Acts 8:12).
 - Jesus said, “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. [As you go...] Go therefore and make disciples of all nations [“ethnos” or peoples], baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you...*” (Matt. 28:18–20).

3. Learning and Submitting to the Scriptures

- The Great Commission is to learn, submit, and teach
 - Jesus said, “**All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.** [As you go...] **Go therefore and *make disciples* of all nations [“*ethnos*” or peoples], *baptizing them* in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, *teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you*...” (Matt. 28:18–20).
 - Learning about Christ’s person and work
 - “*make disciples... baptizing them*” (v19)
 - “*teaching... all that I have commanded*” (v20)
 - Submitting to Christ’s authority
 - “*All authority... given to me*” (v18)
 - “*observe all that I have commanded*” (v20)**
- “In” and an “Out” of membership is tied to learning and submitting
 - Paul commands the church of Corinth, “**I am writing to you *not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother* if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler” (1 Cor. 5:11).
 - “*bears the name of brother*” implies a label of membership among the family of faith
 - “*not associate*” implies a cutting from the membership and fellowship attached to it**

4. Church Members are devoted to “one another”

- First, Christians are not responsible *to* or *for* every other Christian in the same way
 - At the close of his letter to the church of Colossae, Paul says, “***when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans...***” (Col. 4:16).
 - “*you*” = “*saints and faithful brothers at Colossae*” (Col. 1:2).
 - “*the church of the Laodiceans*” = a distinct “church”

- Second, Christians are uniquely responsible to their particular church family (the ‘one anothers’)
 - “*Be devoted to one another in brotherly love...*” (Romans 12:10)
 - “*Live in harmony with one another...*” (Romans 12:16)
 - “*...Instruct one another.*” (Romans 15:14)
 - “*...Have concern for one another.*” (1 Corinthians 12:25)
 - “*...Serve one another in love.*” (Galatians 5:13)
 - “*Carry one another’s burdens...*” (Galatians 6:2)
 - “*Be kind and compassionate to one another...*” (Ephesians 4:32)
 - “*...Build one another up...*” (1 Thessalonians 5:11)
 - “*Confess your sins to one another...*” (James 5:16)
 - “*...Pray for one another.*” (James 5:16)
 - “*...Love one another.*” (1 John 3:11) and 16 other times elsewhere

(3) WHAT IS A BIBLICAL OR HEALTHY CHURCH MEMBER?

The Apostle Paul gives us several defining marks in our passage:

“the church of God [local church, ‘*that is in Corinth*’]” is made up of

- (1) “those [who are] sanctified in Christ Jesus” (v2)
- (2) those who are “called to be saints” (v2)
- (3) those who are “enriched in all speech and all knowledge” (v5)
- (4) those who are “in the fellowship” with Christ and one another (v6, 9)
- (5) those who live under Christ as “Lord.” (v2, 9)

1. A Healthy Church Member is a *Christian*⁴ “*sanctified in Christ*”

- To be “*sanctified in Christ*” is to be counted *pure* and *holy* before God
 - Paul says later in this letter, “Do you not know that the *unrighteous* will not inherit the kingdom of God?” (1 Cor. 6:9). “And such were some of you. But you were washed, *you were sanctified*, you were justified *in the name of* the Lord Jesus *Christ and by the Spirit of our God*” (1 Cor. 6:11).

2. A Healthy Church Member is *Striving for Holiness* “*called to be saints*”

- Not only are Christians “*sanctified in Christ*” (made pure and holy before God), Christians are also being made holy and pure in their practice.
 - After clearly proclaiming that salvation is a gift of sheer grace, the Apostle Paul says, “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are *fellow citizens* with the *saints* and *members* of the *household of God*, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, 21 in whom the whole structure, being *joined together*, grows *into a holy temple* in the Lord. 22 In him *you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit*” (Eph. 2:19–22).

3. A Healthy CM is a *Student of Christ* “*enriched in speech and knowledge*”

- Learning for the sake of mutual instruction
 - “I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, *filled with all knowledge* and *able to instruct one another*” (Rom. 15:14).
 - “*As you excel* in everything—in faith, in *speech*, in *knowledge*, in all earnestness, and in our love for you—see that you excel in this act of grace also” (2 Cor. 8:7).

⁴ R. Stanton Norman, in his book *The Baptist Way*, said, “An emphasis upon a regenerate church membership has historically been so dominant in Baptist life that some Baptist leaders have contended that this theological tenet is the core distinctive for Baptists.” He went on to say, “Christ has determined that only those who have experienced the new birth can be members of His church. [Therefore], churches ...should admit into their memberships only those who can give testimony and evidence that they have been born again.”

- Even those who are not ‘academic’ are to be skilled in ‘knowledge’
 - Paul comparing himself to ‘super-apostles’ said, “***Even if I am unskilled in speaking, I am not so in knowledge...***” (2 Cor. 11:6).
 - The most essential job description for pastor/shepherds is to “***equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood...***” (Eph. 4:12–13).

4. A Healthy Church Member is **Present** “*in fellowship*”

- Accountability
 - “the testimony about Christ was confirmed ***among you...***” (v6)
- Encouragement
 - “you were ***called into the fellowship*** of his Son” (v9)

5. A Healthy Church Member is **Submitting to Christ as “Lord”** (v9)

- Paul refers to the Lordship of Christ 5 times in this opening of the letter
 - The “***Lord Jesus Christ***” is the authoritative name under which we gather (v2).
 - “Grace” and “peace” come from the “***Lord Jesus Christ***” (v3).
 - The “***Lord Jesus Christ***” is the one we are waiting for in eschatological hope (v7).
 - The “***Lord Jesus Christ***” is the one who will judge the guilt of sinners (v8).
 - We have fellowship in and because of “***Jesus Christ our Lord***” (v9).
 - The Lordship of Christ is essential to what Paul is going to teach in the remainder of the letter:
 - *Factions are bad... the Gospel binds you... purity and holiness are high on the priority list... marriage is a testimony of the Gospel... be content with your lot in life... etc.*

- **While the message is not easy, it is clear:** Christ only saves those over whom He is Lord
 - *“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 3:10)*

(4) SOME IMPORTANT QUESTIONS WE SHOULD ASK OURSELVES

- Is Jesus really the Lord of THIS church?
 - Do we actually live like His authority reigns supreme over all else?
- Are we (as a church family) operating as the Bible defines a local church?
 - Is our church family clearly marked out as distinct from the world?
 - Are we an honestly numbered body of baptized believers?
 - Are we primarily seeking to be learners and doers of God’s word?
 - Are we devoted to one another?
- Do we (as individual members) have a biblical perspective on church membership?
 - Do we expect that our membership should be the “*sanctified in Christ*” kind of Christian?
 - Do we expect that our membership should be striving towards growth in holiness?
 - Do we expect that our membership will be students of Christ Jesus?
 - Do we expect that our membership will be present?
 - Do we expect that our membership must submit to Christ as Lord?

Major Point: Christ is Lord of our church, for we are His church; so, we should do membership His way.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Dever, Mark. *What Is a Healthy Church?* Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007. Print.
- Dockery, David S. *Southern Baptist Consensus and Renewal: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Proposal.* Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2008. Print.
- Jamieson, Bobby, Mark Dever, and Jonathan Leeman. *Committing to One Another: Church Membership.* Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012. Print.
- Lawless, Charles E. *Membership Matters: Insights from Effective Churches on New Member Classes and Assimilation.* Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005. Print.
- Leeman, Jonathan. *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus.* Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012. Print.
- Norman, R. Stanton. *The Baptist Way: Distinctives of a Baptist Church.* Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2005. Print.
- Rainer, Thom S. *I Am a Church Member: Discovering the Attitude That Makes the Difference.* Nashville, TN: B&H Pub. Group, 2013. Print.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

Church Member! Fight to Attend by Geoffrey R. Kirkland

<http://vassaloftheking.blogspot.ca/2017/02/church-member-fight-to-attend-your.html>

Why Join a Church by Donald Whitney

<http://www.biblicalspirituality.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/Why-Join-a-Church.pdf>

12 Reasons Why Membership Matters by Jonathan Leeman

<https://9marks.org/article/journaltwelve-reasons-why-membership-matters/>

On Regenerate Church Membership And Church Member Restoration a Southern Baptist Convention Resolution from 2008

<http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/1189/on-regenerate-church-membership-and-church-member-restoration>

5 Reasons You Need to Join a Church by Tim Challies

<http://www.challies.com/christian-living/5-reasons-you-need-to-join-a-church>