

## **First Baptist Church**

### **Sermon 11: Here We Stand On Church Membership**

#### **Series: Here We Stand**

#### **Various Scriptures**

I grew up in a church of seventy or so in average attendance, in a rural town of 500 people, in the *Bible Belt*. How did one typically become a member of a church like that? In my home church, you simply walked forward at the invitation at the end of the service and told the pastor that you wanted to join the church. He would usually ask if you had been saved and baptized, and if the answer was “yes,” he would call over a deacon who had a little clip board with a card (bought from the Sunday School Board) entitled something like “Application for Church Membership.” The music leader would keep singing - *Just as I Am*, until the deacon got all of the information filled out. The music would stop and the deacon would hand the card to the pastor, the pastor would then introduce you to the church, give all the pertinent information about which church you were coming from, and the congregation would vote to accept you into membership. I never remember anyone being turned down.

If the person coming forward was coming to be saved, the process was similar. Instead of filling out the card, the deacon or the pastor himself would kneel down with you at the front pew and he would ask you if you were willing to repent of your sins and trust Jesus. If the answer was “yes,” and it most always was since that is why you came forward, the deacon or the pastor would then lead you through the sinner’s prayer, then you would be introduced to the church and everybody would celebrate your salvation. Before you left church, or soon thereafter, a date would be set for your baptism and the baptism made you a member of the church.

Later, I found out that my rural small church was not that different from larger churches in more highly populated areas in the Bible Belt. We moved to Knoxville when I was sixteen, and the church of about 300 received members basically the same way. When Kathy and I were married and moved to Nashville, the church we joined had about 350-400 in attendance, and they received members in a similar way.

To be fair, there were many things good about the three churches that I was a member of before being called to ministry. I am convinced that the casual, *hurry up*, no examination, low expectation way that members were received into most evangelical churches in the Bible Belt, is a foundational cause of a lot that is wrong with many evangelical churches today. The way of receiving members outside the Bible belt may not have been much better, but my experience was in the Bible belt. A sad fact is that many evangelical churches still receive members in a similar way to what I have described.

Let’s look more closely at the probable consequences of that traditional (at least in the Bible belt) way of receiving members.

First, because prospective members who join by letter, or statement, are not dealt with concerning assurance and evidence of salvation, there are likely many unconverted

people on church rolls. In many churches, prospective members are not even asked to share their testimony.

A second consequence is that most Baptist churches in the Bible Belt have inflated membership rolls that are often two, three, or even four times their attendance. In fact, there are so many members that the church cannot locate (the FBI couldn't locate many of them), that a new category of members was established – “inactive members.” In many churches those two categories of members are close to the number of active members and even larger in some churches.

A third devastating consequence of the way churches have received members, and treat membership, is that formal church discipline has all but been ignored in most Baptist churches, at least in the Bible Belt. When I speak of church discipline, I am speaking of the biblical practice of lovingly confronting sin in the body of Christ that is openly bringing reproach on Christ and the church. Jesus outlined the church discipline process in Matthew 18:15-17 (ESV):

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

We will deal with the subject of church discipline in a later *Here We Stand* message, but church discipline is all but impossible in a church that can't even find a large portion of their members.

A fourth consequence, of the way many churches have treated membership, is that there are many members who sometimes attend, but are involved in no ministry. Though there are many causes of that sad situation, one main cause is that expectations for members are not made clear when someone joins the church. There are many other consequences to treating membership lightly, but just these four ought to motivate us to give membership the priority it deserves.

I want to approach this topic by asking a series of questions.

## **I. The “What” Question: “What Is the Church?”**

The root cause of the problem with church membership is that most professing Christians do not understand “ecclesiology” – the doctrine of the church (the Greek word for “church” is *ecclesia*). The word *church* is used in two primary ways in the New Testament and the context makes it clear as to which of the two each passage is referring.

First, the church is sometimes referring to what Wayne Grudem calls “the community of all true believers of all time.” This concept of the church is sometimes called “the invisible church” or “the universal church.” An example of this use of the word *church* is in Ephesians 5:25 (ESV): “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave

himself up for her.” There are about twelve uses of the word *church* that is referring to *the invisible church* or *the universal church*.

Second, the majority of the time that the word *church* is used in the New Testament epistles it is referring to a specific group of people in a specific location. This is often called, “the local church” or “the visible church.” In the New Testament, about ninety-nine times when the word *church* is used, it is referring to a specific church in a specific locality. When we talk about the church in this message, we are referring to the local, visible church.

The Protestant Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century was primarily about the doctrine of salvation, but it was also about the doctrine of the church. Arguably, the two prominent personalities in the Reformation were Martin Luther and John Calvin. Both of them often spoke about the doctrine of the church and they were mostly in agreement.

The Augsburg Confession (1530), which was the Lutheran statement of faith, said this about the church: “The church is a congregation of the saints in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the sacraments rightly administered.” John Calvin’s definition of the church was, “Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists.” [Both quoted in Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, page 865]

A commonly agreed upon statement of the purpose of a church is that a true church exists for:

1. Ministry to God – Worship
  2. Ministry to Believers – Edification
  3. Ministry to the World – Making Disciples at Home and Around the World
- [All three adapted from Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* pages 867-868]

A true church must practice the proclamation of Word, the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, baptism, worship, edification (being built up), and disciple making, locally, and around the world. But there is something else about the church that is not understood in our culture. The church has been delegated authority by the founder and builder of the church – the Lord Jesus Christ. Make no mistake that Jesus is the ultimate authority that we must all submit to.

The simplest early church confession was “Jesus Christ is Lord.” Jesus Himself said in Matthew 28:18b (ESV): “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” The Lord Jesus who has all authority has delegated some authority to the Government. Romans 13:1a (ESV): “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.” We are to submit to the government’s authority unless it contradicts Christ’s authority.

God has delegated some authority to the family. The wife is to submit to her husband unless he violates Christ’s ultimate authority. The children are to submit to their parent’s authority unless the parent’s authority violates Christ’s authority. In the same way Christ has delegated authority to the church. “The local church is the authority on earth that Jesus has instituted to officially affirm and give shape to my Christian life and yours.

[Jonathan Leeman, *Church Membership*, page 24]

Jonathan Leeman gives a good summary:

Just as the Bible establishes the government of your nation as your highest authority on earth when it comes to your citizenship in that nation, so the Bible establishes the local church as your highest authority on earth when it comes to your discipleship to Christ and your citizenship in Christ's present and promised nation.

[Leeman, page 25]

The church has authority to determine the requirements for joining, authority in church discipline to remove a person from membership, authority to determine who is baptized and who does the baptizing, who receives and administers the Lord's Supper, what constitutes false teaching, and many other things. When you join a local church, it is not like joining a club or a civic organization; you are putting yourself under the authority of that church. Only when the church's authority contradicts Christ's ultimate authority are we to refuse to submit.

## **II. The "Where" Question: "Where Is Church Membership in the Bible?"**

You will not find the phrase "church membership" in the New Testament, but I believe that we clearly see church membership there.

Let's go back to the beginning of the church on the day of Pentecost that is recorded in Acts 2. When the Holy Spirit came upon the believers to unite them with Christ, indwell them, and fill them, Peter began to preach, and we are told in Acts 2:41 (NKJV): "Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them."

Who is the *them* that was added to? It was the 120 persons in the upper room waiting for the promised coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:15). Now, after the Day of Pentecost, there were about 3,120! The point is that they had records; they kept track of individuals.

As they continued in the apostles' doctrine, fellowship, prayers, and taking the Lords Supper together, we are told in Acts 2:47b: "And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved." They knew who these people were.

In the early church, elders (also called overseers and bishops) were made responsible for specific groups of believers. 1 Peter 5:2 (NIV): "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers..." We see that same principle in Acts 20:28 (NKJV): "Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood." It was the elders of a specific local church, in a specific location (Ephesus), that Paul spoke of. They knew that they had the responsibility to oversee a specific group of professing Christians.

Another line of evidence for church membership is that Christians were to submit to specific leaders - Hebrews 13:7: "Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of *their* conduct."

Are you seeing the pattern? New believers were added to the local church, and there were records that revealed who they were and how many there were. There were specific elders over specific believers, in a specific location, and the believers in local churches were to submit to their leaders - who watched over their souls.

All who came to Christ that we know about in the early church were baptized and then they were "added to the church." When a person who was identified with a specific church was involved in sin that was bringing reproach on Christ and His church, they were exhorted, in love, to repent. If they did not repent they were put out of the church (1 Corinthians 5:11-13). There was a specific group of people who were recognized as making up the local church. In 2 Corinthians 2:6, Paul refers to a man on which the church carried out church discipline and says, 2 Corinthians 2:6 (NKJV): "This punishment which *was inflicted* by the majority is sufficient for such a man." *Majority* of what? That only makes sense if there was a recognized membership.

### **III. The "How" Question: How Does One Become a Member of a Church?**

If there was some type of membership in the New Testament church, what was the requirement to join? There is no list of requirements found in the New Testament, but by synthesizing what the New Testament says about the church, it seems that there were at least two requirements.

#### **A. Salvation**

That certainly should come as no surprise to us! The church is the body of Christ, the family of God, and the bride of Christ. All of those depictions of the church assume that those in the church are truly saved people. Acts 2:47b says, "And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved." We, of course, do not know in a final, perfect way who is saved and who is not. But, it seems to me that the church has a responsibility to help a potential member who is joining the church examine their life to discern if they truly are a Christian. The Bible gives us a tool to do just such an examination. That tool is the book of 1 John. John tells us why the Holy Spirit inspired him to write the book of 1 John in 1 John 5:13: "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life..." The book of 1 John contains a series of tests for a person to examine their life to see if they truly have eternal life. Every person who joins this church goes through those self-graded tests.

#### **B. Baptism**

The only kind of water baptism taught in the New Testament is believer's baptism. There are some very godly people who believe in infant baptism. The primary case for infant baptism is based on some interpretations, that I don't agree with, and on human logic. They believe that water baptism replaced the sign of the old covenant which was the circumcision of infant boys. They leap to the conclusion that the sign of the new covenant (which they say is baptism) should be administered to infants of believing

parents. I believe that the evidence of Scripture does not teach that baptism replaced circumcision. The two are compared, but baptism was not the replacement for circumcision. The fact is that there is never a command to baptize infants and every example of water baptism is of believers.

Baptism in the New Testament is primarily a public profession of faith in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as our only hope for salvation. It is also a testimony of our identification with Christ, through the Holy Spirit, baptizing us into Christ at salvation. Not only did Christ die, the old us under sin's slavery died with Him. Not only was He buried, the old us, in Adam, was buried with Him. When He rose from the dead, we were raised to a new life, with a new nature, being partakers of Christ's resurrection life (which is called "eternal life"). The identification with Christ that water baptism pictures is described in Romans 6:3-5:

Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be *in the likeness of His* resurrection.

While the New Testament does not teach that baptism saves us, the New Testament knows nothing of a saved person who refuses to be baptized. The assumption in the New Testament is that all Christians have been baptized. Why would the early church assume that? It was because Jesus commanded it! Matthew 28:19: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

To be His disciple is to submit to His Lordship. How could a person come to Jesus and say, "I trust in You alone to save me; I confess you as Lord of life, but the first thing you told me to do after I become your disciple, well, I think I'll take a rain check on that one; maybe later?"

The mode of baptism is total immersion in water. We believe that for two reasons: First, that is the meaning of the Greek word for baptism. It means to immerse. Second, only immersion gives an accurate picture of what baptism is to picture – our union with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection. The two qualifications for membership are genuine salvation and believer's baptism.

#### **IV. The "What Then" Question: What Comes After Church Membership?**

As a member of a church, you have a responsibility that is twofold.

##### **A. Members Are Responsible to Remain in Covenant**

Though it is nowhere specifically stated in the New Testament that joining a church has all of the qualities of a biblical covenant. A covenant is a commitment based on trust and involving personal relationship. *Covenant* is the language of personal relationship.

Think of the most important commitments in your life and you will see that they are covenant commitments that involve the deepest personal relationships you have.

There is the covenant of marriage. Marriage is a commitment based on trust that we will love and cherish one another through sickness, health, poverty, and riches until death do us part. Marriage is called a covenant in Malachi 2:14: “Yet you say, “For what reason?” Because the Lord has been witness between you and the wife of your youth, With whom you have dealt treacherously; Yet she is your companion And your wife by covenant.”

When we really understand the significance of joining a local church, we see that it has all the qualities of a biblical covenant. All of the commitments in joining a church are in trust and in the realm of personal relationship. We make a commitment to God to worship Him in spirit and in truth and to represent Christ as a part of His body; we make a commitment to one another to love, edify, and serve. That’s got covenant written all over it!

Until the middle of the last century, it was common to require people to sign a covenant that summarized the commitment expected before they could join the church. I think that abandoning of that practice has contributed to the “consumer mindset” (what can you do for me) that plagues the church today. We have gone over the covenant with prospective new members for many years in the First Step Class, but a few years ago, we started asking them to sign it before joining. In this series, each of you will get a copy of that covenant. It is not a bunch of legalistic rules, but a summary of very clear biblical expectations for those who are members of the church Christ is building.

### **B. Members Are Responsible to Exercise Their Spiritual Gifts**

Every believer has been given a Spiritual Gift. 1 Peter 4:10: “As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.” It is in exercising our spiritual gifts that the body of Christ is edified (built up).

### **Conclusion**

How dare we make little of what is so important in the New Testament! Are you a church member? If not, why not? If you are a member, are you living in covenant with the other members of the body?