



BAPTISTS BELIEVE IN A REGENERATE CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

“Where is your church located?” The expected response to this question likely would be a street address where a building is located. But a church is not a building. A church is a fellowship of people who live in many different locations ... a very special kind of people.

Who Should Be a Member of a Church?

Baptists have used various terms to describe their concept of church, such as believer’s church, regenerate church, gathered church, voluntary church, born-again church and fellowship of the redeemed.

Whatever term is used, the meaning is basically always the same: A church is a fellowship of persons who have voluntarily followed Jesus as Lord and voluntarily associated with one another under his lordship and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Thus Baptists believe that **only** saved persons should be members of a church. Baptists also believe that saved persons **ought** to be members of a church. While becoming a Christian is an **individual response** of faith, growing as a Christian is enhanced by fellowship with other Christians. The Christian life was designed not as a solo endeavor but as a fellowship experience, with a church being the primary fellowship.

The New Testament concept of church focuses on a local body of baptized believers in Christ. However, in a few New Testament passages the word “church” also refers to the redeemed of all the ages (Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 5:23-32; Colossians 1:18).

Although Baptists believe that church membership should include only the redeemed in Christ, they encourage and welcome all persons to attend various activities of the church. For example, worship services, Bible studies and ministry events are open to all persons.

Why Should Only Believers Be Members of a Church?

For Baptists the Bible is the sole written authority for faith and practice. **Baptists believe that the Bible teaches that only persons who have been born again should be members of a church.** This new birth does not come by merely reciting facts about Jesus but by a genuine experience of faith in him (John 3:1-21).

The New Testament speaks of a church as being made up of persons who have experienced salvation through faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The book of Acts states about the church in Jerusalem, “And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47 NIV). In both their salutation and content the letters of Paul in the New Testament to various churches indicate that a church is to be made up of persons who have been redeemed (1 Corinthians 1:2; 12:12-31).

The ideal of a born-again church membership has not always been achieved, even in New Testament times. **Although a pure born-again church membership may not be possible, it is nevertheless a goal worth pursuing. Therefore, Baptist churches**

“And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.”

Acts 2:47

endeavor to accept as members only persons who have been redeemed.

How Do Baptist Churches Accept Members Into Their Fellowship?

Membership in a Baptist church is always to be voluntary. Therefore, persons request to be members. They are not compelled to be members. Baptist churches strive in several ways to maintain a born-again membership by how they admit persons to membership.

When a person who has never been a member of any church requests membership in a Baptist church, he or she is asked to give evidence of having trusted in Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Savior. Furthermore, Baptist churches require that a person experience believer’s baptism before becoming a member. **Therefore, a person seeking membership is asked both to make a profession of faith in Christ and to be baptized.**

When a person who is already a member of a Baptist church seeks membership in another Baptist church, normally the person is accepted on the basis of that prior membership. At one time some Baptist churches issued actual “letters” indicating that a person was a member and the person took the “letter” when moving to another church. Today, the term “coming by letter” usually indicates that the church receiving the member will contact the other church about the transfer of membership. The term “coming by statement” normally means that the church of which the person was a member no longer exists or that for a variety of reasons the record could not be obtained.

But what if a person seeking membership in a Baptist church is a member of a church other than Baptist? Baptist churches, being autonomous, respond in various ways. The response depends both on the church background of the person seeking membership as well as on the policies of the church.

Generally speaking, if such a person has not been baptized by immersion as a believer in Christ, a Baptist church will require that he or she indicate faith in Christ and be baptized before becoming a member. If the person has been immersed as a believer, but that baptism was considered necessary for salvation, most Baptist churches will require the person to be baptized before becoming a member; this is done in order to make clear that baptism, while important, is not necessary for salvation.

If the person has been immersed as a believer and understands that it was a way to testify symbolically that he or she had been born again, some Baptist churches will accept such a person into membership. Other Baptist churches will ask the person to be baptized in a Baptist church.

Although a few Baptist churches may accept as members persons who profess faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior whether or not they have been baptized by immersion as believers, most do not. The vast majority of Baptist churches take very seriously the importance of believer’s baptism by immersion.

What Are Other Factors Related to Membership in a Baptist Church?

Churches differ on whether persons should be baptized and admitted into membership immediately upon their profession of faith or whether there should be a delay. Some baptize persons very soon after they have made a profession of faith. Others require persons, especially children, to go through a process of counseling before being baptized.

Some churches require all persons seeking membership to be counseled concerning their experience of salvation and commitment to church membership. Some also expect persons to attend a class for new members. Many do neither.

Baptist congregations vote on a person’s request for membership. The congregation is not voting on whether the person is saved or not. That is a matter between the individual and God. Rather, the church members are participating in Baptist congregational governance under the lordship of Christ.

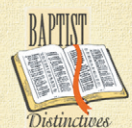
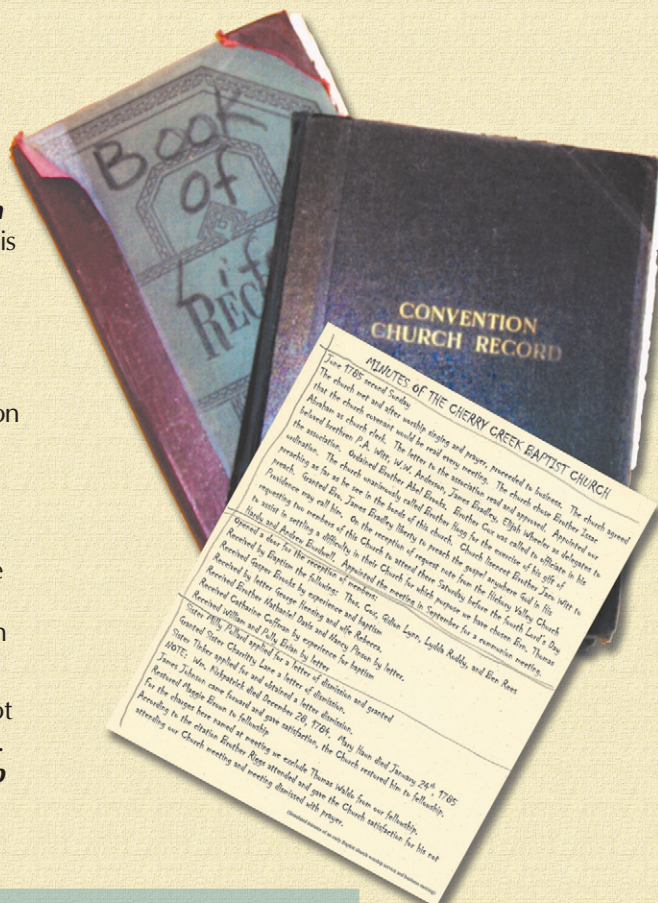
Conclusion

The belief in a regenerate church membership is a basic Baptist conviction. This concept is part of the recipe of beliefs and polities that makes “a Baptist a Baptist.” The next article will discuss why this Baptist distinctive is important and ways in which it is being tested.

For further information on regenerate church membership, see www.baptistdistinctives.org.

“Although Baptists share many core convictions with other Christian groups, our insistence on a regenerate church membership is one of our hallmarks.”

Warren McWilliams
in *Defining Baptist Convictions*



Wanting to share information about Baptist distinctives, Noble Hurley, shortly before his death in 2004, established the Jane and Noble Hurley Baptist Identity Fund for the purpose of publishing this series and asked William M. Pinson Jr. and Doris A. Tinker to prepare the articles. © (Article 9)