

BAPTISTS:



Regenerate Church Membership In Peril?

The ideal of a believers' church consistently appears in Baptist confessions of faith. Baptist theologians, pastors and other leaders through the centuries have held up no other model than that of a born-again church fellowship. That's the ideal. But is this the reality?

Is There Evidence of a Decline in Regenerate Church Membership?

The distinguished Baptist historian William R. Estep stated, **"Baptists in the United States are perilously close to losing their insistence upon a regenerate church membership."**

Other observers of Baptist life agree with Estep and cite as evidence for this conclusion such factors as the huge number of non-resident Baptist church members and the characteristics of many resident members with their lack of involvement in church life, a low level of financial support, little commitment to evangelism, missions and ministry, and a life style obviously contrary to the teachings of Jesus.

Of course, some of these factors may be the result of conditions other than an unregenerate condition, such as being "backslidden" or perhaps immature as a Christian (1 Corinthians 3:1-3; Ephesians 4:11-16). And certainly, numerous church members are wonderfully dedicated followers of Christ. Yet it would seem that these factors would not exist in such abundance if members of churches were truly born again.

Why Has the Ideal of Regenerate Church Membership Been Eroded?

Although such conditions have existed in one measure or another since New Testament times, evidence seems to indicate that their incidence is increasing. No simple explanation exists for this apparent erosion of regenerate church membership. The causes vary from church to church. Furthermore, not all churches are equally affected.

One contributing factor to this erosion seems to be a super tolerant attitude which prevails in our culture today. In church life this attitude could be translated, "It is not right for me to judge whether a person is saved or lost and acceptable for church membership." As a result, some churches accept persons into membership with little or no in-depth discussion with them about the nature of salvation and church membership. Such a discussion is significant because salvation is more important than church membership and ideally should always precede church membership. A person may know all of the facts about Jesus and the "right answers" about salvation (head knowledge) without ever having truly experienced the grace gift of salvation in Christ (heart knowledge).

Evaluating the spiritual condition of others ought to be done very prayerfully, humbly and thoughtfully. Jesus warned about judging others when our own sins are great (Matthew 7:1-5;

"For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a man is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God."

Ephesians 5:5 (NIV)

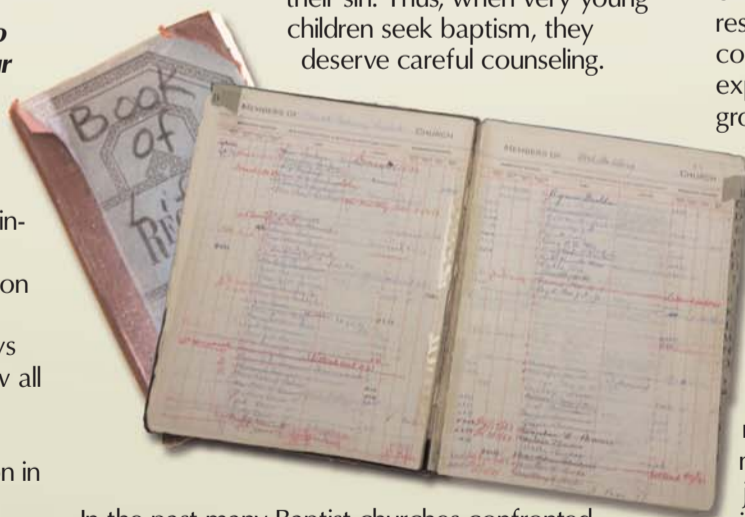
John 8:1-11). A pharisaical, harsh, legalistic holier-than-thou approach does not serve the cause of Christ well. On the other hand, failure to heed the Bible's emphasis on the importance of a born-again fellowship that is abiding by Christ's teachings does disservice to Christ's cause also (1 Corinthians 5:9-13; Ephesians 5:1-7,27; 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15; Revelation 2:18-22).

The very nature of our society adds to the challenge of maintaining a regenerate membership.

For example, in our highly mobile and largely urban society often little is known about persons seeking membership in a church. This circumstance, combined with uneasiness on the part of church members concerning judging others, creates the likelihood that persons who may not have been redeemed will be accepted into membership.

The pressure for increased size of church membership is cited as another cause. C. E. Colton observed from the perspective of a lengthy pastorate, "High pressure methods of evangelism by some well-meaning zealots result in decisions to join a church without true conversion."

The baptism of very young children into church membership may also be a cause. Some children may seek baptism for wrong reasons; indeed anyone may. But children seem more likely to want to be baptized because their friends are being baptized or because they feel pressure from parents or Sunday School teachers to be baptized. Of course, some children may understand very well that they need Jesus as personal savior because of their sin. Thus, when very young children seek baptism, they deserve careful counseling.



In the past many Baptist churches confronted members about behavior that was considered contrary to the Christian life. If such persons were unrepentant, they were subject to dismissal from membership. Various scriptures were cited to support such action, such as Matthew 18:15-20 and 1 Corinthians 5:9-13. Today churches generally tend to emphasize evangelistic preaching, discipleship and Christian growth, citing passages such as Galatians 6:1, Ephesians 4:1-5:21 and James 5:19-20. A goal in both approaches is a regenerate church membership.

Why Should a Decline in a Regenerate Church Membership Be a Concern?

The apparent decline in a regenerate church membership should be a concern for a number of reasons.

Neglect of such a crucial biblical teaching as a regenerate church membership may indicate a lack of commitment to the authority of the Bible.

Baptists have insisted that a church is to be a fellowship of believer priests. Growth as a Christian benefits from fellowship with other believer priests. When a church's membership is not made up of believer priests, the fellowship is not as conducive to Christian discipleship as it ought to be. **Thus, all of the members suffer.**

Baptists have also insisted that Christ is Lord not only of individuals but also of churches. Governance of a Baptist church is to be by the members under the lordship of Christ. If the members do not acknowledge Christ as Lord, then decisions are likely to be made apart from the will of Christ. **This means that the church will become increasingly secular and worldly.**

Such a worldly church likely will not give attention to the central purposes of a church, such as evangelism, missions and ministry. Thus, some of the very reasons for a church's existence likely will not be emphasized.

What Can Be Done to More Thoroughly Achieve a Regenerate Church?

Achieving a truly born-again church is a formidable challenge. Nevertheless, some things can be done, making prayer a primary ingredient in all that is done.

A church should emphasize the importance of a born-again church membership, stressing that a salvation experience ought always to precede church membership. Each person should assume responsibility for evaluating his or her spiritual condition, answering questions such as, "Have I truly experienced salvation by faith in Christ?" and "Am I growing as a Christian?" Persons should be urged to seek spiritual council if the answers are "no."

A church should establish an insightful, discerning and loving process that would evaluate whether persons seeking membership give evidence of having been born again.

A church should also maintain an effective class for prospective and new members to teach the plan of salvation, the importance of Christian maturity and the expectations for church members. Such a class should be both for those joining the church by profession of faith and those joining by letter or statement.

Conclusion

We ought to do all that we can, with God's help, to achieve the biblical goal of a born-again church. **Failure to try will result in terrible consequences for individuals, churches, and the advancement of the cause of Christ.**

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

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William R. Estep
Why Baptists?