

## **The Relationship of Baptism and Membership in the Local Church**

Should baptism and church membership be connected? If so, what is the nature of that connection?

Sincere, godly brothers have different perspectives on this issue! We all want the Lord of the harvest to be honored and His church to grow. Yet, we sometimes struggle toward full understanding and agreement. So we long for the day when we will know fully. In the meantime, we wrestle with these issues and hopefully, with the help of the Holy Spirit, we can arrive at some agreement as did the Early Church.

We are in agreement that we want the Early Church, as described in Acts, to be our pattern. We also agree that we envision all believers in committed, responsible, accountable relationships (“membership”) in a local body of believers. However, some feel that membership should not be tied to baptism and to do so would distort the Scriptural example. Others feel that to baptize without membership in a local body militates against the teaching of Scripture.

Are there any examples of membership being an optional, later choice?

### **Wasn't membership assumed in the Early Church?**

How else would you explain Acts 15, where the gathered church agreed to certain requirements for the Gentiles, and Paul and Silas were commissioned to share those requirements with the new believers in Asia Minor? If there was no membership, who would you submit to? We are indeed called to submit to each other. But for whom, then, are church leaders responsible? For whose souls do they watch? For everyone who calls himself a Christian? How then would you administer church discipline? (By the way, it is not just a job for the elders, but for the church—see 1 Corinthians 5.) What defines the “church”? How could you “put away from yourselves that wicked person” if there were no membership? What does it mean when it says, “Ye are members one of another”?

There are at least five “strands of evidence” for church membership in the New Testament. John Piper says that each of them reveals “something in the New Testament that would be minimized or denied if there was no definable local church membership.”

**1. The Church Is Instructed To Discipline Its Members** (Matthew 18:15-17). Notice that the church body is to be the final “court of appeal.” Without membership, how could you decide who the body is?

**2. Excommunication Exists** (1 Corinthians 5:12, 13). In today's world it seems even more important that we communicate well what excommunication is and how it can happen. Without church membership, how do we put someone out from among us? Who is the “us”?

**3. Christians Are Required To Submit To Their Leaders** (Hebrews 13:17). To which group of leaders should you submit if there were no membership?

**4. Shepherds Are Required To Care For Their Flock** (1 Peter 5:1-4). Whose souls do they “watch for” and give account for?

**5. The Metaphor Of The Body** (1 Corinthians 12:12-31). Romans 12:4 and 5 says, For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office, so we, [being] many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of other. Piper says, “There is something unnatural about a Christian attaching himself to a body of believers and not being a member of that body.”

It is true that membership in the early church does not appear to be as formal as it is today. However, that does not imply there was less accountability. More likely it was because they were all of one mind and all the churches believed the same things. Today, due to the great differences between different groups of believers, local church membership seems to be a way of clarifying to whom and for whom we are accountable and responsible. This is consistent with the Early Church in which there definitely was accountability and responsibility!

Perhaps the most important reason to connect baptism with church membership is the issue of the authority of Christ. How can a person say he is submitting to Christ if he is unwilling to submit to a local church? Certainly while a person can sincerely desire to follow Christ, an isolated believer can too easily define for himself what it means to obey his Master. Honestly, we are all capable of that. How can we love God whom we have not seen if we do not love our brother, whom we have seen? Similarly, how can we say we submit to Christ whom we have not seen if we do not submit to His body whom we can see? Submission in a local church demonstrates our submission to Christ. To encourage people to be baptized without submitting to a local church seems to be encouraging a Lord-less salvation. As Val Yoder says, “Are not spiritual orphans to receive greater pity than genetic ones? To assume that they need no family connections in a local church since God is their Father, is to deny the validity of the structures that God Himself set up.”

Finally, the Great Commission tells us to go . . . make disciples . . . baptize . . . teach all things. Those we baptize are to become disciples. Christ’s disciples to be sure, but then Paul also said, “Follow me as I follow Christ.” So, in a real sense, they are also our disciples. We must take responsibility to disciple them! How is disciple-making done? It is done through teaching, but not that alone. An important concept in Scripture and to the early Anabaptists was that discipling takes place in the context of the “Body.”

Certainly, we allow room for baptizing in unusual situations such as the Ethiopian eunuchs who are passing through. However, wasn’t that more of an exception rather than the rule? If one studies the Early Church, it seems that the greater distortion is assuming that someone could be baptized without also accepting accountability in the local church.

**Some concluding remarks:**

1. We should help people understand the conditions of salvation and steer them away from easy believe-ism followed by easy baptism, without a clear sense of following Christ as His obedient disciples.

2. We must find creative ways to connect baptism with church membership. How can someone embrace the authority of Christ without embracing the authority of His body? Ultimately, the authority of Christ needs a face or else the autonomy of the individual remains. A private, individualistic autonomy goes against our understanding of Scripture and of the Anabaptist vision of a church composed of committed disciples.

3. We need to teach new converts that church membership is important to all genuine believers. While we allow those who are not members to attend, and do not put undue pressure on them, we share our understanding of Scripture and then baptize those who want to obey Christ as His disciples or followers (Matthew 28).

4. Here are some possible ways this can be worked out in practical terms:

a. Explain carefully the authority of Christ and His Church, then baptize upon evidence of true conversion with membership in the local church taking place in conjunction with baptism.

b. Wait for baptism until the candidate is prepared to accept membership. This has historically been the most accepted option for our established local churches.

c. If converts are baptized without full membership, they should be willing to be discipled regularly for a specified period of time until membership is understood more fully and embraced.

5. Let us agree to allow flexibility in a variety of situations around the world as we work together with creativity under the guidance of the Holy Spirit toward our common goal: responsible, obedient disciples of Jesus Christ who meet together as members of a committed local group of believers.

—By Clyde Byler with input from Allen Roth (10/09). Written originally for the DNI Board.

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Bibliography:

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Val Yoder, I Will Build My Church

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