

2 Perspectives on Church Membership

Is Church Membership something around which your church unites, or is it something over which opinion divides? We are conscious of a growing diversity of views in the churches, and here is a summary of the arguments we are hearing:

A. Baptist Church Membership – An outdated concept that needs to be re-evaluated?

Why?

1. It is not 'biblical' to define church membership in constitutional terms. In the New Testament people were made members of the body of Christ through baptism and the activity of the Holy Spirit, not through some ritual of acceptance at the local level.
2. Membership evolved in a different historical context when it really mattered who was 'in' and 'out' because of persecution, vulnerability to heresy and fear of informants.
3. In the past believing preceded belonging. Today the mission imperative is changed – people usually need to belong before they can grow to believe. Inclusion is thus more important missionally than exclusion.
4. As the numbers of people with time and energy for service in church life diminish, church leaders are finding that restricting the body of those who can take responsibility for church life to only those who have been baptised by immersion and received into membership for over 6-12 months is just too limiting. There is a pragmatic need to widen the pool of people that can be drawn on.
5. Increasingly church meetings include all those who align themselves with the church, regardless of formal membership. Only votes to do with Schedule B issues (call of a senior pastor and sale of property) legally require membership to be crucial. This is seen as increasingly anomalous and lead some to argue that our constitutional understanding of membership be changed.
6. A growing percentage of people in Baptist churches do not have a Baptist heritage and denominational idiosyncrasies are seen as largely irrelevant, and often unhelpful to the process of moving forward as a church.

7. Today the word 'membership' smacks of institutionalism, obligation and similar ideas that are alien to contemporary minds, and which are counter to the way we seek to present the Christian community.
8. People seem happier to make shorter-term commitments that are renewed at some kind of annual covenant service.
9. It is therefore argued that we need a radical re-think of our Baptist understandings of membership to enable our ecclesiology to flow from our mission.

B. Membership – a vital aspect of Baptist Church life that needs to be valued and retained.

Church Membership in Baptist Churches expresses something that, whilst maybe needing some creative rethinking, remains a core value that should not be lost.

Why?

1. It is Biblical. It only makes sense to talk about membership of the universal church – the Body of Christ – when you are actually a member of its local expression. In the early church – when there were no denominations – conversion to Christ, baptism and becoming a member of the church were all part of the one event.
2. Having a membership ensures that the people making the decisions about church life, have clearly committed their lives to Christ through baptism and have made a commitment to this local expression of Christ's presence.
3. Membership thus offers a protection against maverick or malevolent voices in church, which can be very helpful at a pragmatic level.
4. Rather than lowering the bar to allow more people to come into membership, we should be raising the bar to encourage a higher degree of committed discipleship. The more distinct lifestyle and behaviour that this engenders is argued to be more effective in mission and evangelism.
5. Whilst people may knock membership as outmoded, what are the realistic alternatives? For key decisions churches still need to know who has the right to join in a vote. Lines have to be drawn

somewhere, and a concept of church membership still provides the core to a fellowship's identity and cohesion.

6. Membership is enshrined in the constitutions of most churches (through Schedule B, which is an Act of Parliament) and would take a lot of effort to change

Is it time for a rethink? Some churches are already trialling some alternative approaches. Come along to an elective at the October Gathering, to think some more about this topic and share your thoughts.