

TALKING POINT #3 DEMYSTIFYING CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

Introduction

There are many misunderstandings of Church membership. Some people will come from Church backgrounds where formal membership is not practised at all, while others will come from backgrounds where membership is almost equated with salvation and so we all bring our own histories and baggage to bear. A fair question is, "How is Church Membership understood at Forest Lake Baptist Church?" When we talk about "Church Membership" here, we are talking about the formal recognition of someone as a member of our Church, as noted in our Church Constitution but why do we do it? What does it mean? What does it mean for me?

Theological Considerations

When we first acknowledge Jesus Christ as our Saviour and Lord, we are immediately incorporated into his body (Ephesians 2:19-22). However, it is taken as given by the New Testament that Christians are committed in local Churches (Acts 2:47). So, for the New Testament, a Christian who is not actively involved in a local fellowship is an oxymoron! But, Church membership is not the same as when we are incorporated into Christ's body at salvation – we would not dare to claim that! Nor is formal Church membership the same thing as being involved in a local Church – you don't have to be a "member" to be a valued and important part of our Church – you are no less a "limb" if you're not a member.

But, there is another theological consideration that makes Church membership important and even necessary - Church governance. We believe in the autonomy of the local Church (see "Talking Point #2). That is, we believe God empowers each local assembly to discern His will and be "Church" in that place – where 2 or 3 are gathered in Christ's Name, there can be "Church." If we believe God will speak through the collective voice of His people in this place, it becomes necessary to have a system of recognising who is included in this group. This is where Church membership becomes important. In the process of Church membership, people give details of their conversion, baptism and personal testimony and in this way, we are able to recognise those who are saved and, as a result, should be part of the process of listening to God. If you're saved and part of this Church, we believe God will speak through you and if that's the case, we want you in membership!

A final point to be considered is that Church leaders are called to govern the Church and, from time to time, practise Church discipline. This is a delicate issue and not one to be taken lightly. Sometimes Church discipline will involve withdrawing a person from ministry in the Church and, in extreme cases, may even involve suspending someone's membership. In an age of so many choices for Church, this may seem a moot point – "if you suspend my membership, I'll just go somewhere else." But, we are exhorted to submit to our leaders and accept their leadership. Equally, leaders are called to lead in a way that submission is easy but by becoming a member you endorse the leaders to lead in a spiritual sense as well as the Vision the Church is pursuing with them.

Historical Considerations

Formal Church membership has been practised in Baptist Churches since the early days of the 17th Century. For the theological reasons listed above, it was necessary to record who was a Christian and, therefore, a member of the local body both spiritually and practically.

However, membership of the Church also became a significant badge for the early Baptists. To call oneself a member of a Baptist Church excluded a person from holding any government office or military rank. It stopped a person from receiving university education in Britain and it often brought on significant persecution. Church membership was not something one did lightly because in so doing, it pledged public allegiance to this local and independent expression of Christ's church in a world where Dissenters were unpopular.

These days, there is a smorgasbord of denominations that are equally Christian and valid – you don't have to be a Baptist to go to Heaven! Each in some way, depending on their model of Church governance, will keep a record of recognised Church members. In our situation, Church membership is our formal record (and constitutionally required) of those who profess faith in Jesus Christ and have committed themselves to the work of God in this place. Church membership is not just about having the "right" to vote at Church members meetings – it is a statement that God has called you to serve in this Church, under the leadership He ordains and in which you are, therefore, a member.

Denomination Considerations

We believe the "initiator rite" of the Church is baptism, which is a fancy way of saying that we believe the Bible teaches Believers Baptism – once you have confessed faith in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour, you are baptised as an outward expression of the inward intention to follow Christ. Accordingly, once a person becomes a Christian, we encourage them to be baptised and become a member. Some Baptist Churches will not admit someone to membership who has not been baptised as a believer. However, our Church Constitution provides that people can become members if they were baptised as infants because we still believe you are a Christian if you confess Jesus Christ as Lord and are therefore a member of this local body.

Personal Considerations

Church membership, then, is the way in which a person formalises what already exists. If a person is committed to a local Church, membership is how it's expressed. It is a statement of commitment to;

- This local fellowship of believers – the body
- To submit to the leaders and mission of this Church – the vision

If you are a baptised believer and you are committed to the body and vision of this Church, then you are effectively a member now – why not formalise that commitment?

Our Church Constitution requires members to strive to:

- remain true to his or her commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 6:1 11-15)
- study the Scriptures, pray, and engage in devotional activities on a regular basis, both individually and in family groups where appropriate (Psalm 119:11,105, Philippians 4:6, Deuteronomy 6:4-9)
- participate regularly in occasions of worship, prayer, fellowship, and teaching as offered by the church. (Hebrews 10:23-25).
- lead a Christ-like life characterised by love, humility, graciousness, peace prayerfulness, and good works in relationship with other believers and with those outside the Body of Christ (Galatians 5:22-6-10, Ephesians 4:1-6, Philippians 2:1-4)
- support, encourage and pray for all those in leadership within the church. (1 Timothy 5:1)
- live in submission to those who have spiritual oversight within the church (Hebrews 13:17)
- establish mutual accountability structures with another Christian person.
- contribute regularly to the financial support of this church, and as the Lord leads, to the support of God's work elsewhere (1 Corinthians 16:1-4, 2 Corinthians 8:1-9)
- participate in the Congregational Conferences and Members Meetings of the church. (Acts 6:1-17)
- actively engage in opportunities to spread the gospel message and extend the kingdom of God within this district and to the ends of the earth. (Matthew 28:18-20 Acts 1:8)
- be actively involved in a ministry in accordance with God's equipping and leading, under the spiritual oversight of the Pastoral Team. (Ephesians 4:11-12 , 1 Corinthians 12:4-11)

If you're committed to the body and vision of our Church, you'll already be doing most, if not all of these, so why not formalise it?

The Next Step?

So, if this makes sense to you, complete the application for membership on the last page and pass it to our Church Secretary. If you'd like more information, call Ps Mark.

Forest Lake
Community
Baptist Church



Application
for
Membership

Date of Application for Membership _____

Applicant's Name _____

Address _____

Telephone _____ Email _____

Please provide a brief statement about your conversion. _____

When and where were you baptised?

Are you currently a member of another Church? Yes / No

If yes, which church? _____

Statement by Applicant

I wish to apply for membership of the Forest Lake Community Baptist Church. I have read and accept the provisions within the Constitution of the Church.

Signature _____ Date _____

Office use only

Leaders Meeting

Letter to current church

Visited

Announced in Bulletin

Welcomed into membership