

Sermon: "To Join ... or Not to Join" (A Biblical Understanding of Church Membership)

I. Important Background Information:

A) What Does Church Membership Signify?

Church membership signifies a church's corporate endorsement of a person's salvation.

- If we believe that only genuinely converted Christians are to be members of the local church, then it makes sense to take time to hear people's testimonies and listen for evidences of godly fruit and increasing holiness in their lives.
- When the church approaches membership in this way, membership can function as the church's corporate witness to the fact that the new member does indeed increasingly display the fruits and characteristics of a genuine Christian.

Church membership signifies an individual commitment to grasp hold of one another in mutual love and discipleship.

- By identifying ourselves with a particular church, we let the pastors and other members of that local church know that we intend to be committed in attendance, giving, prayer, and service. (In short, we are saying "We're part of the family").
- We increase others' expectations of us in these areas, and we make it known that we are the responsibility of this local church. We assure the church of our commitment to Christ in serving with them, and we call for their commitment to serve us in love and to encourage us in our discipleship.
- In short, we enter a covenant relationship with that church and its leadership.

Church membership signifies a regular responsibility that involves people in each other's lives for the purposes of the gospel.

- Church membership should not be viewed as a loose affiliation useful to members only on occasion. This is a self-centered way of looking at membership. It says, "I want to join this club for the benefits that it can offer me. But as soon as it starts demanding more than I feel I'm receiving, I think I'll start looking around."
- Church membership is not a set of rights that I purchase with my tithe. It is a set of responsibilities that I commit myself to carrying out, both for and with other members in gospel fellowship, work, and joy.

Church membership signifies an inward love for God and His people.

- By joining ourselves with God's people in local church membership, we show that we want to covenant with them to help and be helped, encourage and be encouraged, rebuke and be rebuked. In other words, we show that we want to love God's people, and be loved by them.
- According to 1John, this willingness to love God's people is the fundamental indicator of our heart's disposition towards God Himself. *If someone says "I love God", but hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also (1John 4:20-21).*

B) What are the Criteria for Church Membership?

1) Regeneration

Churches should be careful to allow only genuine believers into the covenant of church membership. Why?

Because of who the church is.

- By definition, the church is the gathered people of God. Those who are not a part of that people are welcome as visitors. But membership in a local church only belongs rightly to those who already belong to God (and, therefore, to the universal church) by faith in His Son Jesus Christ.
- Unregenerate members do not share the same spiritual DNA as Christians. Infusing the Church with their blood will lead to complication, infection, and potential fatality.

Because of how the church operates.

- *(Eph 4:15-16).*
- The growth of the body comes from Christ. But Christ causes that growth through the instrumental working of each individual part. Unregenerate members therefore do not contribute to the growth of the body because they have no proper function in it.

Because of the covenant that membership signifies.

- To enter church membership is to enter into a covenant with the other members and the pastors. It is a commitment to being meaningfully involved in the lives of other members to do them good spiritually.
- Therefore, when we allow non-Christians into our membership, we are allowing them intimate access to the lives and struggles of other members - allowing them to informally counsel and comfort, rebuke and correct, teach and train.
- In limiting membership to Christians, we are protecting the flock from being infiltrated by wolves in sheep's clothing.

2) Observable Fruit

In discerning who is a genuine believer, the most reliable criteria for which we can look is the fruit of godly character and actions. Why demand such fruit?

Because Jesus advises us to do so.

- *Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will know them by their fruits (Matt 7:15-20).*
- Cf. also John 15:1-11; Gal 5:22-23; James 2:14-26; 2Peter 1:4-11; 1John 3:10.

Because other criteria are unreliable.

- Emotions ebb. Expressiveness in worship can be merely external. Clarity in talking about spiritual things has been achieved by the unconverted. Being entrusted with responsibilities or positions at church does not necessarily imply godliness. And the use of apparently spiritual gifts can be fatally deceptive (Matt 7:21-23).
- Increasing conformity to God's character is the only sure yardstick with which to measure the genuineness of Christian confession.

C) Why is “Meaningless” Membership Dangerous?

- It is “dangerous” for the following four reasons!:
- 1) **“Meaningless” membership sends a confusing witness to the surrounding community.**
 - It allows people to become members without feeling any particular obligation or accountability to live and teach what the church lives and teaches.
 - And so the poor behavior of many members in that kind of “**low accountability**” environment often taints the church's corporate witness in the community, and it confuses unbelievers around us (about what it means to be a Christian).
 - 2) **“Meaningless” membership causes division due to the sin of unconverted members.**
 - When we uncritically allow mere verbal professors of Christ to enjoy membership in the local church, such members can become sources of division within the church.
 - Division is especially likely if the verbal professor of Christianity has natural teaching ability and is able to propound his own views over against those of the church by teaching Sunday Schools or leading Bible studies with false motives. When this happens, meaningless membership has led to the infiltration of false teachers.
 - 3) **“Meaningless” membership causes ambiguity regarding the duties of membership.**
 - When we fail to tie church membership to specific duties, new members don't have any concrete understanding of what exactly they're committing to!
 - When members do not understand exactly what their responsibilities are, they are left without a practical yardstick by which to faithfully examine their own behavior, or to which they can hold their Christian brother or sister accountable.
 - 4) **“Meaningless” membership leads to the self-deception of irresponsible members.**
 - In other words, with no accountability or obligation, people who aren't really saved can float around (un-noticed) and go on (wrongly) thinking that they are saved!

D) Why become a member of (specifically) First Baptist of Boynton Beach, in particular?

- 1) In a day and age when it seems everyone is making the claim that they “Believe in the Bible as the fully inspired, inerrant, infallible and authoritative Word of God” (and that it must be the unwavering standard of the local church) we (by God's grace) **actually do** believe that! How can you confirm that? Here's how:
 - Consider our statement of faith: (The 1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith). It is historical, accurate, well-respected, and inherently biblical.
 - Consider our preaching and teaching: It is solid, exegetical, expositional, hermeneutical and inherently biblical.
 - Consider our church government: It is congregational, led by a plurality of elders, and inherently biblical.
 - Consider our Teaching Pastor: He is nationally known, a careful and through exegete, led by the Spirit, consistent with the long-held doctrines of our forefathers (including Augustine, Edwards, Spurgeon, Whitfield, Luther, etc), and he is inherently biblical.
 - Consider our fruit. (As Jesus said: “You will know them by their fruits” (Matthew 7:16))
- 2) In a day and age when some churches swing to the one side of emotionalism (under the guise of being “Spiritual”) or the other side of Pharaisaical Stoicism (under the guise of being “Reformed” and/or committed to the truth) ... we are a church (by God's grace) that seeks to worship in Spirit and in Truth. Passionate hearts on fire with strict adherence to doctrinal truth is the goal we strive for!
- 3) In a day and age when many churches willfully compromise on biblical evangelism (in order to be popular), or limit evangelism, (in order to over-emphasize the edification of the Saints) ... and other churches turn their weekly service into more of a weekly evangelism “crusade” ... again, First Baptist of Boynton Beach seeks to find the biblical norm of **both** “feeding” the flock (which is the primary responsibility of the local church) and yet not turning inward and reclusive, but rather, reaching out to a lost and dying world in active evangelism.
- 4) In a day and age when the attributes of God are watered down, selectively admired, and/or chosen on the basis of “political expedience” ... we, as a church, worship the **ONE, TRUE, LIVING, GOD**: (See “**The One True God**” in the 1689 Confession).
- 5) In a day and age when the “bar” of holiness has been lowered time and time again, we are a church who maintains an unwavering standard of holiness among its membership (in the power and strength of the Holy Spirit) and practice loving, biblical church discipline.
- 6) In a day and age when hyper- charismania reigns in some quarters, and spiritual deadness in other quarters ... we, as a church, encourage, support and experience the use of God-given spiritual gifts within the body.
- 7) In a day and age where “love” has become re-defined within the church, to conform to the world's sappy sentimentalism and co-dependent, blind tolerance ... we strive to be a church (in His grace) that is characterized by a sacrificial, unconditional but eminently biblical love, as defined by Scripture.
- 8) In a day and age when church has become (in many instances) more about “programs” and “social activities” we strive to be a church that emphasizes the means of grace (prayer; the sacraments; the preaching, hearing and reading of the Word; and genuine, vibrant, joyful, Christian fellowship)!
- 9) In a day and age when “church” has become increasingly “MAN-centered”, we strive to be wholly “**GOD**-centered”
- 10) In a day and age when the term “local church” itself has lost so much of its original, Scriptural meaning ... authentic churches have a way of standing out from the “compromising” and the “counterfeit”!

In short ... if your objective is to align with a church in the area that aligns closely with **SCRIPTURE'S** definition of what a local church is (and ought to be) we invite you to join our local church family (to His glory)!

II. What is our “APPLICATION”:

- 1) **No matter who you are** it will be **spiritually healthy** for you to attend the “**6-Week Sunday School Class**” (that begins on October 5th) to learn more about what the Bible has to say about this subject.
- 2) If you're **not a member**, come talk to us about becoming one ... and ...
- 3) If you **are a member**, re-examine how active you've been (by Scripture's standards)!
 - (And **listen carefully** to the **Biblical instruction** from the **6-Week Sunday School Class**) ...
 - (And then (by **God's grace**) **sincerely seek** to put it into practice!!).