



Should baptism be connected to membership?

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At the recent Steinbach Bible College Leadership Conference on baptism we found out the real controversy in our churches is over baptism and membership. Many churches are now questioning whether baptism should automatically make one a member of the church.

Why now? Why have we now become conflicted about connecting these two when for so long they were connected? Here is my theory: our theology of baptism is not changing, but our practice of membership might be.

Now, all churches have some concept of membership, some idea of who belongs to them and who they are responsible for. And though churches practice this belonging differently, most churches in history, whether Protestant, Catholic or Orthodox, have believed that baptism is central to whatever the church considers membership. It's hard to read Galatians 3:27–28 any other way: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male or female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (NRSVUE).

Of course, spiritual membership in the body of Christ is distinct from official local church membership. But there needs to be some resemblance, some connection between the two. Official membership should be a church's attempt to give this larger spiritual membership in the body of Christ local expression and practice. It should make it tangible, lived out in shared casseroles.

But here is my question: Has local church membership become a merely bureaucratic thing rather than a spiritual belonging to the local family of God? Is this why it doesn't seem to make sense anymore to connect it to baptism?

When church membership no longer numbers the saints living the Spirit-filled, baptismal life, clothed with Christ, overcoming local cultural, economic, and gender divisions to be the holy body in unity, then it should be disconnected from baptism. Because that is what baptism does. It makes that kind of members.

If membership is merely about voting for church officers, hearing minutes at business meetings, and reviewing the audited financial statements, then don't connect it to baptism. Notice I keep saying merely. \Being in the body of Christ will always involve audited financial statements; we can't escape Christ's determination to have a human institutional body. But my point is: if baptism in your church does the Galatians 3:27–28 kind of work, why not number these people as your church members? Official church membership should not be a higher, premium level of membership achieved sometime after the Galatians 3:27–28 membership.

If baptism is connected to a purely bureaucratic membership that gets you the right to vote on the budget, baptism becomes a merely human bath. On the other hand, if baptism is disconnected from a Galatians 3:27–28 expression of membership, baptism becomes an individualistic me-time with Jesus, sundered from the body of Christ.

So let's connect baptism to the most beautiful local membership we can find. Our membership list should number all local baptized believers the church takes responsibility for. It should number those who are repenting of sin and daily walking by the Spirit. It should number those who are accountable to their sisters and brothers in this congregation and who are powered by the Spirit to serve, discern, love and witness with the body of Christ.

If you are not a member, the church should be evangelizing you and inviting you to the river.