

Saved, Baptized Church Membership

Acts 2:38-47

Introduction

There are only two basic requirements for church membership at a Baptist church like ours: a personal salvation experience and Baptist baptism. In a previous lesson we emphasized the Bible teaching of believer's baptism. Therefore this lesson will focus more on the Biblical requirement that a person be saved before joining the church. Some call this the doctrine of "Regenerate Church Membership," meaning the same thing: that the person must profess personal faith in Jesus Christ (be born again, or regenerated) before he or she can be a candidate for baptism and church membership.

This is in contrast to those who baptize unbelievers, whether adult or infant, and allow them membership into their church. We have said before that baptism and church membership cannot save the soul or impart grace. We believe the reverse - one must first be saved in order to be baptized and join the church. The church was designed by Christ to be a body of baptized believers sent to reach the lost; it is not a collection of lost people trying to be religious and find God.

We will show the importance of a saved, baptized membership by looking at both the Word of God and the example of history.

I. The Argument from History

A. In the Catholic Church

For the first 300 years after Christ, the Christians in the Roman Empire faced great persecution. The Christians fled to all parts of the world, but those in Rome literally went underground and survived in the underground maze of tombs beneath Rome called the catacombs.

Constantine had a vision of a cross, with the words, “By this thou shalt conquer.” So he officially adopted Christianity as the religion of the empire. Now the Christians had a choice: join up with the government-established Christian church and enjoy “religious liberty” or continue to be persecuted for continuing to be independent from the state-sanctioned church.

Many were tired of running and being in danger for their lives, and did not realize the danger of joining the state religion. As soon as the government became an authority, the Bible stopped being the sole authority. Many terrible compromises followed.

Individual soul liberty was always a belief of true Christians, but that doctrine disappear when the church was married to the government. Because of an order by Emperor Theodosius the Great, all inhabitants of the Roman Empire had to belong to the established church. Now not only was the government in the church, but millions of unbelieving pagans as well. It’s easy to see how compromise and pagan rituals took over the Roman Catholic church within only a generation.

(from The Faithful Baptist Witness, Dr. Phil Stringer)

B. In the Protestant Churches

Protestant churches often practice hereditary membership. Children of members at their baptism become covenant members of that church. The danger of this is that it leads to unbelievers involved in making important decisions for the church.

George Whitfield was an Anglican, but a powerful preacher who helped to bring on the Great Awakening. Through his preaching, thousands of people came to be saved. These newly born-again people began reading the Scriptures, and became convinced of the errors in the Anglican and Congregational Church. They united (through profession of faith in Christ followed by believer’s baptism) with Baptist congregations. So many of Whitefield’s converts eventually became Baptists that he once declared, “All my chickens have turned to ducks!”

Soon after came the greatest church planting revival in American history, called the Separate Baptist Revival. Pastor Shubal Stearns and the Sandy Creek Baptist Church started over 2,000 churches from that one congregation!

But those who were saved and stayed in their Protestant churches went on baptizing their children, bringing them as unbelievers into the church. Within one generation, the revival was over in those churches, and their children and grandchildren did not know the God of their fathers.

Today the Anglican, or Episcopal, church is one of the most liberal denominations. It denies the authority of Scripture, performs gay marriage, and even ordains homosexual priests. That is the kind of compromise that happens over time when unbelievers are allowed to be members of the church. Religion takes the place of individual relationship with the Saviour.

(from Why Baptist?, James Alter & Dolton Robertson)

II. The Argument from the New Testament

A. New Testament Examples

In each example, there is a pattern: first salvation, then baptism, both prior to being added to the church. No where can an example be found of an infant who was baptized or a member of a church.

1. The church in Jerusalem (Acts 2:41 & 47; 6:1)
2. The church in Samaria (Acts 8:12-13)
3. The church in Caesarea (Acts 10:47-48)
4. The Ethiopian Eunuch - believer's baptism (Acts 8:35-39)

The only examples of unbelievers in the church were those who had previously professed faith in Christ, but were false in their profession - they had never truly been saved. Judas was a member of the first church, but he had publicly followed Christ, and been baptized by John the Baptist. We cannot enforce what is in someone's heart, because we cannot see it. We have to go by a person's public profession of faith.

B. New Testament Principles

1. The church is a flock of Christ's sheep. (John 10:26-28; Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1-4) The sheep of Christ's flock are those who believe and follow Him.
2. The church is a spiritual house made of "lively stones." (1 Pet. 2:5) Lively means that they were spiritually alive! We know that those without Christ are actually dead in their spirit. (Eph. 2:1,5)
3. The church is the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. (1 Cor. 3:16-17) "Ye" meant the church to whom the letter was written. "Ye" and "you" are always plural in the King James Bible.
4. Scripture is clear that Christians are not to be united in church membership, or any other binding relationship with unbelievers. (2 Corinthians 6:14-18)
5. The church is to be kept spiritually pure. (Ephesians 5:27)
6. Church discipline is to keep the church pure from carnal sin, heresy, and from unbelievers. (Matthew 18:17 & 1 Cor. 5:1-13)

C. New Testament Epistles

When Paul greeted the churches in his letters, his salutation left no doubt that he was addressing a membership made up totally of believers (or at least professed believers). The churches of the New Testament were composed of people who had professed faith in Christ, and been baptized.

1. The church in Rome (Romans 1:7)
2. The church in Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:2)
3. The church in Ephesus (Ephesians 1:1)
4. The church in Philippi (Philippians 1:1)
5. The church in Colosse (Colossians 1:2)
6. The church in Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 1:1)