



# BAPTISTS BELIEVE IN A REGENERATE CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

Baptists use various terms to describe their concept of church, such as believer's church, regenerate church, gathered church, voluntary church, born-again church, and fellowship of the redeemed. Whatever term is used, the meaning is basically always the same: ***A church is a fellowship of persons who have voluntarily followed Jesus as Lord, experienced believer's baptism, and associated with one another under his Lordship and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.***

## Why Should Only Believers in Christ Be Members of a Church?

Baptists believe that the Bible teaches that ***only*** persons who have been born again by a genuine experience of faith in Christ should be members of a church (John 3:1-21). The book of Acts states about the church in Jerusalem, "And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47 NIV). The apostle Paul indicates that a church is to be composed of persons who have been redeemed (1 Corinthians 1:2; 12:12-31).

Although the New Testament concept of church focuses on a local body of baptized believers in Christ, in a few New Testament passages the word "church" also refers to the redeemed of all the ages (Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 5:23-32; Colossians 1:18).

**"And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved."**

Acts 2:47

Baptists also believe that saved persons ***ought*** to be members of a church. Becoming a Christian is an individual response of faith, but growing as a Christian is enhanced by fellowship with other Christians, with a church being the primary fellowship.

***Although Baptists believe that church membership should include only the redeemed in Christ, they encourage and welcome all persons to attend various activities of the church.*** For example, worship services, Bible studies, and ministry events are open to all persons.

## How Do Persons Become Members of a Baptist Church?

Membership in a Baptist church is always to be voluntary. Therefore, persons request to be members. They are not compelled to be members. ***Baptist churches strive to maintain a born-again membership by the way they admit persons to membership.***



**When a person who has never been a member of any church requests membership in a Baptist church,** he or she is asked to affirm trust in Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Savior. This is done because salvation is more important than church membership and should always precede church membership. Baptist churches also ask that a person experience believer's baptism before becoming a member. **Therefore, a person seeking membership is asked both to make a profession of faith in Christ and to be baptized, each a voluntary act.**

**When a person who is already a member of a Baptist church seeks membership in another Baptist church,** normally the person is accepted on the basis of that prior membership.

**When a person seeking membership in a Baptist church is a member of a church other than Baptist,** Baptist churches, being autonomous, respond in various ways. The response depends both on the person's church background as well as on the polity of the Baptist church in which they are seeking membership. Generally speaking, if such persons have never been baptized by immersion as a symbol of becoming a believer in Christ, a Baptist church will ask that they publicly state faith in Christ and be baptized before becoming a member. If the person has been immersed as a believer and understands that it was a way to testify symbolically that he or she had been born again, some Baptist churches will accept such a person into membership without being baptized again. Other Baptist churches will ask the person to be baptized in the Baptist church they are joining.

Although a few Baptist churches may accept as members persons who profess faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior whether or not they have been baptized by immersion as believers, most churches do not. **The vast majority of Baptist churches take very seriously the importance of believer's baptism by immersion.**

**Baptist congregations vote on a person's request for membership. The congregation is not voting on whether the person is saved or not.** That is a matter between the individual and God. Rather, the church members are participating in Baptist congregational governance under the Lordship of Christ.

## Is There Evidence of a Decline in Regenerate Church Membership?

Observers of Baptist life cite several factors as evidence of a decline in an insistence on a regenerate church membership. These factors include a huge number of non-resident Baptist church members, the lack of involvement in church life of many resident members, a low level of financial support, a lifestyle contrary to the teachings of Jesus, and little commitment to evangelism, missions, and ministry.

Certainly, numerous church members are wonderfully dedicated born again followers of Christ. Yet it would seem that these factors would not exist in such abundance if all members of churches were truly redeemed.

Of course, some of these factors may be the result of conditions of persons other than being unregenerate, such as being "backslidden" or perhaps immature as a Christian (1 Corinthians 3:1-3; Ephesians 4:11-16).

"Baptists in the United States are close to losing their regenerate church membership."

William Miller  
Why Baptists?



## What Has Caused the Erosion of the Ideal of Regenerate Church Membership?

**One contributing factor seems to be a super-tolerant attitude which prevails in our culture today.** In church life this attitude could be stated, "It is not right for

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me to judge whether a person is saved or lost and acceptable for church membership." As a result, some churches accept persons into membership with little or no in-depth discussion with them about the nature of salvation and church membership.

Evaluating the spiritual condition of others ought to be done very prayerfully, humbly, and thoughtfully. Jesus warned about judging others when our own sins are great (Matthew 7:1-5; John 8:1-11). Yet, failure to heed the Bible's emphasis on the importance of a born-again fellowship of persons abiding by Christ's teachings does disservice to Christ's cause (1 Corinthians 5:9-13; Ephesians 5:1-7, 27; 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15; Revelation 2:18-22).

**The very nature of our society adds to the challenge of maintaining a regenerate membership.** For example, in our highly mobile and largely urban society often little is known about persons seeking membership in a church. Without some sort of process for evaluating a person's spiritual condition, persons who may not have been redeemed might be accepted into membership.

**The pressure for increased size of church membership is cited as another cause.** C. E. Colton observed from the perspective of a lengthy pastorate, "High pressure methods of evangelism by some well-meaning zealots result in decisions to join a church without true conversion."

**The baptism of very young children into church membership may also be a cause.** Some children may understand very well that they need Jesus as personal Lord and Savior because of their sin. However, when very young children seek baptism, they deserve careful counseling.

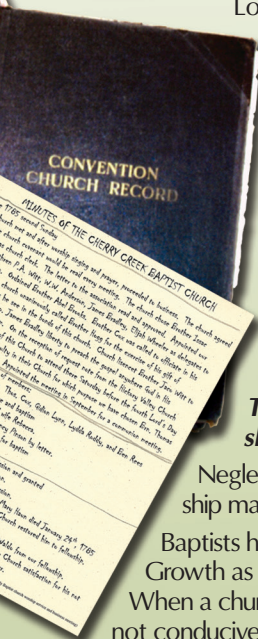
**In the past many Baptist churches confronted members about behavior that was considered contrary to the Christian life.** If such persons were unrepentant, they were subject to dismissal from membership. Various scriptures were cited to support this action, such as Matthew 18:15-20 and 1 Corinthians 5:9-13. Today churches generally tend to emphasize evangelistic preaching, discipleship, and Christian growth as a means of maintaining a regenerate church membership rather than dismissing persons.

## Should a Decline in a Regenerate Church Membership Be a Concern?

**The apparent decline in a regenerate church membership should be a concern for a number of reasons.**

Neglect of such a crucial biblical teaching as regenerate church membership may indicate a lack of commitment to the authority of the Bible.

Baptists have insisted that a church is to be a fellowship of believer priests. Growth as a Christian benefits from fellowship with other believer priests. When a church's membership is not made up of believer priests, the fellowship is not conducive to Christian growth. Thus, all of the members suffer.



Christ is Lord not only of individuals but also of churches. Governance of a Baptist church is to be by the members under the Lordship of Christ. If the members do not acknowledge Christ as Lord, then decisions are likely to be made apart from the will of Christ. This means that the church will become increasingly secular and worldly. Such a worldly church likely will not give attention to the central purposes of a church, such as worship, evangelism, missions, and ministry. Thus, some of the very reasons for a church's existence likely will not be emphasized.

## **What Can Be Done To More Thoroughly Achieve a Regenerate Church Membership?**

Some actions will help achieve a truly born-again church membership, making prayer a primary ingredient in all that is done.

- ◆ *Emphasize the importance of a born-again church membership, stressing that a salvation experience ought always to precede church membership.*
- ◆ *Establish an insightful, discerning, and loving process that would evaluate whether persons seeking membership give evidence of having been redeemed.*
- ◆ *Maintain an effective class for prospective and new members to teach the plan of salvation, the importance of Christian maturity, and the expectations for church members.*

## **Conclusion**

**Effort ought to be made, with God's help, to achieve the biblical goal of a born-again church.** Failure to try will result in terrible consequences for individuals, churches, and the advancement of the cause of Christ.

***For further information, see [www.baptistdistinctives.org](http://www.baptistdistinctives.org)***

The basic material in this leaflet originally appeared in a series of articles in the *Baptist Standard* in 2005. Wanting to share information about Baptist distinctives, Noble Hurley, shortly before his death in 2004, established the Jane and Noble Hurley Baptist Identity Fund to provide for publishing the series. He asked William M. Pinson, Jr. and Doris A. Tinker to prepare the articles. The financial assistance of The Prichard Family Foundation and Vester T. Hughes, Jr. enabled this series of nineteen leaflets to be produced based on the articles. Skyler G. Tinker designed and formatted the leaflets for publication. Each leaflet is for both individual and group study.

The topics in this series: (1) Baptists: Who? Where? What? Why? (2) What Makes a Baptist a Baptist? (3) The Lordship of Christ; (4) The Bible as Authority for Faith and Practice; (5) Soul Competency; (6) Salvation Only by Grace Through Faith; (7) The Priesthood of All Believers; (8) Believer's Baptism; (9) A Regenerate Church Membership; (10) Congregational Church Governance; (11) Church Autonomy; (12) Baptist Church Life: Organization, Worship, Officers, Ordinances; (13) Voluntary Cooperation; (14) Evangelism; (15) Missions; (16) Ministry; (17) Christian Education; (18) The Application of the Gospel; (19) Religious Freedom.

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