



**Meaningful  
Membership**

## ***Meaningful Membership?***

Have you ever thought about what it means to be a member of a local church? To many of us, it is a simple formality that gives us the right to vote at the annual business meetings and might even give us a sense of ownership in the programs. But is that really all there is to it? What exactly are you committing yourself to when you put your name on the membership rolls?

Why is it that so many people lack the desire to become members of the local churches they're already attending?

No doubt, part of the reason for a lack of interest in church membership and its entailments is that the commitment-phobia of our culture (always waiting for a better deal to come along) coupled with the consumerism of our times that shops around to get the most for the least - have radically affected the way many people think about their church involvement.

So often the question of church membership produces a negative reaction:

- "Isn't it unfriendly, and maybe even elitist, to say that we're in and you're out?"
- "So long as I am baptised - that is all that matters."
- "Church membership isn't found in the Bible."
- "I serve the church and give to the church - what difference would it make becoming a member?"
- "I can't stand church meetings - all they do is disagree!"
- "I don't come from a Baptist background - so I don't need to consider church membership."
- "Isn't it possible to be a responsible part of a local Baptist church without becoming formally a church member?"

Is there clear biblical reason for emphasising membership in the local church?

Why is it better to be a member than simply a regular attender, especially if membership requires further obligation?

What does it mean to be a member of this church?

What is it that potential members are asked to commit themselves to?

How are members asked to live out that commitment in practical ways?

## ***What Is A Church?***

Before we think about what local church membership should mean, we'd be wise to ask the more basic question: What is it that I join when I join with a local church in membership?

### **The Church is NOT...**

- a loose affiliation of people who hold roughly the same religious beliefs, no matter what those beliefs might be. I'm not joining a religious club when I join a church.
- a building. A building is simply a place to meet. I'm not going to an exclusive clubhouse when I go to church.
- a non-profit organisation with a vision statement and clear objectives. I'm not joining a charitable society when I join a church.

### **The Church IS...**

- a regular assembly of people who profess and give evidence that they have been saved by God's grace alone, for His glory alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.
- a local, living, and loving collection of people who are committed to Christ and committed to each other.
- a display of God's wisdom and glory (Ephesians 3:10).
- a display of Christ-like love (John 13:35).

### **Church membership is accordingly for believers only.**

It is not for those who simply give mental assent to the gospel. It is for those whose lives demonstrate an increasing application of the principles of the gospel to the situations of their everyday lives, and whose character increasingly reflects the holiness of God.

## ***Biblical Background For Church Membership***

While we do not find indisputable proof texts for local church membership, we do find passages that imply formal membership in local assemblies.

### **Paul's formal exclusion of the sinner at Corinth presupposes formal inclusion.**

Paul exhorts the Corinthian church to remove a brother from their ranks who was sinning in a way not even approved by pagans. (1 Corinthians 5:2, 7, 12-13). Paul is calling for the exclusion of this immoral brother, which would imply that it meant something to be included in that church. He would lose the privileges of membership previously conferred upon him. Formal removal presupposes formal addition.

### **Paul's reference to "the majority" in 2 Corinthians 2:6-7.**

The apostle's instruction seems to refer to a group commonly recognised as the church's members.

### **The early church kept a list of widows.**

We know from the widow list mentioned in 1 Timothy 5:9 that lists of people were kept and tracked. If widows were listed, it is likely that a list of current members was kept and updated as well.

### **God Himself keeps a list of all believers.**

The book of life is God's record of who are believers.  
(Philippians 4:3; Revelation 21:27)

### **God has always made a clear distinction between His people and the world.**

Drawing this distinction was the reason for the ceremonial and civil laws of the Old Covenant - these laws distinguished Israel from the nations surrounding them, as a people set apart to the Lord. Such clarity of distinction between God's people and the world argues for clarity and specificity on our membership rolls.

## ***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 be united with others 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, prayer, giving, and service.

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-centred 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 financial support of the church. 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 inner 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 1 John 4:20-21, this willingness to love God's people is the fundamental indicator of the character of our hearts towards God Himself.

## ***What Are The Criteria For Church Membership?***

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

### **Regeneration**

#### **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 by faith in His Son Jesus Christ. People who are not Christians 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.**

“Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” (Ephesians 4:15-16)

The growth of the body comes from Christ. But Christ causes that growth through the instrumental working of each individual part.

People who are not Christians therefore cannot 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 leadership. It is a commitment to being meaningfully involved in the lives of other members to do them good spiritually. Therefore, if 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

## **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.**

“Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognise them. Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognise them.” (Matthew 7:15-20).

See also: John 15:1-11; Galatians 5:22-23; James 2:14-26; 2 Peter 1:4-11; 1 John 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 (Matthew 7:21-23).

Increasing conformity to God's character is the only sure measuring rod with which to gauge the genuineness of Christian confession.

# ***What Is Required For Church Membership?***

## **Repentance and Belief**

The most important requirement of local church membership is a lifestyle of repentance and belief. One must make a genuine commitment to consistently repent of known sin as it occurs, and to continually believe in Jesus' death and resurrection as the only basis of acquittal before God.

More specifically, this lifestyle of repentance and belief should be demonstrated in three concrete steps.

**Baptism as a Believer.** This is the first way we are commanded to express our death and resurrection with Jesus Christ.

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28:19-20).

**Statement of Faith.** The most important thing we unite around is the message we proclaim - the gospel. For this reason, it is healthy to require people to formally agree to the church's statement of faith. This way everyone knows what the church is united around and doctrinal division is less likely to occur.

**Church Pledge.** The second most important thing we unite around is the lifestyle demanded by the message we claim to believe. For this reason, it is healthy to ask people to commit to the principles and priorities of a church pledge. This way, everyone knows what it means to be a member, what is expected of them when they join, and when they are falling short of fulfilling their pledge obligations as members.

## **Six Basic Responsibilities of Membership**

- *Attend regularly.* If we don't attend, we can't be edified, and the leadership can't get to know us in a way that meaningfully informs their shepherding care of us.
- *Pray regularly.* One of the most basic ways we can edify and encourage one another towards greater obedience, holiness, and joy is through prayer.
- *Serve regularly.* Whether up front or behind the scenes, we can express our commitment to our fellow believers through the acts of service we can do for the benefit of others.
- *Give regularly.* Without giving, pastors can't fully devote themselves to preaching and teaching, missionaries have to come home, and the lights will have to be turned off in the building.
- *Attend communion services particularly.* It is an ordinance commanded by the Lord for our joy in, and remembrance of, Him. It binds us together as a believing community, and reminds us of the significance of Christ's death.
- *Attend business meetings particularly.* We should care enough about the life of our local church to attend business meetings and to contribute to them in helpful ways by being quick to listen and gentle in speech.

# ***Reasons To Join A Local Church***

## **Join For Other People**

### **Join a church for the sake of non-Christians.**

Church membership helps make the gospel clear to non-Christians by providing a unified witness of what it means to be a Christian.

Membership provides this unified witness by implementing a statement of faith, encouraging unity in doctrine and a church pledge, and encouraging unity in lifestyle.

### **Join a church for the sake of weaker Christians.**

God is not merely concerned about our own private piety, but also about our care for the other sheep. This is a whole aspect of godliness that privatised-Christians ignore. If we don't love God's people, then John says we have reason to question our love for God Himself (1 John 4:8).

God wants us to encourage weaker Christians and run the race with them. Don't leave it to other people to care for those outside your circle of friends. This is your responsibility. Members should see themselves as providers - coming to serve others, not to be served.

### **Join a church for the sake of the church leaders.**

If regular attenders don't eventually make themselves known to the leadership as members of the church, then the leadership cannot take responsibility for them as part of this particular flock. Leaders need to know for which sheep God will hold them accountable so that they can tend to them most responsibly and effectively (Hebrews 13:17).

When regular attenders join churches pastors can be freed to do what they do. Pastors can only devote themselves to the ministry because they are set free to do so by members who have pledged themselves to fund the work. Frequently, regular attenders benefit from the commitment of other people who have become members and who give and serve and pray regularly.

## **Join For the Corporate Health of the Church**

### **Join a church to expose false gospels.**

The best defence is often a good offence. God wants us to band together in love so that we can model Christianity for the world. This is often how we best debunk messages that masquerade as biblical Christianity but are really different messages altogether.

Christians are called to differentiate the true gospel from false ones, to defend it against distortion, and to prevent it from being perverted. We do these things best together because we are sharpened by each other's insight, encouragement, and correction.

### **Join a church to edify the church.**

Some people refuse to join a local church because they feel they would be slowed down in their spiritual growth if they joined. Perhaps. But maybe God wants such people to join a church to help speed other people up.

Joining a local church counters wrong individualism, helping us live out the corporate nature of Christianity. The New Testament is full of injunctions to care for each other. This is part of what it means to be a Christian. So if we think we are mature, yet lack a care for Christ's body that reveals itself in carrying out the responsibilities of local church membership, we hurt the church, and we are not yet as mature as we presume to be.

## **Join For Your Individual Health as a Christian**

### **Join a church for your own spiritual protection.**

We can't always read our own souls perfectly. We can deceive ourselves, and we therefore need other people to help us walk as individual Christians (Jeremiah 17:9; Psalm 19:12).

The Bible speaks of people as sheep. Sheep aren't meant to be wandering around on their own between folds. Sheep are dumb. We fall into ravines when we are by ourselves. We need to be shepherded into folds.

So we need to exercise the humility to view ourselves as sheep and submit ourselves to a local body of believers for mutual encouragement, protection, and examination. It is our wisdom and safety to humbly stay with the flock and near a good shepherd who grazes, guides and guards us.

### **Join a church for your own spiritual assurance.**

In joining a church, we are asking our church family to hold us accountable to live according to what we confess. Membership in a local church is that congregation's public testimony that your life gives continual evidence of regeneration.

In joining a church, we are taking hold of one another to know and to be known in mutual responsibility and care, so that we can make sure we are bearing the fruit of holiness, "without which no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14) See also John 14:21; 15:10, 14

### **Join for God**

#### **Join a Church for the sake of God's name.**

The building up of the church is ultimately GOD'S work. "The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved." (Acts 2:42, 47).

"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me" (Acts 9:4). Jesus so closely identified himself with His church that He said Saul was persecuting *Him* when he was persecuting the church.

If Jesus identified himself closely with the church, we should too. By our being together in a church, we are giving testimony and praise to God through our lives as we live and love each other together.

It would be easy to put on programs and attract people, and allow people to enjoy singing and friendships in small groups, but never deal with the most important issues. We could service people socially, but will they be committed to pray, give, serve, love, and attend? These are the marks of a faithful Christian, and these are the characteristics and actions that give God glory in the church.

## **Join a Church for the sake of God's cause.**

God wants His glory displayed and His gospel spread to all the nations. We can take God's glory and gospel to the nations better if we band together than if we remain alone. Being part of God's plan to spread His glory and gospel to all nations is a privilege that we will not have in heaven. We seize the privilege of evangelism best if we work together as one diverse unity.

## ***How Do I Become A Member?***

Each believer is called to make a personal commitment to Christ. We believe that such a commitment is to be lived out corporately in the context of a local church. Membership at Hastings Baptist Church is not a loose affiliation useful only on occasion, but a regular responsibility involving us in one another's lives for the purposes of the gospel.

Therefore, the first and best way to get involved at Hastings Baptist Church is to become a member. As members, we covenant together to care for each other, to encourage each other and to hold each other accountable to the truths found in God's Word.

Anyone who follows the instruction of Jesus to repent and be baptised, who believes the Bible to be God's Word and who is willing to commit to the life and faith of this local body may become a member.

If you are interested in membership at Hastings Baptist Church, talk with either the pastor or one of the leadership team. The process is generally as follows:

- Participation in a membership course
- An interview with a couple of elders with the goal of hearing your basic understanding of the gospel and your testimony to faith in Christ.
- Approval by the church council
- Welcome into membership at a convenient Sunday service

# Statement of Faith

The church believes:

## **Scripture**

We believe the Bible, the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments, to be the inspired Word of God. Rightly interpreted, the Bible is fully trustworthy in all that it affirms. The Scriptures are the written revelation of God to humanity and are the sufficient and supreme authority for all matters of life and faith.

## **Trinity**

We believe that there is one living and true God, eternally existing in three persons. Father, Son and Holy Spirit are equal in divine nature and distinct in personal attributes.

## **Father**

We believe in God the Father, an infinite, personal spirit, perfect in holiness, wisdom, power and love. He sovereignly foreknows all that will come to pass and providentially cares for His universe, concerning Himself mercifully in the affairs of humanity. He hears and answers prayer, and saves from sin and death all who come to him through Jesus Christ.

## **Son**

We believe in Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, who through his incarnation was conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. We believe in His sinless life, atonement for our sin by dying on the cross in the sinners' place, bodily resurrection, ascension into heaven, perpetual intercession for His people and His promised return in power and glory.

## **Holy Spirit**

We believe in the Holy Spirit who came forth from the Father and the Son to convict the world of sin, righteousness and judgement, and to regenerate, sanctify and empower all who believe in Jesus Christ. He indwells every believer, baptising them into the Body of Christ, and is an abiding helper, teacher and guide.

## **Humanity**

We believe human beings are the special creation of God, made in His own image: male and female. Every person of every race possesses full dignity being made in the image of God. We believe that humanity sinned and thereby incurred physical, spiritual and eternal death, which is separation from God. Consequently, all people are born with a sinful nature, are sinners by choice and are under God's condemnation. Only the grace of God can restore a person into fellowship with Himself.

## **Salvation**

Salvation involves the redemption of the whole person, and is offered freely to all who accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, who by His own blood obtained eternal redemption for the believer. In its broadest sense salvation includes regeneration, justification, sanctification, and glorification. There is no salvation apart from personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord.

A. Regeneration, or the new birth, is a work of God's grace whereby believers become new creatures in Christ Jesus. It is a change of heart produced by the Holy Spirit through conviction of sin, to which the sinner responds in repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Repentance and faith are inseparable experiences of grace.

Repentance is a genuine turning from sin toward God. Faith is the acceptance of Jesus Christ and commitment of the entire personality to Him as Lord and Saviour.

B. Justification is God's gracious and full acquittal of all sinners who repent and believe in Christ. Justification brings the believer into a relationship of peace and favour with God.

C. Sanctification is the experience, established in regeneration, by which the believer is set apart to God's purposes, and is enabled to progress toward moral and spiritual maturity through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit dwelling in them. Growth in grace should continue throughout the regenerate person's life.

D. Glorification is the joyful culmination of salvation and is the final blessed and abiding state of the redeemed.

## **Church**

We believe in the universal church, a living spiritual body of which Christ is the head and all regenerate persons are members. We believe in the local church, consisting of a congregation of baptised believers, who have pledged themselves to one another in the love, faith and fellowship of the Gospel. We believe that God has laid upon the members of the local church the primary task of giving the gospel of Jesus Christ to a lost world.

## **Believer's Baptism and the Lord's Supper**

Christian baptism is the immersion of a believer in water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is an act of obedience to Jesus' command and example, symbolising the believer's faith in a crucified, buried, and risen Saviour, the believer's death to sin, the burial of the old life, and the resurrection to walk in newness of life in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a testimony to their faith in the final resurrection of the dead.

The Lord's Supper is a symbolic act of obedience whereby members of the church, through partaking of the bread and the fruit of the vine, memorialise the death of the Redeemer and anticipate His second coming.

## **Last Things**

We believe that the end of the world is approaching. The Christian hope is anchored in the promise of Jesus that He will return personally and visibly in glory to the earth; the dead will be raised; and Christ will judge all people in righteousness. The unrighteous will be consigned to Hell, the place of everlasting punishment. The righteous in their resurrected and glorified bodies will receive their reward and will dwell forever in Heaven with the Lord.

# Member's Pledge

Being called of God into the fellowship of His people and into the membership of this Church, I pledge myself by the grace of God to strive:

1. To live at all times such a life as becomes a true Christian and member of the Church
2. To take an active and earnest part in the life and work of the Church, regularly attending its services of worship as far as I am able, and being willing to help in whatever way I can.
3. To be faithful in prayer for the Church and its witness in the community.
4. To share conscientiously in contributing to the funds of the church according to my means.
5. To do all in my power to deepen and enrich the spirit of fellowship in the Church, always refraining from all uncharitableness of thought or word, and ever seeking to develop the spirit of love in this brotherhood of Christ's people.
6. To share by life and word in the supreme task of the Church, namely, witnessing to the saving, keeping power of Jesus Christ our Lord.