

{ Hand-in-hand }

Baseball and hotdogs. Apple pie and ice cream. We often say, “Some things just go together.” From a biblical point of view, membership and baptism are like that. In fact, that is the assumed reality in the Bible.

When Jesus began his public ministry he chose to be baptized by John, even though it was entirely unnecessary for him to do so. Jesus said that he wanted to be baptized even though he did not have to repent or have his sins washed away. If it was good for Jesus, it

must certainly be good for all believers to obediently follow his example.

16 Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. **17** When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. **18** Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. **19** Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **20** and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Matthew 28:16-20

Additionally—and even more to the point—in Matthew 28:16-20 Jesus clearly provides the mandate for Christian believers to be baptized. Baptism, in part, means an entrance into a community of faith, a beginning of a new family relationship. The rich symbolism of dying with Christ and to oneself, being buried with Christ and raised to new life (Rom. 6:4) and having sins washed away (Acts 22:16) is celebrated each time baptism occurs in the life of the church.

The Bible plainly teaches that baptism follows personal commitment to faith in Jesus (Rom. 10:9-10). In Bible times, everyone who came to faith in Jesus was baptized and became part of the church. When Jesus inaugurated the church he declared, “I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18). The word he used for church is “ekklesia,” which means “gathered.” Every follower of Jesus has been drawn together by Christ, called out of the world and into his church, both universal and local.

Because Jesus promised the thief on the cross that the thief would be with Jesus in paradise that very day we know that baptism and church membership are not mandatory to get to heaven. Still, it would not be wise to build our theology and practice of baptism and membership based on that exception.

When young children come to faith in Jesus in their earlier years, it is prudent to allow them to develop in their faith until such a time as they can understand and appreciate the symbolic richness and depth of the experience of baptism. And while we accept various modes of believers’ baptism, we normally practice immersion because of the abundant symbolism it provides. The Bible clarifies that when we choose a faith-follow relationship with Christ, we die to ourselves, are buried with him and raised to a new life.

Many people these days tend to minimize the importance of baptism and church membership. But obeying Jesus’ command to be baptized and becoming a local member of his family is still God’s plan for us.

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Baptism and Church Membership



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any people have questions about baptism and church membership:

- What does baptism mean?
- What does it actually do?
- Do you have to be baptized to get to heaven?
- What is the difference between being baptized as a baby and later in life?
- What does church membership mean?
- Why is it important?
- What does church really mean anyway?
- Should baptism and church membership be connected?

Answering these questions—and others we can list—starts with the meaning of “church.” At the beginning of the 16th century Reformation, some leaders of this pivotal movement rediscovered the early church practice and biblical teaching that baptism and church membership were meant for people who could personally choose them. This was in contrast to infant baptism, which was the common practice of the time.



Those who committed to this practice became known as “believers churches.” Because they had been baptized as infants and chose to be baptized again, they were also called “Anabaptists,” meaning “re-baptizers.” This re-baptism was a symbol of their personal choice to believe and their desire to be a member in the church.

{ Different but connected meanings }

The word church, as used in the New Testament, has two different but connected meanings. Many times it is used in reference to a particular community of believers in a specific location. For example, in 1 Corinthians 11:18, the Scriptures identify a local group of Jesus’ followers by saying, “When you come together as a church...”

The word is also used to indicate a wider spiritual community. When the Bible refers to believers as part of the “body of Christ,” as it does in Ephesians 4:12, it clearly means that all believers are in one body. The Bible assumes that being in a faith-follow relationship with Jesus places us in both the universal church and a local congregation. The local church is the visible demonstration of the universal church.

What follows is that even though the Bible does not specify how to become a local church member, it does tell us that people who come to faith in Jesus naturally “become members” of a local assembly of believers. The Bible makes much of the picture that each member, or part of the local church body, is needed and important to make up the whole.

11 So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, **12** to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up...

Ephesians 4:11-12



{ Why join a church? }

The importance of being a church member finds its core reason in God’s plan for his followers. The Bible says that Christians “are a chosen people... God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Pet. 2:9).

Because followers of Jesus have in common peace with God and a mission from God, they are bound in a covenant relationship with him and one another. The church is a partnering community of believers who exist more for others than themselves.

A second reason membership is important is the need that everyone has for a spiritual family in which to be nurtured. Ephesians 4:16 clarifies that “the whole body... builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” This indicates each member has a role to play for the mutual benefit of the whole family. And it also means that being clear about who is and who is not a part of this covenanting community facilitates this mutual accountability.