



Baptist Churches
of NSW & ACT

BAPTISM AND CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

***An Introductory Resource to Help Local Baptist Churches
Work through the Issue!***

Updated March 2019

BAPTISM AND CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

INTRODUCTION

If you are looking at this document, then it is most likely because:

- your church has a number of Christians who are part of the fellowship who have come from other traditions, but are not members of your Church, yet want to be;
- you are reviewing your Church Constitution;
- you are part of a church plant considering what form of membership you will adopt.

While for many years Baptist Churches in NSW and ACT have had people actively involved who came from other church traditions, in recent decades more people have joined our churches from other denominations and have struggled with the idea of having to be baptised in order to become a Church Member.

I suggest it is best to look at this as more of a pastoral and historical issue than a biblical matter ie, as Baptists we believe the New Testament is clear. Having become followers of Jesus people then expressed their new faith by being baptised, the form being that of immersion. It is also true from scripture that baptism does not make a person a Christian - that comes through faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. Infant baptism and the development of various denominations is the story of Church history. What we confront today is the experience of brothers and sisters in Christ, members of the universal church of Jesus Christ, wanting to become members of a local Baptist Church, but having issues with being baptised in order to become a church member.

We need to be careful in how we manage this issue because feelings run deep. In most Baptist Churches no matter what a church does it is rare for everyone to be satisfied with the outcome. Please remember the command of Jesus to His Church to "love one another" as it is by this people in the wider community will know we are followers of Jesus. Some people have been deeply hurt by the poor process in looking at Baptism and Church Membership and this has had an adverse affect on the mission of the church. Please carefully treat your brothers and sisters in Christ.

THE CORE QUESTION

The essence of the matter for our churches is more to do with membership than baptism. I repeat, we follow what we see as the accepted New Testament teaching and practice - those who become Christians give public declaration of faith in Jesus as Saviour and Lord by being immersed in water. (See passages related to baptism in Appendix 1.) This is a rite of initiation. In the New Testament, baptism is found only in connection with the new convert. NSW and ACT Baptist Churches will only ever practise and preach Baptism of Believers by immersion. True, some people because of age or infirmity cannot be baptised in this way - an alternative mode will then be arranged; but in more than 99% of cases baptism by immersion of the believer will be practised.

The question arises when a person wants to become a member of the church and queries the need for baptism.

When we look at the New Testament we do not find Church Membership in the form we have it today. For us it is a public acknowledgment of identification with a local fellowship which is part of the Baptist Denomination. In the early days of the Christian Church becoming a Christian automatically meant belonging to the fellowship of believers. As the church evolved there also came the need to admit and dismiss people from the local fellowship. Church history tells the story of the development of Denominations often with confessional statements to distinguish one from the other.

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Baptists have consistently practised baptism of believers by immersion. Membership requirements have varied from "closed" to some form of "open" membership. NSW and ACT Baptist Churches have held to a closed membership position for most of our history. There was open membership in our earliest days, but since 1995 the decision has been up to the local church. Closed membership is where a person has to be baptised as a believer in order to be a church member.

The core question for each church is: Will we be a closed membership church? If not, then what form of open membership will we practise?

Most Baptist Churches in NSW and ACT practise one of five models of Church Membership:

- Closed membership - a believer baptised by immersion
- Baptised as a believer, though immersion not necessary
- Baptised as infant, public declaration of faith (usually by confirmation), adhere to principle of believer's baptism, however consciously object to being baptised by immersion in order to become a member
- Believer, respect the principle of believer's baptism, however consciously object to being baptised in order to become a member, public declaration of faith
- Open membership by affirming faith in Jesus as Saviour and Lord.

A SUGGESTED WAY TO ADDRESS THE MATTER

If you are an established church then please remember there will be people in your fellowship who will be anxious about how this matter is addressed and the outcome. Some people who have been Baptists for a long time feel even looking at the issue is denying our heritage and "watering down" our faith. Those who would love to be members, but have a personal concern about being baptised in order to become a member will already feel as second-class citizens and not wanted.

Church "plants" need to be careful as they are setting in place a pattern which will influence the direction of the church in years to come.

It is important that you read the booklet on Baptism and Membership prepared for the 1995 Assembly. This will clarify the legal situation because where a church has some form of open membership everyone needs to be clear on the restrictions of those who have not been baptised as believers by immersion. This document can be found in the Admin section on the website under "Church Membership and Baptism Reports".

The following is a suggested process to follow:

1. Leadership agrees it is time for the church to address the matter and informs the church. (Normally this decision will be taken to a Church Meeting for ratification.)
2. Bible Studies held. (See notes in Appendix 1.)
3. Church Conference is held to raise the matter, discern the issues needing to be addressed and assessing the level of openness to change or stay as is. (See Appendix 2 for suggested programme.)

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4. Optional Second Church Conference for further input, sharing, assessing where Congregation is on the matter. (See Appendix 2 for suggested Programme.)
5. Recommendation comes to Church Meeting for final decision.

As this affects people who are not members, churches have found it helpful to encourage all adults in the worshipping congregation to attend the meeting, to hold a secret ballot with a box for members and non-members to tick.

Where a clear majority does not eventuate the issue is not resolved and it is suggested the church does not change its practice. In such cases the matter is still present and may be raised at a later date.

If your church would like assistance in discussing this or working it through please feel free to contact with staff from Ministry Support and Development or your Regional Superintendent.

These notes have been prepared by David Brown – Former Director Pastoral Development.

January 2005

APPENDIX 1 - BIBLE STUDY NOTES***Study 1 - What the Bible Says***

These notes were prepared for Epping Baptist Church in 1996 and can be used by other churches with the permission of Epping Baptist. (There was a fourth week of studies which has been deleted as the material will be covered in a Conference format.)

Study 1: What the Bible Says

Listed below the references to Baptism that are listed in "The NIV Exhaustive Concordance."

Simply look at these and make any comments you like and then make concluding statements indicating:

1. What does Baptism mean?
2. Who is to be Baptised?
3. What are we told about the Church especially its composition and function? (This will be considered in more detail in Study 2)

1. Matthew 3:1 - 17

(Other references to John's baptism and that of Jesus can be found in Mark 1:4 - 13; Luke 3:3 - 22; John 1:19 - 34)

2. Matthew 28:16 - 20

3. John 3:22 - 4:2

4. Acts

(These only refer to water baptism in the Christian Church and not verses in Acts related to John's Baptism or Baptism of the Holy Spirit)

(a) 2:37 - 42

(b) 8: 12 - 17

(c) 8:26 - 40

(d) 9:15 - 19; 22:12 - 16

(e) 10:34 - 48 (compare 11:16)

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Study 1 - What the Bible Says

(f) 16:11 - 18, 29 - 34

(g) 18:5 - 8

(h) 19:1 - 7 5.

5. Romans 6:1 - 11

6. 1 Corinthians 1:10 - 17

7. 1 Corinthians 12:12 - 14

8. Galatians 3: 23 - 29

9. Ephesians 4:5

10. Colossians 2: 9 - 12

11. 1 Peter 3:18 - 22

Seek to draw it all together by making your comments as to:

Q1. What does Baptism mean?

Q2. Who is to be Baptised?

If you meet in a small group discuss together your questions and comments.

APPENDIX 1 - BIBLE STUDY NOTES

Study 2 - Belonging to the Church

Study Two: Belonging to the Church

If you read through the New Testament you won't find a person applying to the church to become a member with this application then going to a church meeting on the fourth Wednesday of the month.

However you will discover that being a Christian and being part of the Church go together.

Look at the following well-known references and note:

1. What you are told about the Church, and
2. What part should people play in the light of the following readings -

(a) Matthew 16: 13 - 28

(b) Acts 2: 38 - 47

(c) Acts 11: 19 - 30; 13: 1 - 3

(d) Ephesians 4: 1 - 16

(e) I Peter 2: 1 - 12

What happened in the early days of the Church? The following has been extracted from the first chapter of the book: "The Story of the Church" by Renwick and Harman where the first century is surveyed.

"Early Days"

"We may notice first the change which came over the apostles at the Day of Pentecost. As promised by Christ, they were 'endued with power from on high' (see Acts 2), and then went forth to their colossal task in the strength of God. Disciples who before were very timid now became absolutely fearless (Acts 3: 4). Almost immediately afterwards the number of men converted in Jerusalem alone numbered 5,000, exclusive of women and children (Acts 4: 4)

Beginning at Jerusalem, the Christian faith soon spread far and wide. In Roman times communications by sea as well as by land were relatively easy, a factor which greatly helped the missionaries of the cross. Jews outside Palestine, who spoke Greek and were influenced by Greek culture, began to receive the gospel. Barnabas, a friend of Paul, a native of Cyprus, is typical of this very important class. Soon the good news was being carried to Samaria and to Ceasarea, on the Mediterranean Sea and was being proclaimed

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freely to the Gentiles - a veritable revolution (Acts 8: 10 & 11). Then it went to Phoenicia, to Cyprus and to the great city of Antioch in Syria.

The conversion of Paul (about 35 AD) was of surpassing importance to the Church, for he became the outstanding "apostle to the Gentiles". At Antioch, known as "the Queen of the East", he and Barnabas did a most fruitful work among Jews and Gentiles. As this was a very important commercial centre, the gospel spread from here into wide areas both east and west. Among the Jewish groups encountered in every city, Paul and the other apostles found starting-points for their work of empire-wide evangelisation, even though the majority of the Jews rejected the gospel.

The conversion of so many Gentiles soon raised serious problems as to how far these new converts ought to be bound by the laws and ceremonies of the Jewish Church. Those known as Judaizers wanted the Gentiles to be circumcised, ie to become Jews first; thereafter they might become Christians, but Christians with a strong Jewish tinge. Fortunately for the Christian Church, Paul set his face resolutely against these tendencies (see Galatians 2:7 - 16, 3:1 - 11). The whole problem was thrashed out at the Council of Jerusalem in 49AD. There Paul gained a signal victory (see Acts 15:1 - 29). In spite of this, however, the question vexed the Church for many a long day. The Judaizers continued to "dog" Paul's steps to the very end of his life.

Anyone who wishes to understand the spread of Christianity in the early days should trace each of Paul's journeys on a good map, following the account in the book of Acts. We see him in Antioch, Cyprus, Pamphylia, Central Asia Minor, Cilicia, and Syria. Then he pushes on to Troas and across to Europe (Acts 16 - 18).

After long years of incessant missionary labours Paul was arrested at the Temple in Jerusalem and conveyed to Caesarea for his own security (see Acts 21:27 - 40 and Acts 23 - 27). For two whole years he was unjustly kept in prison in Caesarea by the unscrupulous Felix. In 59 AD he was conveyed to Rome for trial and for another two years was kept a prisoner although "in his own hired house" (see Acts 27 and 28). He preached his message freely to all who came to him - even to the soldiers who took their turn in standing guard over him. It was not long before many, even "in Caesar's household", believed in Christ. During this period also, Paul wrote some of his most profound Epistles. He seems to have been set free in 61AD and to have visited once more the regions where he had evangelised so successfully in previous years. We find him again in prison in Rome where he wrote the second Epistle to Timothy prior to his execution about 64AD during the persecution under Nero.

All we know of Peter forbids us to think he was less active than Paul. His eager, impulsive heart would keep him constantly engaged in his Master's business all his days. As Paul was the apostle of the Gentiles in a special sense, so Peter was pre-eminently the apostle of the Jews. This would lead him to the great cities of the Empire where vast numbers of his countrymen were to be found. The small amount of evidence we have points to Peter's having been at Rome towards the end of his life and to his having died there as a martyr, perhaps at the same time as Paul, or at least in the same year. We may note however, that there is no foundation for the claim of the Roman Church that Peter was Bishop of Rome for 25 years from 42 - 67 AD.

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Study 2 - Belonging to the Church

When we turn to consider the permanent officers of the Church, we find that in the days of the apostles, elders and deacons were appointed and their duties defined (1 Tim. 3:1 - 13; 1 Peter 5:1 - 4). The office of *elder* is variously described in the New Testament as bishop, pastor, teacher, preacher, minister, steward, angel (ie messenger). The various terms mentioned referred to the same officer, but each presented a different aspect of their work. Thus "pastor" indicated their duty to "shepherd the flock" of Christ. "Bishop", a word used to translate the Greek *episcopos*, indicated that they were "overseers" and Paul shows us that as "overseers" they had to "feed the church of God" (Acts 20:17 - 28). That the "presbuteros" and "episcopos" (elder and bishop) were the same is shown by many facts. Thus Paul addressed his letter to the Philippians to "the bishops and deacons". It was a small church in a small city, yet it had a plurality of bishops. It is not uncommon in the early Church to find a large number of bishops in a small area. They could not be bishops in our modern sense. Then, again, the elders (*presbuteroi*) at Ephesus are expressly called "bishops of the flock" (*ephscopoi*). Furthermore, the qualifications of elders and bishops were the same. Scarcely any scholar today would dispute the words of the late Dr J.B. Lightfoot, Bishop of Durham, and an undoubted authority: "It is a fact now generally recognised by theologians of all shades of opinion, that in the language of the New Testament, the same officer in the Church is called indifferently bishop and elder, or presbyter." (*Commentary on Philippians*, p. 93.)

The term "deacon" comes from the Greek *diakonos* meaning a *servant or minister*. In the English New Testament whenever the reference is to those who were administering the funds and property given for the poor, the word is rendered deacon. In this sense it refers to a definite class composed of men of high Christian character (1 Tim 3:12, 13; Phil. 1:1). The officer was very well known in the early Church and it has been generally believed in the past that the "seven" set apart by the apostles were the first members of this order (Acts 6:1 - 6). This is now doubted by certain scholars, but it is in accordance with the view of Irenaeus in the second century. The seven were appointed expressly to attend to the administration of charitable relief among the poor, so that the apostles could be freed from "the serving of tables" and give themselves "continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word". This certainty expresses the reasons why deacons were given a place, in the Church, whatever view we may take of the seven. They were appointed as helpers in the administration and general business of the Church so that the other ranks of the ministry might dedicate themselves more fully to the higher spiritual exercises of their calling. In the course of history, the various bodies which make up the Christian Church have differed considerably in their teaching regarding the position and functions of the deacon.

While the apostles lived, their authority was decisive; but even in their day Councils were held, as in 49AD, at Jerusalem. Later the Councils were of a regional character, but the churches in the various regions (although autonomous) kept up a correspondence with one another and maintained fraternal unity in the love of Christ. Later still, from 325AD onwards, came the great Ecumenical Councils which tried to lay down laws for the Church Universal.

The worship of the early Church was modelled upon the simple service of the synagogue rather than upon the ritualistic service of the Temple and the worshippers really came into vital touch with God. The result was a most powerful and effective Church. We are astonished at what they accomplished. With no worldly grandeur, with little social influence, without even church buildings, those early Christians went on from strength to strength, in spite of the opposition of the great Roman Empire and the bitter animosity of a sinful, pagan world which hated them because the purity of the Christians' lives condemned their own lack of moral standards.

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The very essence of church organisation and Christian life and worship in the first two centuries was simplicity. There was an absence of that formalism and pomp which took possession of the field in later times where spiritual life declined. Christians met for worship whenever they could, often in private home and sometimes in more public places, such as "the school of Tyrannus". Their worship was free and spontaneous under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and had not yet become inflexible in its form through the use of manuals of devotion. The Church was vigorously active. Not only the pastor, but also many of those present took part in the services, for to them the priesthood of all believers was a tremendous reality. Or was it?

Subsequent Church History records a diversity of joy and sadness, development and loss, unity and diversity. But clearly, God has been at work and still loves His Church. Our need is to live as the Church of Jesus Christ in our day.

As a Baptist Church, living together in Christian community has always been a priority - this we believe comes from the NT emphasis.

In summary: What do you think belonging to the Church means for Christians?

APPENDIX 1 - BIBLE STUDY NOTES

Study 3 - Where we are today

Study Three: Where we are today

Our practices today have been greatly influenced by our history.

Most scholars accept that baptism in the New Testament times was for believers and was by immersion.

Through the first few centuries there developed a variety of practices. From baptism of Believers as the norm, some (eg Augustine) developed an argument for infant baptism, especially on account of the doctrine of original sin, while others avoided baptising people because they held to the need to live a sinless life after baptism.

The first clear reference for infant baptism can be dated at the end of the second century.

Following the fourth century the normal practice was that of infant baptism.

During the Reformation the Christian Church, especially in the West, experienced a time of change and division when change was resisted. One group which emerged was the Anabaptists - this name means "re-baptisers". From this group, which experienced a great deal of persecution, the Baptist Church came into being.

As new denominations began so each took a stance on baptism and membership. Today these include:

- infant baptism by sprinkling or pouring, later followed by confirmation
- infant baptism by immersion, in some cases three times
- infant dedication, later baptism as a believer by immersion
- infant dedication, baptism by sprinkling or pouring
- concurrent baptism/confirmation
- baptism encouraged yet not essential for church membership.

With increasing mobility and change of churches, people from these various denominational backgrounds can be found in the one church. It is this which can cause concern and often pain.

Various Scenarios

1. John becomes a Christian from a completely secular background; no baptism as an infant, no previous church membership.
2. Joy is baptised as an infant because parents feel it is the right thing to do, but there is no further contact with a church. This person then becomes a Christian.
3. Kelvin is baptised as an infant, parents are Christians and receives nurture and becomes a Christian, without being confirmed.

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4. Winnie is baptised as an infant, has no real contact with a Church or Christian nurture and at the appropriate age is confirmed as it is the “right” thing to do. This person then becomes a Christian.
5. Alfred is baptised as an infant, receives Christian nurture, becomes a Christian and then is confirmed as a public declaration of faith.
6. Joan is the child of Christian parents, is dedicated as an infant and when friends are baptised by immersion as a public declaration of faith - this person is also baptised. Subsequently a conversion experience takes place.
7. Roger is dedicated as an infant, becomes a Christian and is baptised as a believer by immersion.
8. Bill is dedicated as an infant, becomes a Christian and is baptised as a believer by sprinkling or pouring.

Questions

1. Can you think of any other scenarios?

2. Imagine each of these individuals seeks membership of the local Baptist Church where the Church requires a member to have been baptised as a believer by immersion in order to become a member.

What do you think are the biblical and practical considerations in each situation?

Note: You are not asked in this to necessarily give a conclusion. The question asks you to discuss what needs to be considered.

APPENDIX 2 - CHURCH CONFERENCES

PREPARATION FOR CONFERENCE

1. This conference is best held after the church has agreed to look at the matter of Baptism and Church Membership and looked at the issues involved by using the Bible Studies in Appendix 1.
2. Select a few people to organise the conferences. These should be people trusted by the church who are good at process and will help people become involved.
3. Promote the conference well, arrange baby-sitting and hold it at a time when most people can attend.
4. The purpose of the conference will be to: *“Gain clarity on the issues facing the Church as it investigates the matter of Baptism and Church Membership.”* People need to be informed that this is not a decision-making conference.

Note: The Conference format is for a church which is a closed membership church and is looking at the issue.

SUGGESTED CONFERENCE FORMAT

1. It is best to hold the conference in a room where people have space to move and can meet in small groups where it is easy to write on butchers' paper.
2. Welcome everyone, read and comment on a scripture passage that affirms Jesus as the head of the Church and the Church as the people of God eg Ephesians 1 or 4; Phil 2 or Colossians 1 and pray.
3. To obtain clarity as to where people are on the matter use the following mapping exercises. (Have someone note numbers.)
 - (a) Place decades (eg 1950, 1960, 1970, etc) on A4 sheets of paper on the floor and have people stand on the decade when Jesus first became real to them. (You may like to let some briefly share how this took place.)
 - (b) Have people stand on the decade when they started attending this Church.
 - (c) Place the following sheets of paper on the ground and have people stand on the appropriate sheet.
 - (i) Always been part of this church; From another Baptist Church; From a Church of another denomination; Came to Christ at this Church.
 - (ii) Am Baptised as a believer by immersion; Baptised as infant and confirmed; baptised as infant; not baptised
 - (d) Place "1", "5" and "10" on the ground as a continuum. "1" is low and "10" very high. Ask people to stand on the continuum:

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- (i) Level of importance that church looks at this issue.
 - (ii) Level of anxiety I personally feel in looking at this.
 - (iii) Believe our church should make a change ("1" no; "10" most definitely)
4. Divide people into small discussion groups where people discuss:
 - (a) On a sheet of butchers' paper list the observations people have from the mapping exercises.
 - (b) On a sheet of butchers' paper list issues/questions people have for discussion.
 - (c) Decide on the most important matters and discuss these in the group.
 - (d) Let each person say where they are in relation to this issue.
 - (e) Ensure that people have spent time praying in their groups.
 5. After the allotted time (say 45 - 60 minutes) groups are to gather and the leader of each group will share with the whole group a summary of the their discussion.
 6. Before closing the conference repeat the last mapping exercise mentioned above ie "3. (d) (iii)" to see if there is any change. If you feel it is appropriate you may care to map the five options related to the matter as listed in the introductory article asking people to stand where they personally prefer and then where they think will be good for the church.
 7. Group leaders write a summary of the discussion and give all documentation to the organising committee.

OPTIONAL SECOND CONFERENCE

A second conference can be held if it is clear the church is not of one mind. This may take the form of further small group discussions, a lecture and discussion, further mapping or whatever. The aim of a second conference would be to respond to issues raised in the first conference. If you consider a need for a second conference, but not sure as to its format please make contact with any of the Ministry Support and Development field staff.

CHURCH MEETING

Having begun the process it will be important to conclude it at a Church Meeting. It is appropriate for a recommendation to come to this meeting from the organising committee or church leadership. The recommendation should be clear and known by the church at least two weeks prior to the meeting. As mentioned in the introductory notes it is recommended that a secret ballot be held.

After going through this process hopefully people will have prayed, been informed and able to make a response with a view to the good of the whole. If the vote is close then it is obvious the

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mind of Jesus is not known at present, no change should be made and people need to be caring of each other. If there is a clear way ahead (not necessarily unanimous) then those who have a minority view need to hear the views of the rest of the body and again, people need to care for each other.

If a change to procedure takes place then obviously necessary constitutional changes need to be made. The sample Constitution on the Union website has suggested wording for different forms of church membership.