

Questions and Answers
Regarding the Constitutional Proposals
by the Elders of Bethlehem Baptist Church
on Membership and Baptism
updated 10-30-05

The intention is for us to add more questions and answers as we have time and as they emerge. So note the date updated and check back from time to time for more questions and answers. We will change the date each time more questions are added.

1. What do the Council of Elders of Bethlehem believe and teach and practice about baptism?

Article II, Section 4, paragraph b of the Bethlehem Baptist Church By-Laws says, “*Elders are also required to be in agreement with the Bethlehem Baptist Church Elder Affirmation of Faith.*” Therefore all the elders heartily affirm paragraph 12.3 of this ELDER AFFIRMATION OF FAITH:

12.3 We believe that baptism is an ordinance of the Lord by which those who have repented and come to faith express their union with Christ in His death and resurrection, by being immersed in water in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. It is a sign of belonging to the new people of God, the true Israel, and an emblem of burial and cleansing, signifying death to the old life of unbelief, and purification from the pollution of sin.

2. You just quoted the Bethlehem Elder Affirmation of Faith. Is there any connection between the role of that document and this proposal?

Yes, in this sense. The BBC Elder Affirmation of Faith is a lengthy, thorough doctrinal Affirmation which in December 2003 the church voted to require of all elders. This was a remarkable and wonderful thing. What it did was to secure, as far as humans can secure such things, that the elders will be doctrinally sound on a wide range of biblical issues, including baptism. We believe this also makes the church more doctrinally sound and secure from error that may rise in the membership of the church. The door to the eldership has been made doctrinally much more narrow than it once was.

One effect of this is to remove the fear that the membership of the church must be mature and sound on all the range of biblical doctrine. This is the goal for all members. But the glory of evangelism is that people will be coming to Christ all the time and will be welcomed into membership the way a family welcomes a new baby into the family. It may be a long time of loving teaching before a new member can carry his full weight in the family. In a strongly evangelistic or a missionary setting, church membership must be a very messy affair. New

believers should be welcomed into the church with many strange notions still in their head. Then the teaching of the church labors to correct and teach and mature the believers.

The Elder Affirmation of Faith assures us that there will always be a clear difference between the immaturity of many members and the elders who are charged to lead and teach the church. One way to put it is to say that, since we have made the door to the eldership so narrow, we are free to make the door to membership broader. The doctrinal soundness of the church lies not in the maturity of the members but the doctrinal and spiritual maturity of the elders.

3. Is any change being proposed for the belief, teaching, or practice of believers' baptism described above in Question One?

No. We will only believe, teach, and practice believers' baptism by immersion in accord with the Elder Affirmation of Faith. This is not a mere concession. It is a conviction.

4. What, then, is being proposed as a change regarding baptism and membership?

Since our aim is not to elevate beliefs and practices that are non-essential to the level of prerequisites for church membership, we propose that Christians who have not been baptized by immersion as believers, but, as they believe, by some other method or before they believed, may, under some circumstances, be members of this church.

5. Under what circumstances would we admit a person to membership who has not been baptized by immersion as a believer?

Since we believe that the New Testament teaches and demonstrates that the mode of baptism is only the immersion of a believer in water, we therefore regard all other practices of baptism as “misguided, defective, and illegitimate”—strong words that we propose to be included in the church By-Laws.

Yet, while not taking these differences lightly, we would not elevate them to the level of what is essential. Thus, we would welcome into membership candidates who, after a time of study, discussion, and prayer, prescribed by the Elders, retain a conviction that it would be a *violation* of their conscience to be baptized by immersion as believers. This conviction of conscience must be based on a plausible, intelligible, Scripturally-based argument rather than on mere adherence to a tradition or family expectations.

The elders will make all such judgments in presenting candidates for membership to the congregation. All candidates for membership, even when holding firmly to views different from the official position of the elders, must demonstrate a humble and teachable disposition with respect to the church leadership, as expressed in the Church Covenant.

6. Can you give us the very wording that is being proposed to express this “exception” in the By-Laws Article I, Section 2?

Yes. Here are the very words from the proposed amendment:

1. The teaching and practice of baptism at Bethlehem Baptist Church is defined in Section 12 of the BETHLEHEM BAPTIST CHURCH ELDER AFFIRMATION OF FAITH. The key paragraph states:

We believe that baptism is an ordinance of the Lord by which those who have repented and come to faith express their union with Christ in His death and resurrection, by being immersed in water in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. It is a sign of belonging to the new people of God, the true Israel, and an emblem of burial and cleansing, signifying death to the old life of unbelief, and purification from the pollution of sin.

2. Thus the official position of Bethlehem Baptist Church is that only baptism by immersion of believers will be taught and practiced by the church. Customarily, therefore, all members of the church will have been baptized by immersion as believers.
3. However, we believe it is fitting that membership in the local church (distinct from *leadership* in the local church) should have prerequisites similar to the prerequisites for membership in the universal church. In other words, we believe it is unfitting to deny membership to a person who, by faith in Christ, gives evidence of regeneration.
4. Therefore, our aim is not to elevate beliefs and practices that are non-essential to the level of prerequisites for church membership. This implies that Christians who have not been baptized by immersion as believers, but, as they believe, by some other method or before they believed, may under some circumstances be members of this church.
5. Since we believe that the New Testament teaches and demonstrates that the mode of baptism is only the immersion of a believer in water, we therefore regard all other practices of baptism as misguided, defective, and illegitimate. Yet, while not taking these differences lightly, we would not elevate them to the level of what is essential. Thus, we will welcome into

membership candidates who, after a time of study, discussion, and prayer, prescribed by the Elders, retain a conviction that it would be a *violation* of their conscience to be baptized by immersion as believers. This conviction of conscience must be based on a plausible, intelligible, Scripturally-based argument rather than on mere adherence to a tradition or family expectations. The elders will make all such judgments in presenting candidates for membership to the congregation. All candidates for membership, even when holding firmly to views different from the official position of the elders, must demonstrate a humble and teachable disposition with respect to the church leadership, as expressed in the Church Covenant.

6. We will not admit into membership persons who refuse to practice any form of baptism at all, or who believe that their water baptism caused their regeneration. The former is a serious rejection of the Lord's commandment, and the latter is a serious misunderstanding of the work of the Holy Spirit. Our MEMBERSHIP AFFIRMATION OF FAITH states, "We believe that [the Holy Spirit's] work in regeneration is not the result of water baptism or any outward ritual."

7. In the words of our CHURCH COVENANT, the members shall all be committed to "welcome, and test biblically, instruction from the Scriptures by the elders of the church which accords with the Elder Affirmation of Faith, seeking to grow toward Biblical unity in the truth."

7. Is it right, then, to say that we are not simply admitting to membership anyone who disagrees with our view of baptism?

That is correct. Three key sentences in the proposed wording just quoted are:

We will not admit into membership persons who refuse to practice any form of baptism at all, or who believe that their water baptism caused their regeneration. The former is a serious rejection of the Lord's commandment, and the latter is a serious misunderstanding of the work of the Holy Spirit. Our MEMBERSHIP AFFIRMATION OF FAITH states, "We believe that [the Holy Spirit's] work in regeneration is not the result of water baptism or any outward ritual."

8. What is the driving concern that prompts these proposed changes?

We believe it is fitting that membership in the local church (distinct from *leadership* in the local church) should have prerequisites roughly similar to the prerequisites for membership in the universal church. In other words, we believe it is unfitting to deny membership to a person who, by faith in Christ, gives credible evidence of regeneration and faith in Christ. Or to put it another way, it

is a very serious matter to look at a brother or sister who is truly born again and say, “You may not be a member of this local church.” The local church is not supposed to be a private religious club with membership requirements different from the universal church which the local church reflects. The local church is a local expression of the universal body of Christ. It would be hard to defend from the New Testament different membership requirements for the church universal and the local church. Our aim is to try to make the door to local church membership roughly the same size as the door to universal church membership. We do not claim to have done this perfectly.

9. But does membership really matter that much? Don’t we let people worship at Bethlehem, and even take the Lord’s Supper, and be in small groups, even though they are not members?

Our present practice does not reflect the seriousness of the New Testament view of membership. We think that exclusion from the local church in the New Testament would have been considered virtually the same as excommunication. Therefore, we don’t think it is good to encourage non-member participation over the long haul. It is not good for a Christian not to be a member of a local church.

We hope, in fact, that this proposal will increase the significance of membership. We believe that when a person has no good reason not to be a member (since the requirements would be so basic), the expectation for membership can be elevated. Our proposal is to make the requirements for membership at Bethlehem roughly as basic as requirements for membership in the universal church.

Being a member (an organic part) of the universal body of Christ (Ephesians 1:22-23), but not a part of a local body of believers, would be a serious contradiction of the meaning of the church (local and universal). The “body” imagery in the New Testament is applied to the universal and local church suggesting that we should think of the local church as one particular expression of the universal church. There should be continuity between who is in the one and who is in the other.

Therefore it is a very serious thing to say to someone, “You may not be a member of this church.” We think it is so serious that one should say it only when there are some grounds in doctrine or behavior that the person is not born again—not a member of the universal body of Christ. We believe that some, but not all, disagreements over the meaning of baptism call a person’s faith into question.

10. But why do you put such an emphasis on membership in a local church? Is there anything in the Bible that would show there is such a thing as local church membership and that it is important?

We see at least four strands of evidence in the New Testament pointing to the crucial importance of local church membership.

1) The privilege and responsibility of have some governing powers of the church. Consider the implication of Matthew 18:15-17 where “the church” (*ekklēsia*) appears to be the final court of appeal in matters of church authority as it relates to membership.

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

If there is no church membership, how can you define the group that will take up this sensitive and weighty matter of exhorting the unrepentant person and finally rendering a judgment about his standing in the community? It is hard to believe that just anyone who showed up claiming to be a Christian could be a part of that gathering. Surely “the church” must be a definable group to handle such a weighty matter.

2) The possibility of being excluded from the church (excommunication). There is another implication from Matthew 18:15-17, namely, that the unrepentant person is accountable to a group of people. This is an amazing event: formally excluding a person from “the church” so that he becomes to you “as a Gentile and a tax collector”—that is, an unbeliever. The same kind of exclusion is found in 1 Corinthians 5:1-5. How is this possible if the person is not considered a member of something from which he can be excluded? So both the person’s liability to excommunication and the involvement of “the church” in the process imply that the one being charged is a member and the group settling the matter are members.

3) A commitment to be held accountable by a Council of Elders to believe a basic affirmation and to live a basic covenant. The point here is that without membership, who is it that the New Testament says must submit to leaders? Some kind of expressed willingness or covenant or agreement or commitment must precede submission. Consider the way the New Testament talks about the relationship of the church to her leaders.

Hebrews 13:17 Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.

1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you (*proistamenous humōn*) in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work

1 Timothy 5:17 Let the elders who rule well (*Hoi kalōs proestōtes presbuteroi*) be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.

How is this leadership and this submission to function where there is no membership defining who has made the commitment to be led and who has been chosen as leaders? If we downplay the importance of membership, it is difficult to see how we could take these commands seriously and practically.

4) The privilege of being cared for with the primacy and special benefit of a local covenant family of believers. When the pastors and elders extend their care beyond the membership, it does not mean that there is no primacy to members. Consider Acts 20:28 where Paul tells the elders how to care for their flock.

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.

This verse does not say elders cannot visit unbelievers or those who are not yet members. But it does make clear that their first responsibility is to a particular flock. Does it not make sense that this flock would have definition and limits? Who are we as elders and pastors responsible for? For whom will we give an account to God?

For these four reasons we believe that membership in the local church is of crucial importance. A person who continues in a state of disconnectedness from membership in a local church is walking in serious disobedience to God.

11. Do you think infant baptism is a dangerous and serious misunderstanding of what Jesus commanded when he told us to make disciples and baptize them?

Yes. It is dangerous and it is serious, but, depending on how it is viewed and practiced, it may not be an essential error. By essential, we mean that the error does not necessarily mean one is damned for believing and practicing it. We are committed to believing, teaching, and practicing only believers' baptism.

We have seen infant baptism slide into presumptive regeneration. In certain state churches around the world it has confused the issue of what a true Christian is. It can give false assurance to people who are taught that their infant baptism saves them.

These are strong words. Alongside the biblical exegesis of the meaning of baptism, these spin-off effects of some uses of infant baptism are part of the reason why we have never weakened in our embrace of the belief, teaching, and practice of believers' baptism alone.

The issue for us is not whether infant baptism can lead people to false security (it can), but rather whether there are true saints, who do not see their infant baptism that way, and bear the other marks of regeneration. Is this error—this mistaken understanding of Scripture and this unintended disobedience—of such a nature as to disqualify one from belonging to the local church.

12. Would we still be Baptists?

Yes, and we would be unashamed of that great heritage. Some in this tradition shared the conviction that we are proposing. What would continue to make us Baptists is that we would only believe, teach, and practice baptism of believers by immersion. In addition, we believe in the goal of a regenerate church membership, and we involve the congregation in the governance of the church.

13. Is there any desire or intention to change the name of the church?

No. Not among the staff and elders.

14. Have we spoken with the leaders of the Baptist General Conference and the Minnesota Baptist Conference of which we are a part? What do they think of what the Elders are proposing? Will this affect our membership in the Conference?

There have been both written and face-to-face communications with both the BGC and the MBC. The documents were made available to the leaders of both. Pastor John met personally with Jerry Sheveland (10-1-05), the President of the Baptist General Conference. Pastor John, Dan Holst, Sam Crabtree, and Tim Johnson met with Truett Lawson (10-20-05), the Executive Minister of the Minnesota Baptist Conference.

We share with Jerry Sheveland, the president of the BGC, a passion that baptism of believers by immersion would be preserved as what is believed, taught, and practiced in our church and our denomination. The disagreement comes over what kinds of exceptions may be made in admitting certain believers to membership. Jerry Sheveland wishes we had handled these exceptions another

way. But he would like to put our disagreement in the category of the liberty and autonomy of the local church. In other words, his preference is that we would not leave the BGC. That is certainly our preference as well.

Truett Lawson communicated to us that he believes the proposal of the elders conforms to the guidelines that the MBC developed some years ago when a similar issue came up in other churches. He personally believes in the direction we are going. He does not see any conflict with the MBC leadership on this direction.

15. Was the option of an associate membership considered? If so, why didn't the elders go in that direction?

Yes, we did consider that possibility. There are at least two reasons for not pursuing it:

First, an associate membership does not fit with the meaning of membership and the nature of the church. The local church is an expression of the universal body of Christ. To be a member of the local church signifies biblically that we are members of the universal body. Since there is no associate membership in the universal body, it would be inappropriate to create an associate membership in the local body. What would it mean about membership in Christ?

Second, if one suggested that members admitted who have not been baptized as believers is to have a class of members who are "persistently disobedient" our response would be: to define the associate membership as a category of the "persistently disobedient" would not fit with the nature of life in the church. Either a person's sins are serious enough to proceed with discipline that might result in excommunication, or they are of the nature that Christians struggle with, and should not be put in a special category.

16. Would we still believe that baptism is necessary in a missionary context?

Yes. The question of infant baptism only arises in the situation of second generation Christians. Should the children of baptized believers be baptized? In a missionary context the question is: Should adult converts be baptized? The answer is yes, always and unashamedly. This is the great dividing line in most cultures between being a Christian convert and not being one. There is no special category in the New Testament for secret saints who avoid baptism for fear of identification with Jesus.

17. Will the proposal make the effort to do church-wide member care harder or easier?

We do not believe the changes proposed will make member care more difficult. On the contrary we think the seriousness of membership will rise with this change because it will come closer to removing all barriers to membership that are not essential to being a Christian. This means that we will be able to say to attenders who want to be here that they should join the church and that not to do so is a serious matter. This means that membership can become a more pervasive requirement for roles like small-group leaders and Sunday School teachers. All of this will not lessen our commitment to take member care seriously but heighten it. Whether we do a good job at this will not be determined by who joins the church, but by how seriously we take the teaching of Acts 20:28 and Hebrews 13:17. The seriousness of those verses is what this proposal is rooted in.

Acts 20:28, “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.”

Hebrews 13:17, “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

18. In the elder proposal a conservative Presbyterian or Reformed person could be a member of Bethlehem. But the proposal requires that elders of Bethlehem must embrace the Elder Affirmation of Faith which says that baptism is the immersion of a believer in water. So even though a member agrees with everything in the Elder Affirmation of Faith except the meaning of baptism, that person could not be an elder or pastor at Bethlehem. Why is it seriously questionable to disallow someone into membership because of infant baptism but not seriously questionable to disallow that same person, if mature in the faith, to serve as an elder?

The answer is that it is vastly more serious to exclude someone from the church than to exclude them from an office in the church. Being a part of the church is fundamental to Christian existence. Being an elder is not. Moreover the New Testament gives qualifications for being an elder that are not qualifications for being a member (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:6-9). The standards are higher for being an elder than for being a member.

If we are asked, Would we be comfortable saying to a competent Reformed Paedobaptist teacher who joined our church, “We are glad you are a member but you cannot serve as an elder,” the answer is a) no such conversations are “comfortable,” just necessary; b) we would keep on working and hoping that over time a mind could be changed on this matter of baptism so that the person could be an elder; c) most

importantly it would be a hundred times more uncomfortable for us to say to that person: You may not be a member of this church, even though you might want to.

In other words, the awkwardness of having a competent teacher in the membership who cannot be an elder because of disagreement about baptism is a small thing compared to the much more weighty matter of excluding him from membership.

19. Doesn't the proposal's claim to make membership requirements "roughly" the same as the requirements for membership in the universal church (p. 6 of the 85-page document) rest a huge amount on the word "roughly"? That is, it seems like the proposed MEMBERSHIP AFFIRMATION OF FAITH still requires things that not all regenerate people will necessarily believe.

Yes, the word "roughly" carries a lot of freight. We know that we have not succeeded in defining the doctrinal and behavioral tests of regeneration perfectly. This was the hardest part of our job. We recommend the effort to anyone who wants to be humbled. What are the doctrines which to deny calls a person's faith into question? What are the persistent behaviors which to embrace or to renounce calls faith into question? We have done the best we could in trying to make these choices, while working within the framework that we have. We do not claim it to be perfect.

Here are two observations that might help.

A) The PROPOSED MEMBERSHIP AFFIRMATION OF FAITH is prefaced with these words: "The purpose of the MEMBERSHIP AFFIRMATION OF FAITH is to express what we believe a person must not deny (or, preferably, would affirm) so as not to call the genuineness of his faith into question. It is not meant to represent all that a Christian *should* believe, but the essential truths that a Christian *must not deny*." One can see that we are struggling with how to do what all leaders of churches must do if they are committed to a regenerate church membership (as far as humans can judge). That is, we are acknowledging that new Christians may not have much biblical or theological knowledge at all, and may not be able to articulate even the basic doctrines included in the MEMBERSHIP AFFIRMATION OF FAITH. In that case it seems to us that they should at least be unwilling to *deny* the affirmations.

B) In cases where a person may hold to seriously deficient doctrines that we do not deal with in the MEMBERSHIP AFFIRMATION OF FAITH (for example, the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation or the doctrine of open theism), we believe that enough has been said in the constitution and by-laws and ELDER AFFIRMATION OF FAITH and MEMBERSHIP AFFIRMATION OF FAITH about the nature of saving faith and about how a person is justified and about how a person enjoys the grace of God, that the elders who interview a member candidate will have enough guidance to discern if the person is relying on something other than Christ

for salvation and if the person has as view of God so defective as to call his faith into question.

In other words, it is the task of the elders first and then the congregation to discern the evidences of a person's regeneration and saving faith. This is a weighty matter. It will require from the elders a spiritual and doctrinal discernment that only God can give. The doctrinal and behavioral guidelines they will need are not exhausted by the MEMBERSHIP AFFIRMATION OF FAITH and the CHURCH COVENANT. Where these documents are silent on some important issues, our hope is that ample pointers to truth are in the documents.