

The Biblical Qualifications for Church Membership
Jared Mulvihill – July 15, 2018 – Meadow Creek Church

- My task: the qualifications for church membership
- Lots of questions that will come up
- No Q & A tonight but if you have questions email me specifically and we might address some next week otherwise I am happy to talk further.

Goals:

- (1) Help you understand the biblical qualifications for membership
- (2) Elevate your view of church membership and baptism

Definition of church membership:

Christians identified within a local gathering or community of believers (church) who help preserve the gospel message, affirm gospel citizens, regularly meet together for worship and mutual encouragement, love and disciple one another, and submit to one another for the care of their souls.

Church membership is a public statement.

- When the church admits someone into membership, that church, as an institution, makes a heaven-sanctioned statement that this individual is a Christian. The church affirms their claim to bear the name Jesus.
- When a church excludes a member, either prior to membership or removes them from membership (church discipline), it revokes that heaven-backed affirmation (Jamison 167).

What are the biblical qualification for church membership?

1. Be a Christian: *repentance* and *belief* in the gospel

(14) Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, (15) and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." (Mark 1:14–15).

What is the gospel:

(23) For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, (24) and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, (25) whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith (Romans 3:23–25).

A professing believer is someone who sees their sinfulness and need for a Savior, repents of their sin while putting their faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ as they receive him as their treasure.

Membership within a local church is the church, as an institution, publicly expressing who they believe to be an authentic Christian.

Why the language of authentic Christian? There are many individuals within churches today who profess belief in Jesus but really are not believers.

(21) "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. (22) On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' (23) And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'" (Matthew 7:21–23)

A local church does not have the power to make a Christian. Rather it affirms to the world that an individual's claim to faith in Jesus, from all earthly appearances, is authentic.

2. Believer's Baptism

Meadow Creek Church believes the Bible teaches believers baptism by immersion. So what is baptism:

Baptism at its foundation signifies union with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection. It serves as an outward sign of the inward cleansing and remission of sins.¹

- The act of going under the water (death) and out of the water (new life).

Only Christians should be baptized because only Christians have been cleansed and forgiven of their sins. Therefore, baptism is to follow a profession of faith in Christ.

This is because baptism is a symbol. It is an external practice that bears witness to an internal reality.

¹ Titus 3:5; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Ephesians 1:13-15

And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses (Colossians 2:13).

Baptism is a Physical symbol of spiritual realities: buried with Christ in death and raised to walk in newness of life.

(11) In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, (12) having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead (Colossians 2:11–12).

Baptism: displaying something from the spiritual realm within the physical.

(3) Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? (4) We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. (5) For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his (Romans 6:3–5).

Baptism is God’s design for how someone publically professes faith in Jesus Christ and publically enters into the new covenant community. Within the New Testament, baptism is always the first step of the Christian life—always.

Does the Bible say, “you must be baptized before joining a church? No, it doesn’t. But it does have this pattern: baptism follows an individual’s profession of faith – Acts 2:38: “Repent and be baptized.”

Three reasons why baptism is a qualification for church membership²:

1. Faith is made public in baptism

Baptism is where faith goes public.

In Matthew 28:19 Jesus commanded his disciples to make disciples by preaching the gospel to them, baptizing them, and teaching them to obey everything he commanded. When we get baptized, we are publicly identify with the crucified and resurrected Christ and with his people.

At Pentecost those who believed Peter’s message stepped out from the

² Adapted from Bobby Jamieson, *Going Public: Why Baptism Is Required for Church Membership*, 9Marks (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2015), 161–68.

crowd, declaring allegiance to Christ as Savior through baptism (2:38–41).

Baptism is a command for all who claim to follow Jesus Christ. Why is baptism required for church membership? Because baptism is where faith goes public. It's where invisible faith becomes visible.

If you want to identify yourself with Christ's people and expect them to identify with you, you first need to identify yourself with Christ, which is the purpose of baptism.³

2. *Baptism is the initiating sign of the New Covenant*

Both the old covenant (Mosaic) and the new covenant (Jesus) have signs.

Heb 9:15 tells us that Jesus mediates a new covenant when he paid the ultimate price for our sins. The old covenant is not binding (Gal 3:24–26).

Whereas the old covenant had physical circumcision as the sign and entrance into that covenant, the new covenant has two signs – baptism and communion. Baptism is the initiating oath-sign of the new covenant.

So when the church asks, “How can we rightly affirm someone who belongs to the new covenant?” one part of the answer is, “Who has undergone the covenant oath-sign?” That is, who has been baptized?

3. *Baptism is the means by which the local church identifies individuals as kingdom citizens*

Picture baptism as the passport of the kingdom and the kingdom citizen's swearing-in ceremony.

When Jesus began the kingdom of heaven on earth, he established the church as an embassy of that kingdom. He gave the church the authority to identify kingdom citizens by affirming credible professions of faith in Jesus (Matt 16:19; 18:18–19). And the initiating means by which the church identifies individuals as kingdom citizens is baptism (Matt 28:19).

Baptism is the passport of the kingdom. We become kingdom citizens by faith in the king, but through public baptism the church recognizes and affirms our citizenship. Therefore, in order for a church to recognize

³ Jonathan Leeman, *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 90.

someone as a kingdom citizen, that citizen needs to produce his or her passport.

Jesus bound the church's judgment of one's claim to be a Christian to the public act of baptism. This is because, baptism identifies people as Christians, drawing a line between them and the world.

Clarification: When we as a church do not admit someone into membership, specifically someone professing to follow Christ and has not been baptized after that profession, we are not declaring that you are an unbeliever.

At an individual level, we are able to acknowledge someone as a brother or sister in the faith. Yet Jesus has only authorized a local church to publicly affirm a public profession of faith. And the public profession is made through a believer's baptism.

The church, as an institution, does not have the authority to affirm someone's profession of faith by granting membership apart from believer's baptism.

Here is a helpful illustration:

Imagine the United States government employs me as a customs agent. While working at the Minneapolis airport I notice that my biological father is next in line. When he comes to my window I have a responsibility to ask him for his passport and paperwork. Now I know he is an American citizen. I am able, on an individual level, to affirm his citizenship. Yet, the government has not given me the authority to grant him access to the country apart from his presentation of the correct documents. The issue is not what I'm able to do as an individual, but what authority I have as an agent of the United States.

Qualifications for church membership does not concern what an individual Christian is able to affirm, but what authority the local church has as an institution.

The local church is responsible to publicly affirm a person's public profession of faith in Jesus. The form of that profession is baptism. And the only valid Christian baptism is the baptism of a believer.