

Connecting Baptism and Membership

A Position Paper of the CVCC Elders

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Recently the CVCC elders studied and discussed the question of whether baptized people should also become members of the church upon their baptism. In other words, at CVCC, is it possible to be baptized here and not be a member? Will we, going forward, require candidates for baptism to also commit to joining the church before we baptize them? This question is especially relevant to minors. If we baptize someone, whether 11 or 16, should they join the church and have the same commitment as any adult member? If so, do we create a special category for “non-voting member” since they are minors?

Here is our answer in summary: Yes, we believe that everyone whom we baptize should also become a member at CVCC. Thus, we intend to begin this practice as elders when we consider people for baptism and membership. In addition, we conclude that we should not create a special category for minors of “non-voting member.” Minors will be treated as full members with both the responsibilities and accountabilities of any other member. We do, however, leave it up to the discretion of parents as to whether they think their particular child should be involved in a particular vote or meeting. Below we will explain our biblical rationale.

Why Baptism Leads to Membership

Baptism is integrally connected to the local church. Against the common assumption, baptism is not simply an individual decision or an individual act. There should be church approval and a baptism should be done in the context of a local church. First, consider the nature of baptism. What makes a baptism different from a swim, a dunk, or a bath? What makes a baptism a baptism? There’s nothing special about the water. There’s nothing too significant about the location (they didn’t have church buildings in the New Testament). So, the main difference is the context of the local church. I cannot dunk myself and call it a baptism. My dad can’t dunk me and call it a baptism. A baptism is somehow connected to the church. In nearly every instance of baptism in the NT, it is connected to the church. In Acts 2:41, “those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.” Acts 2:47 later says, “And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.” The number of what? Clearly there is a defined group, a church, that people are being added to through baptism. They then live out life as a church (Acts 2:42–46). 1 Cor 12:13 says, “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body.” Baptism is a picture of being united to Christ (Rom 6:3). The church is the body of Christ. Through baptism we enter into the body. *Therefore, those baptized should unite with the church through membership.*

Some might point to an apparent exception in Acts 8. There, it appears that Phillip, on his own by a road, baptizes the Ethiopian eunuch. This, though, should be considered an exceptional circumstance instead of the norm. The Ethiopian eunuch is not going to be living in Israel, so it’s impossible for him to join a church in Israel when he gets baptized. He is on his way back to Ethiopia when the baptism happens! Also, there is no church in Ethiopia, so there is no point in waiting for him to go back and be baptized there so that he can join that church. The eunuch

essentially *is* the church in Ethiopia. Finally, Phillip is baptizing as a representative of his church, not as just an individual Christian. So this is not the same as, say, a father or mentor baptizing a child. Phillip, on behalf of a church, baptizes someone into, essentially, a new future church in Ethiopia.

This issue also has to do with a theological concept of the “keys of the kingdom” (Matt 16:19; 18:15–20). This is simply not a concept we are familiar with culturally, nor are we taught this in church. Basically, the keys of the kingdom are a cultural understanding of authority (Isa 22:19–22). Just like keys to a door open and shut to keep people in or out, “keys” of a kingdom are signs of authority to allow people in or out of the kingdom. In Jesus’ kingdom, he has established the church as the outpost of his kingdom on earth (Matt 16:18). He gives to *the church* the keys of the kingdom. In Matthew 18:15–20, he clearly describes how the church “excommunicates” or puts out people from the church through church discipline. In church discipline, the church uses the keys of the kingdom. So, the next question is, if the church uses the keys to *remove* people, doesn’t it use the keys to *include* people, or allow them in? Although Scripture doesn’t explicitly say this, this is what the keys of the kingdom are.

With that understanding, we now need to ask, “How does the church bring someone into the church, the outpost of Christ’s kingdom on earth?” We have seen above that it is through baptism that someone enters the church. So, baptism should not be done without the authority of the local church. The church needs to “exercise the keys” by letting someone into the church through baptism. God has given authority in the church to the elders. They oversee (1 Tim 3:1), rule or govern (1 Tim 5:17), and lead (Heb 13:17). In Heb 13:17 God says believers are to “submit” to the elders. One aspect of submission is going to the elders to request baptism. Then, the elders should make a decision of whether to let that person “in” through baptism. So, *elders should approve someone for baptism. It is not for an individual to simply decide on their own they will be baptized.*

So, in conclusion, we see in the Bible that baptism and membership (the church) are closely tied together. We conclude that someone who desires baptism should experience baptism under the authority of the local church that they plan to attend. They should go to the elders expressing that desire, and the elders should approve them for baptism or provide further teaching if the person is not ready. Everyone who desires baptism should also desire to come under the shepherding care and authority of the local church and its elders. Thus, they should become members. They are being baptized into the body, and a church like CVCC is a local expression of the body of Christ.

Why Youth Should Be Full Members

We admit that this is not an issue Scripture directly addresses. This is a decision we as elders have made based upon our wisdom and perception of what is best in our context, and based on Scriptural principles. We take it for granted that a youth being baptized should be a genuine believer, and a genuine believer will show repentance by being involved in a church. A young person can do this even if it will look different from how an adult is involved in a local church. Thus, as we showed above, any genuine follower of Jesus, regardless of age, should seek to be a

member of a church. We cannot conceive of what it means to follow Jesus and not be part of his people. The “one another” commands, the commands to follow elders, and the need for accountability apply to all Christians regardless of age. We want our youth to grow up seeing this close connection between following Christ and being involved in the local church.

So, if we baptize people under 18 and we expect/require them to become members, we are left with two options. Either we have some sort of modified membership for minors or we consider them full members. The first option is to consider minors as “non-voting” members or “provisional members.” We decided against this option because, in the end, it is not something we can find in the Bible. In addition, it muddies the waters as to what it means to be a member. Membership entails both privilege *and* responsibility. We don’t want to undercut the biblical responsibility that members have. One of those major responsibilities is to use the “keys” by voting.

The second option is the one we have decided to practice. *We will treat young people as full voting members.* With that said, we do think elders can give guidance and work with parents on what matters to vote or not vote on. Minors are all different in their knowledge and maturity levels. Some may understand budgets really well, and others may not have any idea how a budget works. So elders can at times counsel parents that their child should not vote for the budget. For some children, parents may think it inappropriate for them to sit in on certain meetings of church discipline. The elders will not force parents to bring their minors who are members to a meeting when the parents don’t feel it is appropriate.

If this paper raises any questions regarding your own situation, we really hope that you will reach out to an elder so that we can talk through these issues with you. We pray that God will use this to help us to grow more into Christlikeness as his church.