

MEMBERSHIP – OPEN OR CLOSED?

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Baptists from other parts of the world are often scandalised when they come to Britain and discover that many, if not most, Baptist churches here are ‘open’ membership churches: i.e. they are churches where people do not need to be baptised to be members. How, they ask, can such churches be ‘Baptist’ churches, where the key Baptist distinctive is reduced to an optional extra? Indeed, it is not just Baptists from other parts of the world who are amazed by our practices. So too are those who practise infant baptism. How is it, that it is possible to be a member of a Baptist church, without having undergone any form of baptism, whether infant baptism or believers’ baptism. The New Testament clearly teaches that baptism is the door into the church (see, for instance, 1 Cor 12.13) – how come many British Baptist churches dispense with the door? The truth is that there is no true logic to the principle of open membership. However, if logic be our only guide, then we British Baptists should follow our Strict Baptist friends and close the Communion Table to all but those who have been baptised as believers. For, although we may say that the Table is open to all those who love the Lord Jesus, our understanding of Scripture is that if we love the Lord Jesus then we will want to commit ourselves to him in the waters of baptism. In the New Testament baptism is clearly part of the conversion process – so that from a New Testament perspective it is as nonsense for the unbaptised to eat bread and drink wine. Yet, we Baptists in membership with the Baptist Union rightly put logic and indeed theology to one side when we welcome all the Table – for we recognise that it is indeed possible to love the Lord Jesus and yet not to see the rightness of believers baptism. However strongly we may feel about baptism, the Lord Jesus must always take precedence. What is true of the Table, is also true of church membership. So for that reason, although a died-in-the-wool Baptist, I am happy to pastor an open membership church. However, this does not mean that I regard baptism as totally optional. Where for instance people come to faith within the context of our church, then we would expect them to be baptised if they wish to become a member of the church – just as nobody can be baptised without becoming a member of the church (unless they are, already committed to a church of another tradition). However, where people from a non-baptist church tradition wish to become members of our church without being baptised (and ‘baptism’ in our terms refers to believers baptism), then we are happy to welcome them. Indeed, much as I would like to see them baptised, I recognise that there is no Scriptural necessity for mature Christians to be baptised – in so far as in the New Testament baptism has in mind those who wish to begin go the way of Christ. There is no doubt in my mind that without open membership we as a church would be much the poorer.