

DEVELOPING A POLICY FOR NON-CONFORMERS

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How do we respond as a church when people, who do not conform to accepted Christian norms of behaviour, begin to attend our services? Indeed how do we respond when church members deviate from the norm?

What should our attitude be to gays and lesbians wishing to be part of our fellowship? How do we respond when marriages fall apart in our midst? Or when those amongst us become single mothers? Or when single girls decide to terminate their pregnancy? Or when couples in the church live together? How do we handle alcohol or drug addicts or self-harmers who wish to become members of our church? How do we deal with members who are prejudiced against asylum seekers or wear clothes produced by sweat shops?

If Jesus is to be our guide, then there is no doubt that we should welcome everybody, whether or not they conform to norms of Christian discipleship. For Jesus was the friend of sinners (Matt 11.19). To those who complained of the company he kept he declared: "I have not come to call respectable people to repent, but outcasts" (Lk 5.32). Yet Jesus clearly expected people to change. Although he did not condemn the woman caught in adultery, he did say: "Go, but do not sin again" (John 8.11). The Apostle Paul was equally forthright: "people who are immoral or who worship idols or are adulterers or who steal or are greedy or are drunkards or who slander others or are thieves – none of these shall possess God's Kingdom" (1 Cor 6.10)

How does all this translate into the life of a Baptist church? Are we to baptize only those who have got their life together? Although baptism clearly denotes repentance, it also is an acknowledgement that our only hope is the grace of God. If baptism becomes a mark of 'perfection', then it denies the need for the grace of God!

Where does church discipline come in? When are matters brought to the church meeting? And what, for that matter, are the most heinous of 'sins'. More often than not Jesus attacked the hypocrisy of the Pharisees rather than people's sexual morals. Indeed, in the Sermon on the Mount he made it clear that attitudes can be as important as actions. As for Paul, his lists of 'sins' are so wide-ranging that few would escape his condemnation!

At a time when life is increasingly messy, and where matters are often more grey rather than black and white, people are increasingly regarding the Christian life – and not just conversion – as a process. Or, to put it another way, we are increasingly recognising that in the New Testament conversion is a life-long process and involves three tenses: we have been saved, we are being saved, and we will be saved. Perhaps we should regard baptism and church membership as a sign that people desire to go the way of Christ. On this basis we can perhaps welcome people into church membership who are struggling to live up to Christ's calling.

What kind of policy would you frame for non-conformers?

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