

# **Restoring Integrity in Baptist Churches**

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## **Restoring Integrity in Baptist Churches**

As many in our nation contemplate the daily revelations coming from the world of professional sports regarding the use of performance enhancing drugs, I am reminded that any short-cut one takes to attain growth may compromise integrity.

The local church faces a similar dilemma. A local church can grow by using any number of enhancements: for instance, by appealing to consumerism, creating a “trendy” atmosphere, reaching out to felt needs, not offending members, or by attempting to please all those people who enter the door. These “short-cut” methods to achieve church growth can do harm to the corporate body just like drugs can harm the individual’s body.

A church that wants to obey Christ must ask some tough questions: Does our mentality compromise the integrity of the church as established by Christ? Are numbers at any cost the most important thing? Does the church want to be “bigger and better” by any means or should it be satisfied to maintain its integrity even if that means growing at a slower rate at first?

At this point, you may be thinking, “How are Baptist churches in danger of losing their integrity for the sake of growth?” Take a moment to think about what has happened to Baptists over the past century. Since the early 1900s, Baptists have experienced a skewed emphasis upon soul competency or the priesthood of the “believer” (rather than the more biblical “believers”), the loss of church discipline in most of our churches, the changing of views from closed communion to a more open position, and the failure to defend our primary distinctive of believer’s baptism.

How then should Baptist churches avoid compromising their integrity for the sake of growth? Five solutions present themselves from the New Testament doctrine of the church.

First, meaningful or regenerate church membership must be regained. Meaningful membership will counter the culture of consumerism that the church faces. A congregation full of members who understand their roles will result in a well-balanced church with more than the usual twenty percent of the members doing eighty percent of the work. In order for our members to take membership seriously, biblical expectations must be understood. A proper theological understanding of the believers’ church will affect the way we see our part in the local church. Moreover, the successful maintenance of regenerate church membership allows congregational government to function properly. Regenerate membership is perhaps the most crucial and central element of polity in the life of Baptist churches.

Second, Baptist churches must regain and act on the proper understanding of baptism. The God-given ordinance from which our denominational name arose has fallen into anonymity. With liberal challenges questioning its importance, many younger pastors and church workers have not been properly equipped to defend the doctrine of baptism. A discussion must take place regarding the various elements of baptism: baptism must be of believers, baptism must be by immersion, baptism is the outward symbol of the inward change, baptism is the public profession of faith, baptism is the door to the local church, and baptism begins the covenant relationship among believers in a local congregation. Only those participating in this ceremonial act out of

obedience to Christ may be accepted into the membership of the local church. Thus, baptism properly understood protects the entrance to the church while church discipline protects the continued integrity of the church.

Third, our churches must understand and maintain the proper view of the Lord's Supper. A proper view of the Lord's Supper understands the ordinance is meaningful and not merely a quarterly addendum at the end of a service. A correct understanding of the Lord's Supper is that it is a meaningful event for remembering the work Christ on the cross, celebrating the fellowship and unity of the body, and anticipating the triumphant return of Christ, while denying the errors of transubstantiation and consubstantiation. In addition, the Lord's Supper understood correctly cannot be separated from church discipline and the regenerate nature of the congregation.

Fourth, Baptist churches must regain the proper practice of church discipline that always seeks restoration. Church discipline can easily be twisted as a legalistic hammer with which one may beat others over the head. Such misuses do not exemplify biblical church discipline, which intentionally confronts members in sin, seeking both individual restoration and the maintenance of a pure body. The loss of biblical church discipline has led many onlookers to say that the church is no different than the world. This should never be the case; by requiring regenerate membership reinforced by biblical church discipline, the church will look very different from the world.

Finally, our churches must address emerging and seeker trends, pointing out certain challenges to Baptist theological practice. Baptists must examine proper theological practice in light of the success these movements have achieved. While the local church needs a new measuring stick for success other than mere numbers, the conversion of human lives does indeed represent the mission of the church. The traditional Baptist church order that follows and flows from Scripture can emphasize in a real way the community sought by emerging groups and the emphasis on evangelism among seeker groups. Perhaps both of these movements in some way have recognized missing aspects of the local church—aspects that have gone missing because of an incomplete theology of the church.

The discussion of how a proper and complete understanding of Baptist church doctrine can guard the integrity of the local church has already begun. Many of our pastors and scholars have contributed to a healthy and necessary discussion. For the sake of our future, we must resist the short-cuts that lead to unnatural growth, and invest in training the next generation how we can maintain the Christ-ordained integrity of the New Testament church.

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