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How Inclusive Should the Local Church Be?

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I once attended a Methodist church Bible study in another city. In the study I was verbally accosted in the class by the husband of the teacher for some things that I said. To my knowledge, I was only saying what any true believer ought to say, but he took exception. After the class we talked further about the different way we looked at the issue. At one point I asked him about an even more foundational matter: Do you believe in the existence of God? He finally came around to answering me by saying that he was, at best, an agnostic. "Are you a member of the church?" "Yes," he said, "because these are the people I want to associate with."

This is an example of inclusiveness that is over the top. Belief in the existence of God is essential to a man's salvation. Since the church is to be made up of believers, he simply does not qualify.

This introduces the first filter for an inclusive membership plan: The incoming member must be a believer. I won't go further on this since most reading this concur already, except to mention that many churches are not careful enough on this issue. Lack of care will lead to a bloated roll with many who show no signs of conversion.

The second filter is connected to the first: There must be agreement on certain doctrines that have to do with salvation.

Among those doctrines essential to salvation, we find the following:

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- ✧ The existence of a personal God
- ✧ The holiness of God
- ✧ The pre-existence of the Son of God
- ✧ The virgin birth of Christ
- ✧ The divinity of Christ
- ✧ The perfections of Christ
- ✧ The substitutionary atonement of Christ
- ✧ The resurrection of Christ
- ✧ The ascension of Christ
- ✧ The coming again of Christ
- ✧ The depravity of man
- ✧ The eternal judgment and reward of mankind
- ✧ The necessity for grace in order to be saved
- ✧ The necessity of repentance and faith for conversion
- ✧ The work of the Spirit in bringing life to those who believe
- ✧ The infallibility of the Bible

This is a partial list, but representative of those kinds of doctrines that a man must believe in order to be one with Christ. To say that a man must believe these things is only saying that he must believe in a gospel that saves. Even if your church does not have a Statement of Faith, or ask new members to state in some way that they believe certain doctrines, you will seek essential agreement on these doctrines by merely examining the new member's conversion.

A church should not require that an *entire* Statement of Faith be endorsed before a believer may join. Additional doctrines may be included that are not required for a person to be a Christian. Yet, by thinking through the entire Statement of Faith the new member is able to understand what kinds of things are believed to be important in the church and will be taught in its meetings and its mentoring. A Statement of Faith also will be a good

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tool to use for securing leaders and teachers. All teachers and leaders must conform to the Statement before being granted an official platform for leading others. And a Statement of Faith, as a faithful summary of Christian doctrine, may help to train believers in various ways. It might be wise for incoming members to acknowledge that they are aware that the church leadership will teach in conformity with its Statement and that future leadership will be related to conformity as well. But this is not the same as requiring that every point in a Statement of Faith must be subscribed to by the incoming member.

Baptism is a third filter to membership. Almost all denominations and nearly all non-affiliated churches agree on at least this: A church is a body of *baptized* believers. Baptists believe this as do Presbyterians although their concept of baptism includes sprinkling babies. God has forever tied baptism to conversion in such a way that, in the New Testament, it would be inconceivable to have one without the other. It may not be the most important truth in the hierarchy of doctrines, but it is a first order act of obedience, designed to picture what has happened in the salvation experience. Christ Himself commanded that all disciples be baptized.

Baptists have a particularly difficult stand to take here. Historically, a former Presbyterian would have to be immersed before membership in a Baptist church. Presbyterians, on the other hand, see the mode of baptism as a matter of indifference, meaning that they can receive people who are sprinkled and those who are immersed, and may perform either. The Presbyterian, who is a believer, insists as Baptists do that baptism is necessary to church membership. But if you are baptistic you will not believe his sprinkling is true baptism. What is the Baptist to do? You only have one course of action—you must immerse the former Presbyterian before membership. This should be logical to both you and the Presbyterian, given that he believes baptism is necessary prior to membership also. This brings forward an additional issue. Baptists believe that baptism must be post-regenerational and the Presbyterian's sprinkling most likely was prior to his conversion—when he was a baby. So, on a second count as well, Baptists must immerse those who were sprinkled as babies before membership.

Suppose a true believer concocted another way to baptize, let's say, by dipping the foot into a stream of water. He makes his case and truly believes that this fits the biblical requirement. He believes further that this form was practiced in the early church, although there is no mention of it in the New Testament. Should we be willing to accept that sincere expression of what the person calls baptism as fulfilling what Christ intended? Of course not.

In the same way, we Baptists must not accept a form of "baptism" that is not baptism at all, even though, in love, we recognize that some people are genuine in their belief that

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sprinkling or pouring is true baptism. We all know that many pages can be written between good people on this issue, but I'm only stating how a Baptist must think about the meaning of baptism. To us, baptism *is* immersion and the word "immersion" could have been used in the Bible instead of the transliteration of the Greek word, "*baptizo*." Baptists have to deal with our convictions and factor that into our membership process. Paedobaptists as well must live with theirs.

A fourth matter should be considered as a filter to membership—whether or not the applicant is living in a sin that is disciplinable. If such a sin were found out, a good church would have the obligation to remove the person as soon as they received him. It is not just preferable, but required therefore not to receive him in the first place. Unrepentant disciplinable sin reveals that the person sinning is not a true believer. Therefore, to receive him would be to receive a person Jesus told us to refer to as "a heathen and a tax collector" (Mt. 18:17). Correcting this problem would involve repentance prior to membership, which might include discussions with a former church and others, plus restitution where needed.

A final matter might be considered. Some of us also believe that a membership covenant is a helpful article for a new church member to sign. Are we going beyond inclusiveness in membership by expecting this? Not at all. That is, we are not if our covenant is only a summary of *God's* requirements for living out our Christianity in the world. If we are saying that a thoughtful and public committal to a covenant is required, we are only saying that a person must be submissive to Scripture itself. We are laying nothing on the believer except that he must recognize that there are commands that God demands of all believers. This step assures us even more of the true salvation of the individual seeking membership since it shows his willingness to obey Christ to the best of his ability, with the aid of the Spirit.

In summary, we are to receive those Christ receives—those who profess that they are true believers having received the life of Christ, those who believe those truths necessary for that salvation, and those who are determined and enabled to live a life that is indicative of a truly converted person, seen both in their initial willingness to follow Christ's command to be baptized and in their obedience in all other matters.

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