

Why Should I Join a Church in my College Town?

“I am only going to be here for a few years, so why should I join a church in my college town?” That is a question I have heard numerous times in my ministry as a college pastor in a local church and as a campus minister with the Baptist Collegiate Ministries. It’s a legitimate question. After all should the student throw away the relationship with the home church that has nurtured and trained him or her and cast their lot with a group that they barely know? Let me start by saying that there really isn’t a verse that says, “Thou shalt move to the university and join the local church there in order to please God.” I have come across a good resource on the subject at <http://www.biblicalspirituality.org/whyjoin.html>. This material is from Dr. Donald Whitney of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He covers the Biblical basis for joining a local church as well or better than I could, so I highly recommend you read that article.

From a practical standpoint, let me add a few things. One, as a student you might think your life is too transient to make a difference in the local church. After all, you are going to be travelling back home frequently (at least once a month) and you may not be in town for three months during the summer (if you don’t have to take summer classes, which more and more students are having to take!). And then there is the limited time you plan to be in college as a factor on whether to join or not. You might consider, if you are 19 years old you have 9.2 more moves to look forward to in your life. I still don’t know how you make the .2 move but that is beside the point. You will be in your transient period of your life for the next 20 years. It’s only after age 44 that people start really settling down. You can check it out at <http://www.census.gov/population/www/pop-profile/geomob.html> if you are into stats and analysis. So your life now is probably as settled as it is going to get for a while. Better start making roots wherever you can and for whatever length of time you have in one place.

Second, joining a local church will help you get over the home sickness faster. If everything about your life except the education is back home, it’s no wonder you want to be back there. The problem is that if you believe God has called you to go to the university where you are and it’s in another city, then what you are really saying is that God can’t provide for you where he called you to go. We all need a place to belong and a fellowship to be a part of regardless of our age. Joining a local church gives us a place to call our own even if it is only for a limited time. My wife and I have been members of 8 different churches since we got married. While we have loved every one of them, there is still something special about going back to our “home” church. Nothing can replace those memories, but we have not been members there for the last three decades. You may move back to your hometown after graduation, but chances are greater that you will not. So go ahead and start forming your own faith traditions by joining a local fellowship when you find yourself in a new community.

Third, it’s really what your Pastor would or should want to happen. We encourage folks who move into our communities to join our fellowships. However, that it is no different than our students going off to college and moving into a new town. There really is something different about being a member of a congregation and just attending there. To me it’s like renting a car. I know that at the end of the trip I’m going to turn it in and if

I don't crash it I can just walk away from it. So I tend to take it for granted and don't really care how hard I drive it or if I take it off-road. Ok, that's enough self confession time. But you get the picture. If I buy that car, I'm going to invest more time in the maintenance and care of that car because it is mine. The same is true for our church. If it's my church, then I am going to care more about it and desire to be a more integrated part of the church than I would if I just attend there while I am in school.

That brings me to another question I have often heard, "Why should I get baptized?" That question usually is coming from one of two common angles. Angle number one is the person who has just placed their faith in Jesus through the testimony or witness of a friend. Angle number two is from someone who has recently started attending one of our local Baptist churches from another denominational background and been told they need to be baptized to join.

The answer to the first one is fairly easy. A quick reading of the book of acts gives us examples of people who come to faith in Christ and then are baptized. We even find Jesus being baptized in the gospels as a way of identifying himself with those who are committed to following God's ways. So the pattern of belief in Jesus and then baptism can be seen in Phillip and the Ethiopian (Acts 8:26-40) and with Paul and the Philippian jailor (Acts 16:16-34).

The second one is not so easy to answer. It involves a proper understanding of the meaning, mode, authority, and the right candidate for baptism. While I was on staff at Westside Baptist church in Gainesville, our pastor Gary Crawford had compiled a sheet that we gave to our witnessing teams to help them understand and communicate this sensitive issue. I am going to copy that document below so that you can understand why many churches insist that believers from other denominations be baptized again or by total immersion.

The Ordinance of Baptism

1. Who May Be Baptized?

Only Believers – Those who repent and believe. John refused baptism of the Pharisees and Sadducees "who knew no repentance." (Mt. 3:7) Peter demanded repentance. (Acts 2:38) All ten of the references to baptism in Acts reveal faith as prerequisite to baptism. (Acts 2:41, 8:12, 8:13, 8:37, 9:18, 10:47, 16:4, 16:33, 18:8, 19:4). First, one is saved...then baptized.

Note: This excludes infant baptism which developed in the second 500 years of Christian history. Augustine (an early church father and Catholic theologian) taught that a child is not only born with a tendency to sin, but shares the guilt of Adam's original sin. He taught that the grace of God is received through baptism (a sacrament) and thus, the doctrine of "baptismal regeneration." Church and state were almost synonymous at that time and a decree was handed down that all unbaptized infants must be baptized within eight days or the parents would face imprisonment and death. Those who "obeyed God rather than men" were severely persecuted.

2. How Are Believers To Be Baptized?

Immersion

- (a) Baptizo means to “immerse” according to 50 authoritative Greek lexicons.
- (b) Eis + ek mean “into” and “out of” respectively. (See Mark 1:9-10, Acts 8:38.)
The words epicho (to pour) and rantizo (to sprinkle) are never used in connection with baptism.
- (c) Practice of the early church – This is documented from early writings of Christian scholars, none of whom are Baptist, thus, not prejudiced in favor of immersion. Why the change? Theological reason – baptismal regeneration and pragmatic reason – convenience (clinical baptism).
- (d) Symbolic – It’s the only mode that portrays the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus.
- (e) Architectural – many buildings of early churches had baptisteries as large as pools.

3. Why Are Believers Baptized?

Baptism is:

1. an essential part of the gospel (see above references in Acts)
2. following the example of Jesus (Mark 1:9-10)
3. being obedient to the command of Jesus (Matthew 28:19-20)
4. a public testimony of our commitment to Jesus

Summary **Right Candidate – a believer**
Right mode – immersion
Right meaning – symbolic
Right authority – New Testament church

Note: Alien baptism – refers to baptism by a church which teaches doctrine contrary to New Testament teaching.

Example: Sprinkling is not the right **mode**. Infant baptism is not the right **candidate**. Immersion for salvation is not the right **meaning**. Baptism is valid if it involves the right candidate (a believer), meaning (symbolic), mode (immersion), and authority (New Testament church).

Note: The administration of baptism can be done by anyone the church chooses. Baptists have traditionally assigned this to the pastoral office.

Note: Should one be baptized who has no intention of uniting with a local church? Probably not. Baptism signifies repentance and faith. It identifies one with Christ and indicates their incorporation into the “body of Christ.” Thus, there should be a desire to be a part of the visible

church. Indifference at this point may indicate a lack of understanding or sincerity of commitment.

Note: What about the baptism formula? The apostles were given specific instructions to baptize in the name of the trinity (Matthew 20:19). Was Jesus prescribing a definite formula to be used at all times? No. The words were used to describe the character of the baptism Jesus instituted. Acts 2:38, 10:48, and 19:5 suggest the Apostles did not use this formula always.

So that's probably more information than you were looking for when you clicked on this link, but I hope it will help you make one of the most important decisions you will ever make after you have trusted Jesus as your Lord and Savior. I know the church I am a member of is not perfect. How could it be with me as a member? But it has been the body of Christ to me and my family on many occasions of both joy and sorrow over the years and I believe it will be to you as well. If you have any more questions or specific insights you want to share with me, feel free to email me at eddie.gilley@ufbcm.org.