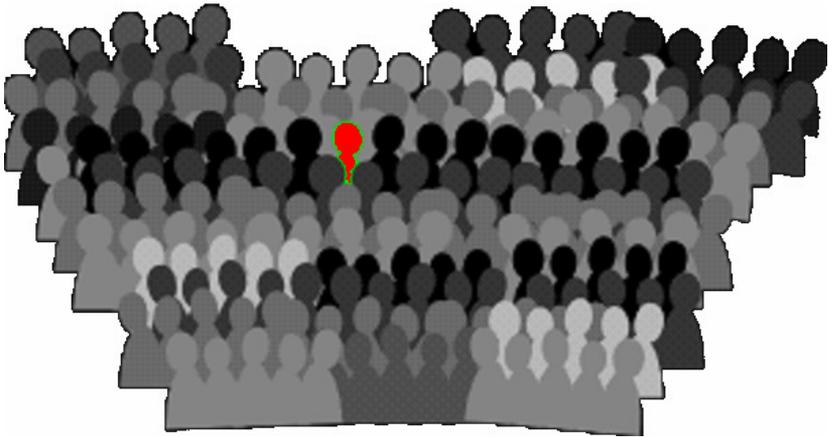




Truly Belonging

a guide to church membership



the church

Stapleford Baptist Church

stapleford baptist church

1 Why membership and what is it?

The aim of this booklet is to describe what we, the “members” of Stapleford Baptist Church (SBC), believe about the church of God in general (the universal church) and how these principles are worked out in local churches, at SBC in particular, and in the lives of individual Christians.

If you are a Christian, you are a member of God’s universal church, but it does not stop there. God expects Christians to be identified with and committed to each other. The early Christians, as revealed in the New Testament, demonstrated this by belonging to each other in local fellowships – the local church ¹. Truly belonging to a local church is, like marriage, a public identifying and pledge of commitment to each other. Becoming a “member”, truly belonging to a church, is to stand up and say “Look here! I’m with these people - through thick and thin! It’s where God wants me to be.” In fact it is not about “what’s in it for me?” but rather “what can I give?” And, of course, it’s about bringing glory to God by being obedient in serving Him, serving one another and serving the community at large.

We hope that as often as we, as members, read this booklet it will challenge us to recommit ourselves to serve Him more wholeheartedly. If you are not a “member” of SBC, we hope you will be challenged to fully commit yourself to His service, and to the fellowship, in “membership”.

All numbers in *superscript*, e.g. ¹ refer to Scripture verses and are listed in section 5 of this booklet - References

2. What is a church?

So let's start with "What is a church?" A definition we have found helpful is "A **congregation** of **believers** who are **committed** to each other" ². Let's look at it under each of these three headings.

But first, let's be clear about something - where do we turn if we want to learn the truth and God's way?

It seems everyone has an opinion on everything and some claim to be an authority. As for us, we believe in the authority of the Bible; we believe it to be God's words (that's one of the beliefs listed at the end of this booklet). So we'll be referring to it often in the following pages.

Congregation

The Bible says the church is an assembly called out by God ³. Called out from all the people. In its widest sense this means called out since time began from all the people that ever lived. This is the universal church, the body of which Christ is the Head and to which all who are saved belong. We'll see later that God so much wants us to grasp what a privilege this is that He provided several amazing illustrations of the church in His word.

We don't find the term "membership" of a local church explicitly mentioned in the Bible. What we do find is people being committed to (indeed "devoted to") each other (Acts 2: 42). This is what we intend by "membership" of SBC. Often the Bible uses the word church to mean a *local* church. This is best illustrated by "the church in the house of....." an individual ⁴. They could be "committed to each other" in a special way because they lived in a locality and were able to see each other regularly. They were able to fully bring glory to God by serving Him *together* in their locality.

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Some Christians never enjoy this. They never become “members” and fall short of full **identification with** and **commitment to** those who are. Some stay on the edge of a local church often because of secondary differences or a “bad experience”, others move from church to church. This causes hurt (1 Corinthians 12: 26) to those in the church and robs God of some of the glory that could be given to Him. Others become “members” in public ceremony but then show that they are largely “members” in name only, failing to stand alongside brothers and sisters in the bad times or the demanding aspects of church life together.

Believers

Belief in what? People meet in groups all the time, secular and non-secular, around a set of beliefs. Some of these assemblies claim to be part of the universal church of God and yet it would seem unwise to be associated with them. So how do we distinguish ourselves from other assemblies? By stating and affirming “**what we believe**”. And what we believe, about man and God, about the past and the future is taken directly from God’s revelation to us – the Word of God, the Bible. A summary of what we, at SBC, believe is at the end of this booklet.

The fundamental requirement of “membership” is salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ. We believe members should be those who a) can testify to their salvation, b) have been baptised, a visible sign of their union with Christ and c) who strive to live lives consistent with such a profession.

Committed

By becoming a “member” of SBC a person is simply recognising their full submission and commitment to God who saved them and hence to each other in the life of this local

church. Ephesians 4: 16 says we are “joined and held together”.

3 The wonder of membership

- our privileged possessions and our privileged response

a) *Belonging.* It is a privilege just to be part of this “joining together”. It’s a very special “joining together”. It’s a God-ordained “joining together”. So much does God want us to grasp this that He has provided several illustrations in the Bible - the body, a building, the family, the vine, the bride. Please take the time to look up the rich verses which give these illustrations (item 5 in the References section of this booklet). These pictures give us a clear sense of each individual having an identity, belonging to, depending on, and being united with others under the headship of Christ.

b) *Unity* ⁶. It is a privilege to belong to this assembly of like-minded people. People in general yearn for a sense of belonging to something and try to satisfy it at work, in societies etc. We have the privilege of being joined together and to God by the faith God has unconditionally given to us (Ephesians 2: 8). We are the ultimate assembly!

Our response should be to “make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit” (Ephesians 4: 3), refraining from all conduct and conversation which might do harm to the church, doing all possible to promote it’s spiritual well-being and seeking at all times to obey our Lord’s command to **love one another** (John 13: 34).

c) *Sharing.* We have the privilege of mutual care and prayerful support and encouragement, and of sharing our knowledge and experience of God’s day-to-day dealings with us as individuals. This encompasses preaching, teaching, (discipleship/training), active listening, sharing verbally together (with or without our eyes shut!), sharing our possessions (including our homes), and *sharing each other’s*

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burdens! Yes, bearing and forbearing is a major privilege of membership. For only if someone knows that you have affirmed the same fundamental beliefs as them can someone feel free to unburden himself or herself on you and thereby receive the benefit they sometimes desperately need.

We demonstrate our commitment to each other by: -

- Praying for each other,
- Attending when the church meets, see Hebrews 10: 25 (especially Sunday worship, Communion, midweek and members' meetings),
- Financial giving as a response of thankful hearts,
- Seeking out ways of identifying and using our God-given gifts.

d) Serving. It is, perhaps, unusual to think of this giving word in the context of privileges, as privileges are usually things we receive. The church (this assembly of individuals called out of the world by God) may be unique in this respect. Can we grasp that Almighty God has chosen to work His Sovereign purposes out using us? Out of gratitude for all He has served us with, isn't it a privilege to serve our Lord amongst each other and in the wider community in which we live? Let's be wholeheartedly committed to Christ and His glory in the church, recognising that this should govern the use of time, energies, possessions and gifts.

e) Leadership. We have the privilege of spiritual leadership for our care, guidance and feeding. Our response should be to pray for, encourage and submit to our Elders in accordance with the authority God has given them in His Word for the ordering of church life.

Christians should always be motivated by **love** for God and not enslaved by legalistic requirements. We recognise that sickness, work and family commitments and personal circumstances on occasion limit our ability to respond.

However, none of these should reduce our desire to live individually and together for the glory of God.

4 Conclusion

A lot of what has been stated here is summarised in that single verse, quoted earlier, which has been laid on the hearts of the Elders.

“From Him (the Head, that is, Christ) the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” Ephesians 4: 16.

It speaks of

- The Headship of Christ
- The unity of the body (the *whole* body, joined, literally *glued*)
- The second by second sustaining by one another (**held**), empowered by Him
- The necessity of each and every member – including you the reader (a supporting ligament)
- The “vital signs” that we are a living organism and are growing and building ourselves up.

In what are we building ourselves up? In **love**, for the church exists to **demonstrate love**, up, in and out. How is this love demonstrated? By each member doing his/her work - **BY SERVING**.

So you’ll see that we believe that every Christian should truly belong to (be a “member” of) a local church. To do so is to be obedient to God, to encourage other “members” and it will

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bring spiritual health to both the Christian and the local church.

5 What will our response be?

If you're not a "member" of a local church and believe that SBC is where God wants you to serve, then you should read the following "What we believe" section and ask yourself if you fundamentally agree with it and want to uphold it. See one of the Elders and they will arrange to come and talk with you about how you became a Christian, what God has been doing in your life since, previous church associations (if any) and other matters. You can raise any questions you have about SBC.

If you are a "member" and believe SBC is where God wants you to continue to serve then recommit yourself to God and to the fellowship by making this promise. You may find it helpful to sign it and keep it with you. The three elements reflect our response, as individuals, in Worship, Fellowship and Evangelism.

"With God's help **I WILL** glorify Him by:

- Working out my salvation to become daily more like Christ.
- Being committed to serve, and serve with, other members of my spiritual family.
- Bringing His gospel to the people God has put me in contact with."

In all that we seek to do may it be uppermost in our minds that our chief end is to glorify God individually and as His church.

6 References

1. Evidence that early Christians gathered in local churches –
Phil 1:1, 1:27, 2:2-4; Heb 10:24-5; Acts 4:23, 32-35;
Rom 12:10-11,16
2. What Evangelicals Believe, FIEC, Edited by Andrew
Anderson, p40.
3. Meaning of “church” – universal – Eph 1:22, 3:10, 21;
Col 1:18,24.
4. Meaning of “church” – local – Acts 2:41-47, 8:1, 11:26, 14:23;
1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15.
5. Illustrations of the church:
Body of Christ – 1 Cor 12:27; Col 1:24
Flock of God – 1 Peter 5:2
Holy Temple – 1 Cor 3:19; Eph 2:21
Family of believers – Gal 6:10; Eph 2:19; 1 Tim 3:5
Bride of Christ – Rev 19:6-9; Eph 5:27
6. Unity – John 10:16, 17:20,21; Eph 4:4-6.

7. What we believe

(Stapleford Baptist Church Confession of Faith taken from the Church Constitution)

1. The full inspiration of the Holy Scriptures. They are infallible and authoritative in all matters of belief, life and conduct. They not only contain, but are, in themselves, the Word of God. The New Testament is reliable in its testimony to the character and authorship of the Old Testament. There is a need of the teaching of the Holy Spirit for a true understanding of the whole.
2. There is one God, eternally existing in three persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit – each of whom is co-equal and co-eternal. There are not three Gods, but one. He is the Creator, Sustainer and Judge of the world.
3. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is holy, righteous and full of grace, mercy, compassion and love. In His infinite love, and in order that the world might be saved, He sent forth the Son. Through faith in Christ, the Son of God, and led by the Holy Spirit, we are able to approach Him and call Him “Father”.
4. Jesus Christ is the incarnate Son of God. By the operation of the Holy Spirit He was conceived and born of a virgin. After living a perfect life on our behalf He was slain for our sins on the cross, was raised from the dead, triumphant over Satan, sin and death, and ascended into heaven, where He now sits in glory at the right hand of the Father Almighty. His true humanity and full deity were mysteriously and really joined in the unity of His divine Person. Although He was tempted, yet He remained without sin.

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5. The Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Godhead, is not a mere influence or vague power, but a person. His work is indispensable to regenerate the sinner, to lead him to repentance, to give him faith in Christ and to sanctify the believer in this present life. Both to the individual Christian and to the Church He is entirely necessary for spiritual power and effectiveness.
6. All men by nature are sinners as a result of the Fall. This sin, which so pollutes and controls them, infecting every part of their being, renders them guilty in the sight of a Holy God and subject to the penalty, which, in His wrath and condemnation, He has decreed against it.
7. The death of the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross was a sacrifice in which He offered Himself as a perfect oblation and satisfaction for our sins. His death was both penal and substitutionary – that is, He suffered the punishment of sin in our place and on our behalf. His death brings forgiveness of sins to all those who approach God trusting in it. He was not the Son placating an angry Father. Rather, the Father Himself, in His love, gave His only begotten Son, who willingly, and under no coercion whatever, save that of His eternal desire to do the Father's will, came into the world and went to the cross as the propitiation for our sins.
8. Through faith (and only faith) in the Lord Jesus Christ, the sinner is freely justified by God. Thus God does not reckon our sins to us, but instead reckons Christ's righteousness to our account. Salvation is therefore by grace and not by any human merit. Trust in man's good works, or in any mediation other than Christ, is both alien to the teaching of Scripture and damning to the welfare of the soul.

9. The ordinances of Believer's Baptism and the Lord's Supper as being instituted by our Lord Jesus Christ – but not Baptism as conveying regenerating grace, nor the Lord's Supper as being a sacrifice for sin, not involving any change of the substance of the bread and wine.
10. One day the Lord Jesus Christ will return personally, visibly and gloriously to this earth to receive His saints to Himself and to be seen of all men.
11. He, as the righteous Judge, will divide men into two, and only two, categories – the saved and the lost. Those whose faith is in Christ will be saved eternally, and will enter into the joy of their Lord, sharing with Him His inheritance in heaven. The unbelieving will be condemned by Him to hell, where eternally they will be punished for their sins under the righteous judgement of God.

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The following scripture references may be referred to as the source of the above confession. They are given for each of the 11 numbered sections in turn.

- 1 John 17:17; 1 Pet 1:25; 2 Tim 3:16
- 2 Deut 6:4; Rev 1:8; Matt 28:19. Also John 1:1;
 Heb 12:23; Acts 17:31; Phil 2:6; 1 Tim 1:17
- 3 John 17:3; Exod 34:6; Eph 1:3. Also Rom 8:15-16;
 Heb 9:14
- 4 Matt 1:23; Heb 1:2-3. Also Heb 1:8
- 5 1 John 3:24; John 16:13. Also John 15:26; Eph 4:30
- 6 1 John 1:8; Rom 1:18. Also Rom 3:23; Psalm 51:5;
 1 Cor 2:14
- 7 Ezek 18:32; 2 Cor 5:21. Also Rom 8:1; Rom 3:25;
 Eph 2:4-5; Php 2:8; Luke 23:41
- 8 Eph 2:8-9. Also John 1:12; Rom 5:1
- 9 1 Cor 11:26; Acts 2:41
- 10 & 11 Acts 1:11; 1 Thess 4:16-17; John 3:15 & 18;
 Rev 21:27