

The Biblical Basis for Higher Membership Standards

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“The typical church in America today has “dumbed down” the meaning of membership to a point where membership means nothing. The phrase “inactive members” is often used as if it were taken from the pages of Scripture. But in reality, the only inactive members we see in the history of the New Testament fellowship are Ananias and Sapphira as they are carried out feet first from the Jerusalem church.

What has happened in the American church today where membership or belonging to a local fellowship means so little? The early church gladly met daily. They won the favor of those observing them. They were a magnetic fellowship that attracted thousands.

But for many church members today, Easter-only attendance is not unusual. Instead of being a magnetic fellowship attracting many, numerous churches have poor reputations in their communities. Though some differences between the first century church and the church today are cultural, most are theological. Our understanding of the church, discipleship, and commitment is flawed. The biblical pattern for church involvement and commitment is significantly different than the pattern in most churches today.”¹

¹ Rainer, Thom. *High Expectations*. Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1999. Pages 49-50. I disagree with one small aspect of this quote. God drew people to the church. It was not their “magnetic fellowship.”

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Our God is truly an awesome God, and Lisa and I continue to count ourselves blessed to lead Morningview Baptist Church. With each passing week, with each congregational service, with each conversation, we are falling more in love with and experiencing more love from this church family. In your midst, the words of the psalmist have become my own: *“Praise the LORD! I will give thanks to the LORD with all {my} heart, in the company of the upright and in the assembly. Great are the works of the LORD; {they are} studied by all who delight in them. Splendid and majestic is His work; and His righteousness endures forever.”* (Ps 111:1-3, NAS)

I write this paper for our membership because I would like to take the opportunity to explain why we need to raise the membership standards for our church body. Even before Greg Belser followed God’s call to another church, Morningview was considering a membership amendment for our by-laws. There was the awareness even then that such measures were a necessary part of building a healthy church. As your current pastor, I bear that same conviction. I have a deep love for my Lord Jesus, and I trust that you possess that love for Him as well. By His grace, we are a family of believers, a local body of Christ, and each of us bears the responsibility of rightly caring for this body. But how healthy are we when over half of the body is missing? How healthy is our body when significant portions of it only function partially and sporadically? How healthy is our body when critical portions of it never develop to maturity? The answer is rather obvious – it is not healthy at all. My hope with this paper is to answer the questions and allay the concerns regarding our proposed by-law amendment for membership. I hope it will lead you to pray, search the Scriptures, and weigh matters carefully.

Why the Modern Church Needs Membership Standards – The Obvious Problem

“Why do we need new membership standards? The way we have always done it works just fine!” No doubt you have heard many people make similar remarks as we consider such

significant changes. However, the simple fact of the matter is that the way we have always done membership is not working “just fine.” Consider the traditional Southern Baptist method. Persons coming into the church, whether by salvation or transfer of letter, were simply instructed to “go forward” during the invitation time, tell the pastor how the Lord was leading them, and briefly pray with the pastor. When the invitation was over, the pastor would stand with the person (or family) and introduce them to the congregation and give a brief explanation of how they were presenting themselves for membership. The membership would then vote at that very moment to welcome the person(s) into membership. The church would then send for the person’s letter or baptism would be conducted within a few weeks. Finally, the person would be added to a Sunday School class, and the process of membership would be considered complete.

If that membership process worked well, we would expect to see all such members actively involved in the life of the church and bearing fruit for the glory of God. Unfortunately, that is not the case. The Southern Baptist Convention is composed of over 43,000 churches and roughly 16.3 million members. According to the Annual Church Profiles submitted by SBC churches, only about 6 million of those members attend morning services on a given Sunday. When you factor in visitors and non-member children, that means on a typical Sunday, less than 35% of Southern Baptist Church Members show up to church. Furthermore, less than 1 of every 4 church members attend Sunday School on a given Sunday.² A report from the North American Mission Board published a few years ago revealed another startling statistic. The median SBC church baptizes 5 people into membership and adds 5 other people to membership in an average year (for a total of 10 additions). However, the median SBC church is only growing by 1 member a year. That means that 90% of the people added to church membership roles in the SBC disappear within 1 year.³

² “Honest Statistics: A Large Convention of Small Churches, Part 2.” August, 2005. Article posted at: http://wwwFOUNDERS.org/blog/2005/08/honest-statistics-large-convention-of_04.html.

³ Ibid.

In the Spring of 2005, Dr. Thom Rainer, then Dean of the Billy Graham School at Southern Seminary, published an article in “The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology.” In this article, he conducted a critical analysis of the Southern Baptist Convention and its evangelistic effectiveness since the conservative resurgence. He notes in the article that from an evangelistic perspective, “the denomination is on a path of slow but discernable deterioration.”⁴ He goes on to set forth several theories regarding the cause of the decline. One significant theory is that churches are becoming less evangelistic because of an overwhelming number of unregenerate (unsaved) church members. Rainer and his team set about trying to measure how many church members might be unsaved. They decided upon a simple methodology whereby they would ask church members 2 simple diagnostic questions: “If you were to die today, do you know for certain you would go to heaven?” and “If God were to ask you why He should let you into heaven, what would you say?” Christian researchers listened carefully to the answers and placed people into 3 groups. 55% were classified as “those who ARE Christians.” 14% were classified as “those who MAY NOT BE Christians.” 31% were classified as “those who ARE NOT Christians.”⁵ When you take into account the fact that some church members can have “head knowledge” and yet be unsaved, it means that as much a half of the membership in SBC churches could be unregenerate.

So what does all of this mean to us? It means that the contemporary church is in dire condition and that the traditional SBC process of church membership has some substantial shortcomings. Our own numbers bear out this same reality. We have roughly 740 members on our membership roles, yet only about 350 in worship on a given Sunday. Remember that many of our children are not members, yet they are counted in attendance. If we subtract them, then you see that only 35 to 40 percent of our members attend on a given Sunday. Now we do have

⁴ Rainer, Thom. “A Resurgence not yet Realized: Evangelistic Effectiveness in the Southern Baptist Convention since 1979.” In *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*. Vol. 9, No. 1, Spring 2005. Page 61.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 63.

shut-ins who are still considered active members, and a few members will be missing each Sunday due to illness, vacations, jobs, and other necessary absences. However, even allowing for those variances, we still have over 300 members that we can give absolutely no account for. When you consider that membership is the church's corporate endorsement of a person's salvation, it means that we have been irresponsible in how we have handled membership and it means that we have likely contributed to a false assurance of salvation in those people's lives. It also means that at this very moment, there are Morningview Baptist Church members who are damaging the reputation of Christ because they are not manifesting biblical spiritual priorities.

So what is the answer at this point? The answer is for us to build a membership process that is biblical, that protects the integrity of what true salvation looks like, and that educates perspective members about healthy membership involvement. Prior to 1945, over 80% of the American population was classified as "Christian." The "Bridger" generation, born between 1977 and 1994, is only about 4% "Christian."⁶ We live in a post-Christian culture where we cannot assume people are true converts just because they identify themselves as "Christians." We can no longer assume that self-identified believers know what it means to be church members. For the health of the church and for the salvation of unbelievers, we need to more carefully share the whole gospel and more faithfully examine our prospects.

What is the Biblical Basis of Church Membership?

Before we start answering this question, we must define what the church is. Scripturally, the best description is found in Acts 2:42-47. In these verses, we see an account of the activities of the very first Christian church. Through these verses, we see that the church was submitted to Apostolic teaching (the Word of God), they practiced the ordinances together, they prayed together, they fellowshiped together, they shared possessions to meet needs, they worshiped together, God used them to reach their community together, and the power and presence of God

⁶ Rainer, Thom. *The Bridger Generation*. Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1997.

was manifested among them. Our confessional statement, *The 2000 Baptist Faith and Message*, likewise gives a clear description:

A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the two ordinances of Christ, governed by His laws, exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth. Each congregation operates under the Lordship of Christ through democratic processes. In such a congregation each member is responsible and accountable to Christ as Lord. Its scriptural officers are pastors and deacons.⁷

Both of these sources support the truth that the church is to be composed only of baptized believers who clearly manifest the fruits of regeneration.

Now we can turn to the original question. What is the biblical basis of *membership*? You can search the entire New Testament and you will never find the word “membership” anywhere. However, in Romans, 1 Corinthians, and Ephesians, Paul uses the word “members”⁸ extensively to refer to Christians who are part of Christ’s body, the local church. Though Scripture does not give us definitive proof texts supporting our system of membership, there are numerous texts that imply a formal membership system in local assemblies of faith.

In several places in the New Testament, we see specific persons referred to as one of a “numbered” group of believers in a particular church. (Col 4:9; 4:12) In 1 Corinthians, chapter 5, Paul calls upon the Corinthians to remove a man in open sin from their midst. He tells them that when they are assembled, and he is with them in spirit, they are to deliver the man out of their fellowship. (1 Cor 5:4-7) In 2 Corinthians, he is probably speaking of the same man who is now repentant. In 2 Cor 2:6-7, he notes that the punishment inflicted by the “majority” was sufficient, that the man was repentant, and that the man needed to be comforted and welcomed back. By calling for the exclusion of the immoral brother, and later the inclusion of the repentant brother, Paul has revealed to us that there was some system in place, even in the early church, to

⁷ The 2000 Baptist Faith and Message. Article 6, “The Church.” Posted at: <http://www.sbc.net/bfm/bfm2000.asp#vi>.

⁸ The Greek term is *MELOS* and it literally means a part or limb of the body.

include and exclude persons from membership as determined by the “majority” of the congregation. Another interesting factor is that the early church kept “lists.” In 1 Timothy 5:9, Paul refers to the list of widows. If widows were listed and tracked, it is likely that a current list of church members was maintained by the body as well. Finally, at the end of most of the New Testament letters, certain believers are commended to specific churches by the Apostles, and the churches are also warned about the dangerous conduct of apostates. For evidence of this truth, read Romans, chapter 16, or consider this excerpt from 2 Timothy:

Make every effort to come to me soon; for Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica; Crescens {has gone} to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me. Pick up Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for service. But Tychicus I have sent to Ephesus. When you come bring the cloak which I left at Troas with Carpus, and the books, especially the parchments. Alexander the coppersmith did me much harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds. Be on guard against him yourself, for he vigorously opposed our teaching. At my first defense no one supported me, but all deserted me; may it not be counted against them. (4:9-16)

Thus, based upon the preceding texts, we can surmise that the early church had a system in which they kept lists of members, maintained standards of obedience for continued inclusion in the body, decided membership issues according to the will of the “majority,” and tracked members who moved between churches.

Regarding the biblical basis for church membership, there is one final and very critical reason for maintaining high membership standards. Throughout the historical accounts present in Scripture, we see that God has always made a clear distinction between His people and the world. In Ezra 10:11, God says to Israel, “Now, therefore, make confession to the LORD God of your fathers, and do His will; and separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives.” In John 15:19, Jesus reminded His disciples that even though they were *in* the world, they were no longer *of* the world. 2 Cor 6:14-18 says it most clearly:

Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God

said, "I will dwell in them and walk among them; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. "Therefore, **come out from their midst and be separate,**" says the Lord. "And do not touch what is unclean; and I will welcome you. "And I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me," says the Lord Almighty."

God has plainly demonstrated that He desires a clear distinction to be made between His people and the people of the world. Thus, as His church, we too must hold to standards for our members that clearly and specifically communicate God's expectations for His children. We must protect the spiritual integrity of the church by setting in place a process that supports the biblical ideal of regenerate membership.

What Happens when the Church does not have Good Membership Standards?

According to Mark Dever, a prominent Southern Baptist Pastor, there are basically 4 effects of what he calls "Meaningless Membership." First, meaningless membership sends a confusing witness to the surrounding community. A low-accountability environment opens the door to persons who feel no particular obligation to live according to Scripture and to maintain godly habits. Such behavior ruins the church's corporate witness and it confuses unbelievers around us about what it means to be a Christian. Second, meaningless membership causes division in the body of Christ due to unconverted members. Between believers, there is a unity of the Holy Spirit (Eph 4:4-6). Persons who are unconverted do not have the Spirit and can end up sowing many seeds of division through patterns of selfishness, pride, gossip, anger, lying, and covetousness. Third, meaningless membership causes ambiguity regarding the duties of membership. When we fail to educate new members about their scriptural responsibilities, they don't have any concrete understanding of that to which they are committing, and they are left without a standard by which to examine their own behavior. Fourth, meaningless membership leads to the self-deception of irresponsible members. As noted previously, membership is the local church's affirmation that an individual is bearing fruit that gives evidence of salvation. Failing to tie church membership to clear scriptural obligations communicates to the lazy and

unconverted that Christ-like behavior and spiritual growth is optional or even unnecessary. It also puts the church in the position of supporting what is likely a false assurance of salvation in those persons' lives.⁹

These 4 things are precisely what the majority of churches in our convention are characterized by today. We even see some of these things in our own church. It is these reasons that have caused many leaders in our convention to seek a return to the ideals of biblical membership standards and church discipline. In September of 2006, a number of SBC scholars met at Southwestern Seminary to discuss the need for churches to recover such measures. Chief among their concerns was the unhealthy state of most SBC churches due to lax membership practices.¹⁰ At The 2006 Southern Baptist Convention, similar concerns were brought to the denomination in the form of a resolution on integrity in church membership.¹¹ Though the motion was not brought to the floor for vote by the resolutions committee, it reflects the fact that more and more pastors and leaders are mindful of our weak membership practices. To address this issue, churches are turning to the same kind of standards and practices that we are considering for our membership. Even churches that would be considered as “Seeker-Driven” have already employed many of these same measures.¹² I know that we all desire to see Morningview Baptist Church be as spiritually healthy as possible. Enhancing our practices to more faithfully pursue the biblical mandate of regenerate membership will be a big step in reaching that goal. Now that we understand the need for higher membership standards, this paper will examine three specific elements being set forth in our proposed amendment that are distinctly different from our current practices.

Why do We Need a Membership Class?

⁹ See materials posted at: <http://marks.9marks.org/Mark6/LessonD>

¹⁰ See the Baptist Press article posted at: <http://www.baptistpress.com/bpnews.asp?ID=24277>

¹¹ See the article posted at: <http://wwwFOUNDERS.org/blog/2006/06/resolution-on-integrity-in-church.html>

¹² Rick Warren's Church, Saddleback, is one example. See <http://www.saddlebackfamily.com/membership/default.asp?sc=freshStart>

A New Member Class serves several purposes. First of all, it allows us to share the whole gospel with every incoming member so that they can evaluate their own heart and experience in accordance with God’s Word. This might surprise you, but recent studies show that membership classes have become a very effective tool in leading people to faith in Christ.¹³ The class also helps us acquaint people with the doctrinal beliefs of Southern Baptists. It helps us to orient them to our particular church, our leadership, our various ministries, and our vision. It provides a forum to explain the biblical expectations for membership as represented by our church covenant. Finally, it prepares them to be immediately involved in learning and serving within our church family.

In the past, we have offered a “New Member’s Workshop” that has accomplished some of these same things. However, because the class was optional, many new members did not attend. The class we are proposing will be more comprehensive, it will take place on Sunday mornings over a period of 6 weeks, and by making it required through the by-laws, it will be much more effective in closing the “back-door” of the church. Thom Rainer, in his text *High Expectations* states:

Though this study cannot draw dogmatic conclusions, the relationship between assimilation effectiveness and new member classes is amazing. Our research team examined the retention level of the new members over a two-year period. [We concluded that] churches that *require* persons to enter membership through a new member class have a much higher retention rate than those that do not.¹⁴

In most of these study churches, those that required the membership class had retention rates higher than 100% because attendance increased at a rate greater than the number of new members. In other words, the class not only helped to retain new members, it had a very positive impact upon the attendance of resident members.¹⁵ Thus, a membership class that is *required* for all new members will significantly contribute to the health of our congregation.

¹³ Lawless, Chuck. *Membership Matters*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005. Page 26. In this study, 43% of the churches surveyed said that evangelism was the primary purpose of their New Member Class.

¹⁴ Rainer, Thom. *High Expectations*. Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1995. Page 105.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Why should we Require a Membership Interview and Approval by the Deacons?

The most simple answer to this question is found in Hebrews 13:17. It says, “Obey your leaders, and submit {to them} for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.” Thus, because the leadership of our body will be called to account for the members of our body, they should have the right to examine them prior to membership. A second reason is cultural. We live in a culture, especially here in the South, where most people would identify themselves as Christians even though they do not have biblical beliefs or manifest any of the marks of true conversion. As noted in the research covered earlier, almost half of Southern Baptist church members could not clearly answer two basic questions about their salvation. Thus, even those coming by letter from other Baptist churches need to be closely examined, for the sake of their own salvation as well as for the purity of the church. Third, our leaders possess maturity and discernment that comes with their call to lead, and they are most prepared to offer Scriptural teaching and guidance to new members when it is needed. They are also most accountable to the church and to the rest of the leadership body when the confidentiality of shared information needs to be preserved.

The final reason that a membership interview and deacon approval should be required is because they are simply good ideas that help insure that persons are truly saved and that they are manifesting the fruits of regeneration. Rainer has noted that such counseling is becoming more and more common, and that some churches are even returning to the historic Baptist practice of requiring Christians to give a public testimony of their faith prior to admission to membership.¹⁶ This sounds extreme, but not unbiblical. Jesus Himself instructed us to look for spiritual fruit:

"You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn {bushes,} nor figs from thistles, are they? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit; but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good

¹⁶ Ibid., Pages 61-62.

fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will know them by their fruits. Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven.” (Matt 7:16-21, NAS)¹⁷

We should discern if a person really understands what salvation means, we should look for spiritual fruitfulness, and we should see in them an earnest desire to associate with and be active in the church. Only God can truly know a person’s heart. Only God can truly know whether or not a person is really saved. But we do have the responsibility to see whether or not a person manifests a credible profession of faith and the biblical priorities that accompany it. Offering loving counsel at the moment God leads them¹⁸ and loving examination as they undertake the responsibility of membership will help our new members understand the significance of biblical church membership. From a kingdom perspective, it also helps build a truly regenerate church.

Why should we Require New Members to Sign the Church Covenant?

This requirement is perhaps the most controversial of all three. Baptists seem to have an aversion to signing anything. I recently asked one of our members why they felt that way, and their only answer was that their daddy raised them to believe that “Baptists don’t sign nothin’!” A few feel that it is legalism. Some think that such commitments are a private matter between Christians and the Lord, and thus a matter of individual conscience. Let me state here that we do want to avoid legalism – we don’t want to turn our faith into a matter of what rules and practices we follow rather than a sincere love for God from a transformed heart. Also, a conscience that is ruled and guided by the Holy Spirit is a gift from God and I do not want to detract from its’ importance. However, what kind of statement are we making when we refuse to sign a

¹⁷ See also John 15:1-11; Gal 5:22-23; James 2:14-26; and 2 Peter 1:4-11.

¹⁸ I am making reference here to our “Decision Room.” This is one of the reasons why we started the decision room. If people do feel led to respond to a work of God in their hearts, they need a quiet place where they can share and receive counsel apart from the nervousness of being in front of a crowd and apart from the pressure of having to “hurry-up” because the invitation is going too long. It also gives us our first opportunity to examine them as they seek entry into our membership.

commitment to biblical conduct, yet we will submit to far greater requirements and sign documents for jobs, civic organizations, and financial exchanges?

At this point, it is important to understand the history and nature of church covenants. Church covenants express biblical standards for Christian behavior and have been used extensively for hundreds of years. Prior to the mid 1900's, they played a very significant and prominent role in church life. Congregations would recite them together often, copies of the covenant would be prominently placed in church buildings, and new members would sign them as they joined a church body. They fell into disuse in the mid 1900's as church membership standards as a whole fell into decline. We must understand that the authority of a church covenant does not lie in the language with which it is written, nor in the fact that signatures are affixed to it. The authority of the church covenant lies in the congregation's willingness to enforce biblical standards of conduct among church members. Morningview Baptist Church has a current church covenant that all members are bound by whether we sign it or not. The moment a person consents to being voted into membership, they assume responsibility for living according to the standards expressed in the covenant.

If that is the case, why bother with signatures? There are three reasons. First, a signature symbolizes the fact that you willingly bind yourself to the agreement you have signed; it signifies a serious commitment. We want our members to take their walk with the Lord, their witness to the community, and their commitment to the church that seriously. Secondly, we see it exemplified in Scripture. In Nehemiah 9 and 10, the people had returned from their foreign captivity and they were recommitting themselves to honor the covenant God had made with them. In Nehemiah 9:38, we see that they made an agreement in writing and then signed their names to it (the names are listed in chapter 10). At the end of the list of names, it says,

Now the rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants, and all those who had separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the law of God, their wives, their sons and their daughters, all those who had

knowledge and understanding, are joining with their kinsmen, their nobles, and are taking on themselves a curse and an oath to walk in God's law, which was given through Moses, God's servant, and to keep and to observe all the commandments of GOD our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes. (Neh 10:28-29, NAS)

Notice the two major themes we see in these verses: separation from the world and obedience to God's commands. We should take our commitment to the Lord and His church just as seriously.

Third, the benefits of having new members sign the church covenant have now been proven through research. In his research on high expectation churches, Rainer noted,

Where a church covenant was required, retention was extremely effective. Indeed, the churches which required covenant signings were more than twice as effective in assimilation compared to the other churches in our study. . . Two further pieces of data demonstrate the impact of a church covenant. Those churches that used a covenant actively had an attendance virtually equal to their memberships. Second, the average tenure of pastors in these churches was nearly twenty years.¹⁹

Chuck Lawless, the current Dean of the Billy Graham School at Southern Seminary, recently wrote, "Our research at the Billy Graham School has shown that churches that raise the standards of membership (often through the use of a covenant) ultimately produce members who are more committed, better equipped, and more outward focused."²⁰ That is exactly our goal as we seek to put in place these new member requirements.

So Why Didn't the Early Church Have These Kinds of Membership Standards?

It is true that in the New Testament church, we don't see required membership classes, church covenants, and interviews with leadership. But remember, these measures are necessary as a corrective to a reigning culture of church membership that has ceased to be biblical. Life was very different when the church was started. First of all, there was no "cultural Christianity" that the true Christians had to be distinguished from. Those who converted from Judaism and Paganism were immediately distinguishable from the surrounding religions and their faith was quite often tested in its infancy by severe persecution. Secondly, as we look at the end of Acts 2,

¹⁹ Rainer, Thom. *High Expectations*. Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1999. Page 63.

²⁰ Lawless, Chuck. *Disciplined Warriors*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2002. Page 116. Their research also reveals trends towards an additional requirement: signing the church's doctrinal statement.

converts were immediately involved in house churches and sitting directly under apostolic teaching. Furthermore, they gathered together every day for worship, prayer, encouragement, and fellowship. Thus, there was instant discipleship and accountability for spiritual growth. Thirdly, when a believer's life did not measure up to Scripture, they were rebuked immediately and put out of the church if necessary.²¹ In the minds of church leaders, those that left the church proved they were not truly Christians (1 John 2:19), so they were treated as such; they were not allowed to remain indefinitely on a church role as an "inactive" member.²² Thus, though we may not see current procedures for membership specifically modeled in the New Testament, the scriptural ideal of high membership expectations is very clearly discernable.

Won't we Lose Prospects Who Think Our New Membership Standards are Too Difficult?

Sadly, we may lose a few, but let's keep this issue in perspective. The call of the Gospel is to die to ourselves. If a Christian is not willing to die to their own desires in order to be examined and instructed regarding the scriptural guidelines for church involvement, then how committed are they? How committed would they be to our church? Furthermore, research once again proves that higher expectations attract people instead of repelling them; these measures lead to greater church health and numerical growth. At this point I would recommend that you read Chuck Lawless' text *Membership Matters* and Thom Rainer's text *High Expectations*. Both works have been cited throughout this paper. Both books contain numerous stories about how stronger membership standards closed the "back door" of the church *and* inspired renewed commitment among resident members. Furthermore, in the churches studied, true numerical growth always accompanied the rise in spiritual commitment. Consider the numbers. Would you rather welcome 100 people into the church under our current standards and only see 10 of them still involved next year, or would you rather welcome 75 members using high membership

²¹ For examples, see Acts 8:20-23; 1 Cor 5; Gal 2:11-14; 2 Thess 3:14-15; 1 Tim 5:19-20.

²² For a better treatment of the subject of Church Discipline, please see my previously released paper on the subject. It is posted on the Pastor's Resource page at www.morningview.org.

standards and still see all 75 involved a year from now? The answer is easy. The bottom line is this: a church that is composed of regenerate Christians will worship more, pray more, give more, serve more, and evangelize more; it will accomplish more for the glory of Almighty God. That is why we need these new standards of membership.

I hope that I have answered your questions and allayed your fears through what I have written here. As I have stated on numerous occasions, I am dedicated to being the most biblical pastor that I can be, and I am committed to leading Morningview to be the most biblical church it can be. Being a church that is an effective force for the Gospel in this day and age is a difficult challenge. Some churches have chosen the route of “softening” membership standards, “softening” their proclamation of the Word, and embracing secular ideologies for growth. Eventually, such churches evolve into religious communities and cease to be true Christ-exalting churches. I truly believe these measures are scriptural and that they will help to insure the health of Morningview’s ministry and witness for decades to come. Should our Lord return in our lifetimes, I pray He would find us faithful and fruitful rather than shortsighted and blind. That is why I pray you will carefully consider and support these proposed measures.