

# **Is There a Church within Your Church?**

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## **Is There a Church within Your Church?**

The February meeting of the Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) included five hours of subcommittee and workgroup discussions of a motion to disfellowship Broadway Baptist Church of Fort Worth. You can read more about the specific case elsewhere. I was drawn aside by the answers church representatives gave about their membership. Broadway's examination was occasioned by the reported behavior of some of its members. In apparent candor, they admitted that they received members and put them in places of leadership without knowing all that much about them.

In one way, the answer will not have that much bearing on whether or not Broadway is found to be in friendly cooperation with the SBC. At the same time, many of our Southern Baptist churches could have been sitting in that room answering similar questions in the same way.

For example, one representative from Broadway said that he was unaware of the lives or reputations of candidates for church membership. He was also unaware of what kind of discussion the pastoral staff typically has with new members. Could that be your church? I'll say that for most of my years at my current church it was true of mine.

In one discussion, another Broadway representative referred to Augustine's teaching that the church should welcome all and be made up of those who are only apparently believers as well as those who are actually redeemed. Augustine actually interpreted the parable of the sower in Matthew 13 so that the field upon which the seed was sown was the church rather than the world. The various responses to the gospel seed were thus all responses of people within the church—the lost and saved (everyone, I suppose)—should be in the church, then.

Recognizing that this is the reality (as in Matthew 13's parable of the wheat and tares) of churches in this present time I still do not agree we should be at peace with this definition of "church." A New Testament church is a believers' church.

Augustine clearly understood and rightly noted the difference between those who join with a church and those who are additionally joined with Christ. He was not teaching that all who say "Lord! Lord!" would be saved. He was, in my view, demeaning the visible church in favor of the universal one. And yet it is the local, visible, struggling church that represents the universal church.

As an aside, we should note that demeaning the visible church in favor of the universal has become very popular in ways that Augustine did not imagine and would not approve, I think. Those who profess to love Jesus and disdain local churches are doing this. They claim to be part of the body of Christ and yet want no part of any present-day manifestation of it. They may take this position because of the hypocrisy of (other) Christians or because real things cannot usually stand up to our vision of ideal things. In any case, their union with Christ is pretty hard to express and harder still for others to discern. In our current discussion we might note that solitary Christians find themselves without the needed edification of discipline if they disregard the local church, or if they are neglected by the local church they have joined.

My church and yours stand as concrete images of that transcendent church made up of only wheat. Imperfect as it is, we are wrong to discount it. God certainly does not. Our churches stand individually as complete bodies. The commands to edify one another, care for one another, hold one another accountable, etcetera, apply to specific congregations each and all.

While lost people often profess faith in Christ, we must not call this acceptable. How many of our congregations practically accept that many members are not redeemed people? I would say many, if not most. I say “practically” because it is a place where our practice falls short of our intent. This was the upshot of a year-long discussion about regenerate church membership within the Southern Baptist Convention. Many churches, mine included, noted that discussion and are taking greater care to know the spiritual state of their members. Many more should be making this effort.

I am always troubled by controversies that are understood so narrowly that the rest of us think we have nothing to learn. That thought crosses my mind when someone I know or someone more famous falls from ministry prominence into humiliating scandal. It is not enough for me to say that I am unlikely to commit the particular sins of Ted Haggard or Jimmy Swaggart or Jim Bakker. I must ask myself what “small” compromises we have in common that led them to places I now find unthinkable.

Sure, most churches would not knowingly continue membership to those who openly live an immoral lifestyle. Do we know the lives of the scores or hundreds of our members we never see, though? In what ways are we edifying those members? I think we could say that months or even years with no participation in worship, ministry, or giving indicate a spiritually troubled church member—one apparently in open disobedience to the commands of God.

I am not saying that your church or mine is likely to be challenged by a motion at the Southern Baptist Convention. It matters when that happens but we more certainly stand before a greater tribunal than the denomination. I am merely saying that when we are scandalized by the behavior of another person or group we should stop a minute and consider our own stewardship or guilt. Otherwise the lesson is lost.

Not all sins of negligence are equivalent in their impact. I also do not buy the argument that one person’s guilt excuses another person’s guilt. The spectacle of another’s failure should not make us feel righteous or proud, though. Our lives and ministries are not judged by such an imperfect standard, although the temptation to think so is very seductive.

This short column is not about Broadway Baptist Church, then. We do not know what action, if any, the convention will take next June. Some of the ways they are currently troubled should speak to us regardless of what we know of that particular congregation. They are in disarray at this time for some of the same reasons many of our churches could find themselves in disarray in the future. Let those who have ears to hear, hear.

A lot of things in life are like this. We can do the right thing now when it is merely difficult or we can do it later when it is nearly impossible. Mandatory new member classes are going to be offensive to some folks. Church covenants and confessions of faith will likewise discomfit a few we would like to welcome to our fellowship. Formulating such procedures and resources takes time, people, and diligence from this day forward. It is just easier to mean well and do less. Easier until that day comes when we realize that our churches are largely populated with members who have no relationship with Christ. What then? What now?

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