

# Meaningless Membership: A Southern Baptist Perspective

By [Al Jackson Print](#)

What do Britney Spears, Brad Pitt, Bill Clinton and Al Gore have in common? If you answer, “All four have been members of Southern Baptist churches,” you move to the head of the class.

These four individuals are found in the branch of Christianity that also includes Al Mohler, Mike Huckabee, Bobby Bowden, and Billy Graham, among others. Our Southern Baptist churches include their share of prominent personalities. Some bring honor to our denomination. Others bring dishonor.

## **MEANINGLESS CHURCH MEMBERSHIP IN THE SBC**

The purpose of this article is to answer the question, How has meaningless church membership adversely affected the Southern Baptist Convention?

The question assumes that membership in many Southern Baptist churches has little impact on how those members think or live. Historically, Baptists have affirmed regenerate church membership, which implies that every church member should walk in holiness and purity. Yet the widespread reality today is otherwise. A person can walk in ways that bring great shame to the name of Christ and yet remain a member in good standing in a Southern Baptist church.

The meaninglessness of membership can be seen in the number of Southern Baptist church members compared with the number of people attending Sunday worship. Convention-wide, there are 16 million members. But only 6 million people show up on a typical Sunday. Where are the other 10 million Southern Baptists? Some are providentially hindered, but surely not 10 million.

Apparently, the twentieth-century Southern Baptist revivalist Vance Havner was right when he said, “We Southern Baptists are many but we’re not much.” After the convention-wide crusade to add one million new members to Sunday School rolls in 1954— “A Million More in ’54”— Havner famously said, “If we get a million more like we got in ’54, we’re sunk.”

## **WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF MEANINGLESS MEMBERSHIP?**

The Southern Baptist Convention is most likely far smaller than what we report. And our membership rolls most likely contain a multitude of unregenerate individuals. Our Baptist forefathers would view our present condition with shock and horror.

What are the consequences of such meaningless membership?

*It Gives a False Assurance of Salvation to Multitudes*

First, the failure to practice church discipline and maintain integrity in our church rolls gives the multitude of “inactive members” a false assurance of salvation.

It is common for a man or woman to join a Southern Baptist church, but then to stop participating in worship and fellowship—sometimes for decades. Yet when the church says or does nothing, the individual continues to believe he or she is saved. This is the case because of our refusal to obey God in the matter of discipline.

We often say that we love inactive members too much to discipline them. Actually, our lack of discipline reveals our lack of love for these people who give little or no evidence of the new birth. Many such people are under the just condemnation of a holy God. This is the greatest and most grievous consequence of allowing them to maintain church membership without church involvement.

### ***It Harms Our Gospel Witness***

Second, the fact that so many Southern Baptists live in open disobedience to God’s commands and have little involvement with their fellow members greatly harms our denomination’s gospel witness.

Hypocrisy within our churches is common, and Southern Baptist churches almost universally fail to practice church discipline. As a result, Christ’s bride is stained and soiled when she should be progressing toward radiance, holiness, and blamelessness.

Church history professor Tom Nettles has said that “holiness should pave the way for evangelism.” In other words, the holy lives of a congregation should undergird its gospel witness. Those who proclaim the gospel of God’s saving grace in Christ Jesus should be able to point to an assembly of believers who are new creations in Christ.

Sadly, many lost men and women have been able to point to their own moral superiority when comparing themselves with the immoral and deceitful lives of church members. As a result, they feel justified for not trusting in Christ.

### ***It Makes for Some Ugly Business Meetings***

Third, meaningless church membership periodically reveals its ugly face at church business meetings.

The typical Southern Baptist congregational meeting is characterized by routine motions and decisions. However, occasionally, when the Spirit begins to move in God-glorifying ways, unregenerate church members who haven’t been seen for years suddenly appear at business meetings. The result is not pretty. God-glorifying initiatives are halted, and godly pastors are often voted out. The occasions on which this has happened are too numerous to count.

### ***It Hinders our Missionary Efforts***

Fourth, meaningless membership in Southern Baptist churches hinders our efforts to declare God's glory to the nations.

Yes, it is true that we have the largest number of missionaries worldwide of any American denomination. Our 5,000 International Mission Board missionaries span the globe. Yet this translates to one missionary for every nine Southern Baptist churches. In light of the Bible's clear teaching on missions, is it unrealistic to think that every church should have a least one missionary serving internationally? More than 30,000 Southern Baptist churches have no missionary from their ranks. How can this be? Where is the passion to declare God's glory among the nations?

Consider one other missionary statistic: Southern Baptists gave approximately \$150 million last year to the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for International Missions. Southern Baptists tend to take some satisfaction in knowing that the Lottie Moon Offering is the largest missionary offering in the two thousand year history of Christianity. But do the math and divide \$150 million by 16 million Southern Baptists. You get less than \$10 per Baptist. Apparently, obeying Jesus' last command to "go and make disciples of all nations" means very little to many.

### **WHAT SHALL WE DO? RECOVER MEANINGFUL MEMBERSHIP**

The picture I have attempted to paint in this article is a dismal one. Vance Havner's diagnosis from fifty years ago—"Southern Baptists are many but we're not much"—is as true today as it was then. The greatest tragedy of meaningless church membership is that God's glory in his church is diminished.

A recovery of meaningful church membership is desperately needed in the Southern Baptist Convention. Perhaps then we will know something more of "him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us. To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen" (Eph. 3:20-21).

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May/June2011

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