We are Pilgrims on a Journey: Reimagining Church Membership in Contemporary Wales

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Abstract
This article is our theological and missional response to a practical and pressing question: what does it mean to be a member of a Baptist church in Wales today? The classic Baptist understanding is that a Baptist Christian will make a believer's commitment to Christ (baptism) and simultaneously a commitment to belong to a specific group of Baptist believers (membership). It is our contention that this understanding has now been largely replaced by a tacit assumption that, instead, a Baptist Christian's commitment is largely one to an *organisation*. In this article, we call for these two original commitments to be once again separated and individually honoured. We argue that, today, a commitment to a specific group of Baptist believers on a spiritual pilgrimage is a compelling metaphor for church membership. We also argue the case for seeing baptism as a pilgrim participation in Christ's story.

Keywords
Baptist; pilgrimage; membership; baptism; Wales; mission.

Introduction

> It was a tragic day when the fellowship of the early church groups faded out into church membership […] the Kingdom of God consists in just this loving, blessed fellowship, the *Verbundenheit* among the 'saints'. Church members can hate one another. My membership is external, fellowship is divine and internal.[1]

[1] Thomas R. Kelly, *The Eternal Promise: A Contemporary Quaker Classic and a Sequel to A Testament of Devotion,* 3rd edn (Friends United Press, 2016), pp. 103, 106.

Baptist Church membership (in the United Kingdom at least) is undergoing an existential crisis. This is a crisis on at least three levels. It is an ontological crisis, because the common understanding of what it means to be a church member has changed significantly over the last two hundred years or so. It is an ecclesiological crisis, because changes in UK charity law mean that the role of the member in church governance has lost its clarity. And it is a theological crisis, because of the loss of a common understanding of what contemporary expressions of covenant and discipleship might look like.

In this article, we examine these three different aspects of church membership, and we propose that some of the difficulties described might be overcome by adopting 'pilgrimage' as a contemporary metaphor for church membership. We also explore different understandings of baptism and suggest that the formative water experiences in the exodus story might offer a new and radical way of rethinking the role of baptism in our churches.

What is a Church Member?

Membership of Baptist churches emerged at a time when the default religious affiliation in the United Kingdom was to a national church closely regulated by the monarchy and the state. This religious affiliation was usually by birth (default) rather than choice, and so membership of a Baptist church denoted a personal conviction of certain theological beliefs. It was understood as entering into a covenant with others in a community who shared the same beliefs, and part of this covenant was an agreement to adhere to certain moral codes — in other words, membership also required a commitment to a certain way of life.[2] In both beliefs and praxis, therefore, a member of a Baptist church marked themselves out from the 'world'. Baptist churches would often have a written covenant for their members, and also provision for banning or expelling members who were deemed to have violated the covenant. This was to be expected for a system which evolved under the pressure of persecution. One of the earliest examples of this is the 1606

[2] See, for example, Nigel G. Wright, *Free Church, Free State* (Wipf and Stock, 2005), chs 2–3.

Gainsborough covenant (from the recollection of William Bradford), of a separatist congregation, which used the metaphor of pilgrimage to describe their relationship to each other and to God.[3] This congregation came under the leadership of John Smyth. Consequently, later, the first Baptists also made it clear that both the fellowship and the uncertainty of pilgrimage would be a key part of their baptistic identity: they would be open to what they would (together) learn of God, they would do their best before God, and they would need God's help to do this:

> As the Lord's free people joined themselves together by covenant as a church, in the fellowship of the gospel to walk in all His ways, made known, or to be made known to them, according to their best endeavour, whatever it should cost them, the Lord assisting them.[4]

The authors of this article have been in pastoral ministry and working in a Baptist College in Wales for many years, and during that time we have seen a new (mis)understanding of church membership emerge. Rather than being committed to a covenanted community with a (narrowly) defined set of beliefs and allowable praxis, church membership in the twenty-first century is increasingly seen as 'belonging to an organisation'. In terms almost precisely parallel to belonging to a golf club, for instance, members attend the organisation's events (Sunday services, midweek groups, social events), they bring their children and sometimes their spouses along, they join the leadership committee (deacons/elders), and they give of their gifts and spare time to paint the club house (vestry) or decorate the premises (flower rota). Even tithing or financial giving is increasingly seen in this light. One

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[3] James R. Coggins, *John Smyth's Congregation: English Separatism, Mennonite Influence, and the Elect Nation* (Herald Press, 1991), pp. 33–34. Coggins explores the debate about where the covenanting took place on pages 56–60.

[4] *Bradford's History of the Plymouth Settlement, 1608–1650*, ed. by Harold Paget (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1920), p. 7. This is a modern English version of the 17th-century text. Governor William Bradford's original manuscript, *Of Plimoth Plantation,* p. 6, states, 'And as ye Lord's free people, joyned them selves (by a covenant of the Lord) into a church estate, in ye felowship of ye gospell to walke in all his wayes, made known, or to be made known unto them (according to their best endeavours) whatsoever it should cost them, the Lord assisting them.' Available online from the Digital Collection of the State Library of Massachusetts <http://archives.lib.state.ma.us/handle/2452/208249> [accessed 30 October 2005].

church member asked one of us to visit her in hospital, commenting, 'After all, I've paid my membership.'

Who's in Charge Here?

One of the three key statements of the UK Baptists' Declaration of Principle is '[t]hat our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, is the sole and absolute authority in all matters pertaining to faith and practice, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures, and that each Church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer His laws'.[5] Traditionally, Baptists have equated the word 'Church' here with church members, leading to a system of governance whereby members come together in a church meeting to prayerfully discern the mind of Christ on matters large (like calling a new minister) and small (like whether or not to keep the pews). In theory, at least, becoming a church member meant having a say in the governance of the church.

However, changes in UK charity law this century have meant that each church needs to appoint managing trustees who bear the responsibility for the governance and financial management of the church and its assets. In Baptist churches, the deacons are these managing trustees, and so in the eyes of the law at least, it is the deacons who are responsible for decisions taken by the church. This has clouded the role of the church member in governance, and tended to favour those who prefer a style of leadership which is concentrated in the hands of the few.

What Would Jesus Do?

There is another problem with the inherited model of church members being collectively responsible for the governance of a church. It is that, increasingly, church members are not theologically homogeneous. If the majority of members of a Baptist church have not grown up in Baptist chapels, they may have little understanding of the classic concepts of covenant and 'walking with and watching over one another' which

[5] See Baptist Union of Great Britian, 'Declaration of Principle', Baptists Together <https://www.baptist.org.uk/Groups/220595/Declaration_of_Principle.aspx> [accessed September 2024].

undergird the Baptist ecclesiology. This, coupled with increasing Biblical illiteracy among churchgoers, may mean that 'discerning the mind of Christ' degenerates into a business model of an Annual General Meeting style of gathering.

Is it just us?

We wanted to test whether there was any empirical evidence for our sense of this existential crisis for Baptist church membership. We therefore shared an early form of this article with a gathering of Baptist ministers and church members in January 2025.[6] We set out the three aspects of the problem as presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Three elements of contemporary society that lead to confusion around Baptist church membership

And we asked the question 'To what extent have these three aspects been an issue in your church?'. Participants (around 40) were invited to respond anonymously by using the online tool Mentimeter. They got into ten smaller groups, discussed, and voted. Answers were recorded using a five-point scoring scale, where 0 is 'totally disagree' and 5 is 'strongly agree'. The results are presented in Figure 2.

[6] In a more recent survey with a different group of Baptist church leaders, we asked the same questions and received almost identical results. The results in Figure 2 are used with the permission of participants.

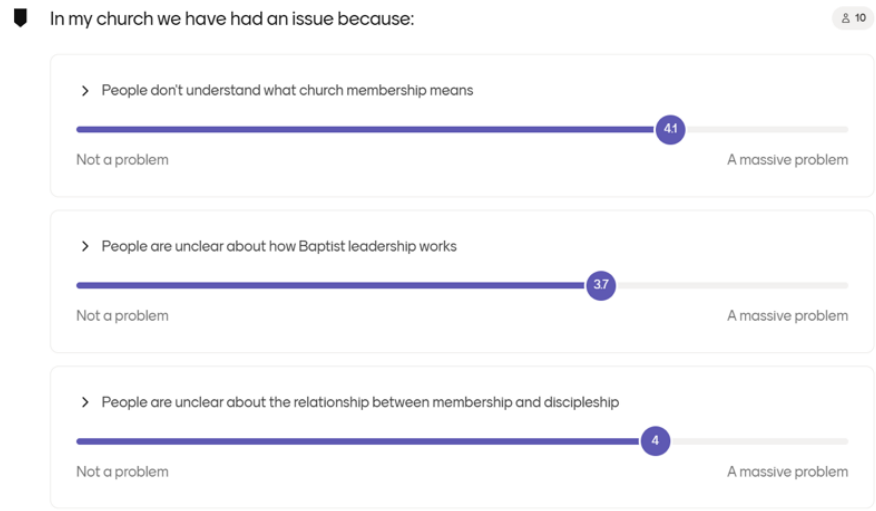

Figure 2. Aggregated results of a survey of Baptist church leaders.

The evidence, as seen in Figure 2, therefore suggests that we are not alone in identifying these three aspects of the problem.

Pilgrims on a Journey

It is a commonplace trope to attribute the decline in church attendance/membership to increasing secularisation, a suspicion of established authority, and a growing resistance to any sort of regular commitment. We do not deny that these may be actual sociological trends, but we do not think that they are the main problem. Or at least, we think that there is another major cause — and one that (unlike the three trends just cited) we can actually do something about.

In 1966 Richard Kelly published a collection of essays written by his father Thomas, author of the Quaker classic *A Testament of Devotion*. In several of these essays, Kelly argues strongly that the problem with church decline (even then!) cannot be laid at the door of those outside. Rather, it is that the church has lost its fire. Here is but one example from a speech Kelly gave:

> Let us be utterly honest tonight. I may appear to be speaking more to the ministers among you, but I really mean to speak to you all. Some of us have gotten so tangled with time, with committees, with service programs, with pushing about institutional machinery that we have lost something of the radiant glow of Eternity which we once saw dawning within us. The time was when God was very near, when heaven's joy was pressing upon us on every side, and the world seemed to lie at our feet, and at His feet. But now heaven's echo has grown distant, and we are weary, and somewhat disillusioned, and not wholly unspotted by the world. And the Sundays come crowding upon us, and we are spiritually dry.[7]

We agree with Kelly, and we hope that we are not being needlessly provocative in claiming that the problem with church membership as belonging to an institution is that the institution is not terribly attractive. For many people, the Covid-19 pandemic broke the long-ingrained habit of getting up early on a Sunday morning to sit in a pew while other people were still in bed, and they just have not returned. And yet our experience of presiding at 'secular' funerals, going into schools, reading social media, and chatting to our friends tells us that people still have a great interest in spiritual matters. The great questions of life have not changed: How can I be happy? Why do I do bad things? Why is there so much suffering? How can I live a good life? How can I find love? Why am I so lonely? How can I be safe? How can I make the world a better place? It is just that people do not expect to find the answers to these questions inside a church.

We think that this is because the church itself has not been asking these questions for a long time. Perhaps we (the church) have set ourselves up as the place to which you can come for answers, but we are not terribly convincing as the people who have it all sorted out. Instead, we (the authors) think that we Christians need to recover our identity as those on a spiritual journey, disciples following Jesus. Pilgrims.

What is Pilgrimage?

The English word *pilgrim* and the Welsh word *pererin* come to us via Old French from the Latin *peregrinus/pelegrinus* — *'per'* as in *beyond*, and *'agro'* meaning *field*. Pilgrims are those who have to leave the security of their

[7] Thomas Kelly, *The Eternal Promise*, p. 110.

fields and go beyond. Originally, religious pilgrimages were carried out to holy shrines either because it was believed that the deity actually dwelt there, or as a spiritual discipline which confirmed one's spiritual devotion and perhaps conferred some spiritual blessing such as healing, forgiveness of sins, or answered prayer. In the Old Testament, Israel's decades' long journey through the desert becomes emblematic of the wider biblical narrative arc from captivity to freedom, and in both Testaments we read about people (Jesus included) who go on pilgrimage to Jerusalem or to the Jordan for worship, healing, or baptism.

The New Testament and 'The Way'

In the New Testament, the frequently occurring Greek word that relates to pilgrimage is *hodos* (occurring 406 times). *Hodos* originally meant a road or street, but soon came to refer to a journey, such as a bird's 'flight' or an army's 'march'.[8] Figurative usage is also early, where it often refers to 'manner of life', or, we might say, 'approach to life'. The metaphorical use of the term in religious expressions is very familiar from the Hebrew Bible. The 'two ways' metaphor appears most famously in Deuteronomy 30, but also in the Apocrypha, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the New Testament, and other early Christian literature (e.g. *The Didache* 1:1 and following). Here, the emphasis seems to be on the choice that a fork in the path requires, and that the chosen way will represent a person's obedience and commitment — or otherwise — to God's 'path'. In these cases, *hodos* almost always translates the Hebrew word *derek* and metaphorically represents the individual or group's life before God. However, despite the prominence of the 'two ways' metaphor in much Jewish and Christian thinking, we should not automatically read it into every occurrence of *hodos*.

This is particularly the case in the Gospels where *hodos* means the very literal dust paths that Jesus and his followers use, but also — and at the same time — the figurative following of the Son of Man as

[8] Wilhelm Michaelis, 'Ὁδός, Ὁδηγός, Ὁδηγέω, Μεθοδία, Εἴσοδος, Ἔξοδος, Διέξοδος, Εὐοδόω', in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol 5, ed. by Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedfrich (Eerdmans, 1964), pp. 42–97 (p. 42).

disciples and others. In Mark's Gospel in particular, being 'on the way' (10:32) becomes almost a technical term for discipleship.[9]

There are a variety of people at a variety of stages who travel with Jesus 'along the way'. We are familiar with the Twelve, but we should note that it is precisely on 'the way' that they reveal their lack of understanding of the mission of Christ (Mark 10). Other followers include a rich young man, who decides that the journey is not for him; Bartimaeus who receives his sight (10:52); and a disciple who needed to hear that the journey might involve homelessness (Luke 9:57). There were 'great crowds' who 'followed [Jesus]' (e.g. Matt 12:15), who were often seeking healing. Then after the resurrection, the 'way' to Emmaus becomes a prototype for belief in the risen Christ.

Given the variety of people who followed Jesus along 'the way', it is clear that this path did not mean a settled commitment to Jesus, or even a basic understanding of his teaching. Rather, the expression included those with an interest in going along with Jesus to hear more or receive something from him, to be part of the pilgrim band, or simply to see what would happen.

In John's Gospel, Thomas asks Jesus, 'How can we know the way?' (John 14:5); Jesus famously replies, 'I am the way' (John 14:6). In other words, the term *hodos* has, by this time, become strongly and personally associated with the person of Jesus himself.

The First Christians and 'The Way'

Given the significance of the *hodos* language in the Gospels, it is perhaps unsurprising that, in the book of Acts, the term 'The Way' takes on new relationship with the first Christians. In particular, it seems to be a term used to describe the movement of people that became known as Christians (Acts 11:26). As Paul puts it before the Roman Governor Felix, 'according to the Way [*hodos*], which they [Paul's opponents] call a sect, I worship the God of our ancestors' (Acts 24:14; cf. Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:22). Paul identified himself and the teaching of Christ

[9] For example, Morna Hooker comments, 'The road (ὁδός, cf. v. 17) on which Jesus' followers travel with him is also "the Way", an early term for discipleship.' Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel according to Saint Mark*, BNTC (Continuum, 1991), p. 245.

proclaimed through the church with the term 'the Way', and, moreover, Luke is keen to promote the idea that this name was known also to the gentile Roman authorities (e.g. 'Felix, who was rather well informed about the Way', Acts 24:22).

Hence, Luke's volume on the expansion of Christ's church, takes the idea of being on a road, on a journey, on 'the way', and uses it metaphorically to describe the first Christian groups and the proclamation and teaching of Christ. We might say, therefore, that at the heart of Christianity from the earliest days, was the idea of *pilgrimage*, and there is something about this movement, this journey, that becomes a mark of Christian identity.

The Reformation Christians and 'The Way'

By the time of the European reformations, religious pilgrimage in Europe was widely associated with the (Roman) Catholic Church and the earning of spiritual merit, and for this reason pilgrimage sites were commonly plundered and the practice discouraged in Puritan or Calvinist areas. However, the popularity of texts such as John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*[10] (1678) and William Williams Pantycelyn's great hymn (1762) *Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah*[11] show that, rather than disappearing, the idea of pilgrimage became allegorised and internalised as an interior pilgrimage, or 'pilgrimage of the heart'. And sometimes the two sorts of pilgrimage were combined: for instance, the English separatists who crossed the Atlantic on the Mayflower in 1620 were known as the *Pilgrim* Fathers as they underwent a physical journey in search of a new physical and spiritual home where they would be free to worship.

The Early Baptists and their Commitment to 'Walk Together'

As we have already seen, the first non-conformists, including Baptists, adopted a commitment to 'to walk in all his [Christ's] ways, made known, or to be made known to them'. This image became characteristic

[10] Its fuller title is *The Pilgrim's Progress from This World, to That which is to Come,* which reinforces the point about the allegorisation of the pilgrimage process.

[11] The 1762 date refers to the original publication of the Welsh version of the hymn, *Arglwydd arwain trwy'r anialwch*, which refers to the pilgrim *(fi bererin gwael ei wedd)* in the second line.

of Baptist covenants. It expressed a desire for the community to be *together* in the journey of discovery that is the Christian faith.[12] It contained a recognition that this journey was not an individual one, but that it is shared with others. This makes sense when we consider that they were not just encouraging one another to maintain the ways of Christ that they already knew, but to discern and follow the ways that were yet to be made known. The image of 'walking' on a 'way' helpfully captures the idea of shared experiences and shared recollections of the journey so far, but also of the unknown, yet-to-be-discovered elements of the journey still to come. As Paul Fiddes puts it, 'The image is a dynamic one, of pilgrimage and process.'[13] In other words, we suggest that the metaphorical pilgrimage with Christ was present in the earliest days of Baptist developments as represented in their formational covenants.

Pilgrimage Today

There is evidence that the popularity of physical pilgrimages is on the up — for instance, the BBC2 television series *Pilgrimage,* which features celebrities from different faiths trekking together on established pilgrimage routes is now (2025) on its seventh season. Describing the original 2018 series following the route to Santiago, the *Guardian* newspaper had this to say:

> There were no road-to-Damascus experiences and very little piety. Instead, when seven people in the public eye walked the Camino de Santiago, the ancient pilgrimage route across northern Spain, there were many arguments and much snoring and swearing.
>
> The group — a priest, an atheist and assorted believers and non-believers — discussed the values shaping their lives while retracing the steps of medieval *peregrinos*. Along the way, they forged friendships and encountered some of

[12] See, for example, Paul S. Fiddes, '"Walking Together": The Place of Covenant Theology in Baptist Life Yesterday and Today', in *Pilgrim Pathways: Essays in Baptist History in Honour of B.R. White*, ed. by W. H. Brackney, P. S. Fiddes, and J. H. Y. Briggs (Mercer University Press, 1999), pp. 47–74.
[13] Fiddes, '"Walking Together"', p. 48.

> the hundreds of thousands of people who walk the Camino each year, part of a resurgence in pilgrimages.[14]

Many arguments, not much piety, much snoring and swearing. Discussion of values shaping lives; priests, atheists, and everyone in between travelling together; friendships forged. Could this possibly be church?!

People go on pilgrimages for all sorts of reasons — to have space to grieve; to recover from burnout; to slow down; to seek wisdom; to seek God; to encounter nature; as a challenge. All of these reasons open up a space for people to have a genuine encounter with God in the way that the membership of a bounded institution does not. Pilgrimages require the sacrifice of security; they entail running risks; they force you to rely on the kindness of strangers, and they deepen your appreciation of food and companions to eat it with. These conditions are beginning to sound very like discipleship. And pilgrimages give you the opportunity to make new companions, who may need to rely on you if they get injured — or you may need to rely on them. And so walking with and watching over one another is the very stuff that pilgrimages are made of. In the walking, there is time to listen to one another's stories, and deep fellowship is forged.

We would like to see our Baptist churches say, We are not a building or a club or institution with rules you must follow. We are fellow travellers on a pilgrimage, a spiritual journey of following Jesus. We do not know where we are going, except that Jesus has promised that he is the Way. We have, if we are honest, more questions than answers. We do not always behave well, but we try. We are not always quite sure what we believe: some of us are very clear about this, but others have doubts. We like singing and eating together. We try to love one another, because that is what Jesus told us to do. We listen to each other's stories, and we look after each other. We learn together about Jesus and from him, and together we try to make the world a better place according to his great command to love. Will you come and join us?

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[14] Harriet Sherwood, 'Faith, Friendship and Curses as Seven Celebrity Pilgrims Trek to Santiago', *The Guardian*, 14 March 2018 <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2018/mar/14/modern-pilgrimage-road-to-santiago-journey-self-discovery> [accessed 13 November 2025].

What about Baptism?

Traditionally, membership of a Baptist church has been seen as belonging to an organisation. The entry bar is high: acceptance of a certain set of beliefs and living under the lordship of Christ. This, in turn, entails certain restraints and standards of moral behaviour, as well as the usual expectation of an organisation that members give their time, presence, gifts, and money to support the cause.

This article suggests that, instead, we offer potential church members the opportunity to commit to a spiritual pilgrimage. This is commitment to at least three things:

1. A commitment to a specific band of pilgrims (local church) who are on the same spiritual journey. This may be expressed as a church covenant.
2. A commitment to following Jesus as the Guide, even though the journey may take us to unexpected places. This may be expressed as a public statement of faith during the membership ceremony.
3. A commitment to a way of being church which allows for questions and doubts as well as joyful worship. This will be worked out by regular meetings of the pilgrims (church meetings), and it may be that the ancient practice of *examen* would be a good way of holding these discussions.

If, then, we adopt this model of membership-as-pilgrimage, where does baptism fit in? We are not the first to ask this question, as Fiddes points out from ecumenical conversations: 'The basic proposal made by Baptist conversation-partners was, and is, to place baptism in a wider context, or a longer journey.'[15]

Baptism as a Deciding Commitment to Christ

Over the years of Christian practice, baptism has symbolised a number of aspects of the Christian journey: forgiving sin, conversion, joining the

[15] Paul Fiddes, 'Baptism and the Process of Christian Initiation Reconsidered', *Materialdienst des Konfessionskundlichen Instituts*, 75.3 (2024), pp. 135–143 (p. 135).

church, to name but three.[16] The particular role that baptism plays in *effecting* as opposed to *representing* these events varies from one Christian tradition to another.

However, within the approach we are pursuing, we wish to emphasise the role that baptism plays in representing commitment. As the language of pilgrimage ('the Way') was used in the book of Acts to represent the first Christian groups and their commitment to Christ and his teaching, we want to approach baptism, initially, through the book of Acts.

Baptism and the Church of Pentecost

On the day of Pentecost, in the first recorded instance of *Christian* baptism (we note the role of the 'name of Jesus Christ'; Acts 2:38), '3000 people were added' (Acts 2:41) we are told. But before we assume too readily that this is the same as our typical understanding of baptism today, let us reflect a moment. Given that the audience of Peter's sermon was, 'devout Jews from every nation under heaven' (Acts 2:5; cf. Acts 2:14, 22), the many respondents in baptism would therefore have been these same Jews. This means, firstly, that baptism cannot have here represented a *conversion* to God for this was already the God whom these devout Jews worshipped (and, indeed, this was why they were present in Jerusalem). Nor, secondly, can it have meant *joining* the people of God, for they were *already* members of God's people: Israel. Rather, in this instance at least, baptism seems to have meant, primarily, a *particular commitment to, and identification with, Jesus Christ* (hence, the use of Jesus's 'name' alone in the baptismal formula; Acts 2:38[17]) for those who were already in relationship with God and God's people.

This particular commitment was expressed, by the candidate, through repentance and baptism, and, by God, through forgiveness and the gift of the Spirit. But more than this, baptism was held out to his hearers by Peter as an invitation to become participants in a particular (Christian) understanding of the story of God. The receipt of the Spirit,

[16] For a helpful discussion, see Robin Jensen, *Baptismal Imagery in Early Christianity* (Baker Academic, 2012).
[17] Cf. Lars Hartman, *Into the Name of the Lord Jesus*, SNTW (T&T Clark, 1997), p. 39.

on the day of Pentecost and in baptism, was proclaimed as a fulfilment of the prophecy of Joel (Acts 2:16–21; Joel 2:28–32). Jesus of Nazareth is presented as the one about whom David spoke (Acts 2:25–28; Psalm 16:8–11), as well as the crucified one who has been made 'both Lord and Messiah' by God (Acts 2:36).

In other words, as signified by being baptised and receiving the Spirit, these worshippers of God are not simply assenting to a particular interpretation of the Hebrew Bible, but entering experientially into the story of God as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. As Paul Blowers puts it, baptism is a 'celebration or ritual enactment of the drama of sacred history'.[18] He continues that the early Church Father Cyril of Jerusalem 'acknowledges that baptism is a mimesis, a representation'. Thus, while baptism is certainly a major point in an individual's story, it also represents and reenacts entry into a story shared with others. The Spirit is poured out on all those in the upper room because they represent 'all flesh'. The Spirit is poured out on the 3000 from 'every nation' because they represent 'all flesh'. For the baptised, this identification with Christ's salvation story, meant a commitment to Jesus's teaching and practice (which included common meals and prayer; Acts 2:42). Moreover, it meant a commitment to a particular fellowship of fellow-pilgrims also on the Way. But this was not the same as 'church membership' since, as we have seen, those baptised on Pentecost were already part of God's people.

Therefore, in this instance, we have a picture of baptism enabling those who are 'on the Way' to share in the same commitment to Christ as others,[19] and to identify with Christ as others have done, and to acknowledge before God and God's people the cruciform shape that their lives have now taken. This is certainly a bodily and spiritual experience — the Spirit of Christ is active in baptism as we have seen. However, it is also a representative experience, representing the full

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[18] Paul Blowers, *Moral Formation and the Virtuous Life* (Fortress, 2019), p. 119.

[19] In an article considering the nature of baptism for those who are baptised some years after a point of deciding faith, one of Paul Beasley-Murray's research correspondents describes baptism as 'a response from people already on the way'. Paul Beasley-Murray, 'Baptism for the Initiated', in *Baptism, the New Testament and the Church*, JSNTS 171, ed. by Stanley E. Porter and Anthony R. Cross (Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), pp. 467–476 (p. 470).

entry into the story of God's people in Christ. Therefore, although people may share in the pilgrimage with others at different levels and with different understanding, at some point, the baptised are those who share in a decided commitment to participate together in Christ, in his salvation, and in his story.

Baptism and the Exodus

We see this same idea represented in another way. In the New Testament and in early Christianity, baptism was often linked with the story of the exodus (*ek-hodos* – the 'way out'). So, we read in Paul,

> Our ancestors were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. (1 Cor 10:1-2)

Similarly, Origen draws the comparison between baptism and the crossing of the Red Sea.

> The just person crosses the Red Sea as though on dry land […] O Christian, the divine word promises much greater and loftier things for you who, through the sacrament of baptism, have parted the waters of the Jordan. It promises a way and a passage for you through the air itself. (Origen, *Homily 4 on Joshua 1*)[20]

Recalling, then, the exodus story, the Hebrews face shared slavery in Egypt, and God calls Moses to lead the people out. They journey together through the Egyptian desert, with God as their guide and protector. They face the Red Sea ('Sea of Reeds'), and all with faith to enter where the waters have been parted, pass through unscathed, to continue their journey in the wilderness.

In this understanding, where baptism is understood in light of the miraculous escape through the Red Sea, baptism is a necessary part of a journey, but neither is it the beginning nor the ending of that journey. The journey is for those who sense the leading of God, identifying and going forward with God's people, and who are willing to make the same commitment to enter God's miracle of salvation. For

[20] This is not the only significance of water in the exodus story. The early church also used various episodes of wilderness wanderings in connection with other sacraments. The wine of the Lord's Supper was understood through the transformation of the waters in the exodus story. See Ambrose of Milan, *On the Sacraments*, 4.18; Blowers, *Moral Formation and the Virtuous Life*.

those who pass through the waters, on the other side is not an automatic resolution of doubts or revelation of the knowledge of God. But there is a continued journey in the company of others to discover God together, to struggle with the commitment that has been made, and to live with the discernment of the onward path. While this shares many characteristics of the journey prior to baptism, both the newly baptised and their baptised companions have made a commitment and shared in the experience of salvation by passing 'through the waters'.

Of course, the crossing of the Red Sea is not the only passing 'through the waters' of the exodus story on the pilgrimage to the Promised Land. Origen, for example, notes the crossing of the Jordan as another occasion and that both crossings are fulfilled 'now' in the believer's baptism.[21] To play with this idea a little, we recognise that along the journey, there will inevitably be a number of stages of commitment. In some religious traditions, in this case Buddhism, such moments are even called 'stream-entries'. Yet there is a marked difference between those who have made the commitment to cross the Red Sea who then make further and deeper commitments in the company of their fellow pilgrims, and those who 'take the plunge' for the first time.[22]

Hence, we note that the New Testament writers and early Christians adopted a theological interpretation of the exodus story[23] such that the escape through the Red Sea was understood as, in some way, congruent with baptism. This makes sense when we recognise that the *ek-hodos* is, quite literally, a journey on the 'Way'. For these writers and preachers who already understood their own Christian identity as disciples through the metaphor of the journey, or pilgrimage, it was a natural step to see baptism as another point on the journey, but

[21] Blowers, *Moral Formation and the Virtuous Life*, p. 119.

[22] We might see parallels here with the practice of 'renewing the vows of baptism through being sprinkled with water, especially at the Easter eucharist'. Paul Fiddes, 'Baptism and the Process of Christian Initiation Reconsidered', p. 140.

[23] See, for example, *Exodus in the New Testament*, LNTS 663, ed. by Seth M. Ehorn (T&T Clark, 2022). We note the flexibility of this theological interpretation in early Christianity, as Tertullian links baptism with the Passover, on account of the Last Supper. *Tertullian's Homily On Baptism*, ed. and trans. by Ernest Evans (SPCK, 1964), p. 41.

nevertheless a decisive one. For the believer who was baptised, they were making a decision to commit themselves to Christ and Christ's story. Their life now became understood through the lens of the salvation story, following the 'Way' of Christ. Moreover, this was a shared story, shared with those fellow pilgrims who had taken the same decision to be baptised. Baptism was neither the beginning nor the end of the journey, which began before baptism and continued afterwards, but it was a critical marker on the journey.

Therefore, far from being a clumsy add-on to an understanding of church membership as pilgrimage, baptism becomes an integral and natural part of that journey, and a critical point for those who would make the commitment to become part of Christ's shared salvation story.

Conclusion

This article has explored a new model of church membership for contemporary Wales. Membership in Baptist churches has become much less than it might have been as the language of 'membership' has been related to the membership of an *organisation*: a golf club, a dining group, a Baptist church. This understanding is only strengthened by continuing restrictions placed on churches-as-charities in the UK. However, this article has argued that membership should, instead, be a decisive commitment to a particular people. This is best understood as sharing together in a pilgrimage, an image that is both relevant and redolent in contemporary Welsh society.

However, we have noted that people in Wales often wish to be members of a church, even though they may not be able to express their faith in normally accepted theological cadences. They have a strong commitment to the people, and seek the opportunity to explore together with others the meaning and significance of the journey for themselves. Hence, rather than using church membership as a way of *excluding* those who do not pass a theological test, this article argues for the value of church membership in *including* all those who wish to share the journey, recognising that faith is most often formed through sharing life with others 'on the Way'.

It is clear, then, that this proposed model brings the bar for membership down to a significantly lower level. In the traditional model, the bar for membership was high, requiring specific commitment to certain doctrines and an agreed set of behaviours. This was completely appropriate in the context of state persecution within which Baptist church membership first arose. However, today, the context is one of secularisation and general religious illiteracy, and it seems a wise, contextually-driven, missiological decision to lower the bar for entry.

Ours is not such an unusual proposal as it might seem at first sight, as pilgrimage has been an important part of Christian practice from the beginning. Moreover, we saw that the very varied group of people who followed Jesus could be described as pilgrim followers on the way. Similarly, the first Christians in Acts used the language of the 'Way' as part of their new identity, their self-understanding in their relationship with Christ and his teaching.

However, since this is not the traditional order in which baptism precedes membership, we asked what role there might be for baptism within this scheme. In fact, if membership is a decided commitment to a particular group of people, baptism is a decided commitment to Christ. There is nothing new here except that we saw that the baptisms on the day of Pentecost were not so much a doorway for entry into the church as they represented an entering into a particular story, the story of salvation through Christ, shared with other believers. This was confirmed by the symbolic use of the exodus story by the early Christians where the crossing of the Red Sea was representative of baptism. In such a schema, baptism was a significant and decisive step, but neither marked the beginning nor the end of the journey, but was, instead, a commitment to the journey itself and the God of the journey, and became an identity marker. Baptism, therefore, fits well into the idea of membership as pilgrimage.

Other questions arise which will not be answered here: to what extent can a person on the pilgrimage be a leader; are there any requirements beyond being 'on the Way'? Is there a minimum theological expectation for a person to be baptised, or is commitment to entering the ongoing story of salvation sufficient? Is there a particular

stage of the journey at which baptism should 'normally' be entered in to, and is there the possibility of rebaptism (if, like Origen, we see the different formative water experiences in the exodus story of the crossing of the Red Sea and the Jordan as both representative of baptism)?

While there are clearly other questions to be worked out, this model of a deciding commitment to a group of people (church membership, understood as pilgrimage), followed by a deciding commitment to Christ (baptism), offers an approach that is consonant with the mission of God in contemporary Wales. It seems to continue the work of the early non-conformists, including Baptists, as they sought to 'walk together in all [Christ's] ways, made known or *to be made known*'.