

MEANINGFUL MEMBERSHIP

INTRODUCTION

At Eastside, we are committed to letting God's word be the guide and standard for every aspect of our lives—both individually and corporately.

We believe that the Bible is God's trustworthy and final authority in all matters (Ps. 19:7-11; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:20-21). We desire to hold a biblical vision that honours the Lord. **We believe** that this will glorify God most and result in the flourishing of all members in our church.

As part of a commitment made when Eastside and Bayside became one church, it was agreed that after a period a new constitution would be developed. This 'discussion paper' is the second in a series of papers developed by the elders intended to stimulate biblical discussion and reflection among our membership. The papers in the series include:

1. The Church & its purpose
2. **Meaningful Membership**
3. Membership requirements
4. Authority structures in the church

NEXT STEPS AHEAD

The release of these papers will be accompanied by teaching and opportunities for discussion.

You will see questions for reflection and consideration throughout the paper. There are also resources for further exploration. We'd encourage you to submit your biblical reflections—both positive and corrective—on these papers to the elders. These will then be used by the elders to develop the draft constitution that will be submitted to the members for consideration and approval.

'ME CENTRED' COMMUNITY

We believe that the cultural spirit of individualism and consumerism is a danger to God's view of church community. In the West, we live in the most individualistic and anti-institutional age in history.

Scepticism toward institutions and authority structures can be traced back to the Enlightenment in the 17th century which has taught us to doubt external authorities. This coupled with, more recently, postmodernism, individualism, and consumerism mean that it is normal and encouraged to prioritise individual interests over the collective good.

In other words, what is good for me is more important than what is good for the group. This is evidenced in the attitude that says, "I'll only come or be part of this if it is good for me. And when a better offer comes along, I'll take it up."

Broadly speaking, the danger for local churches is that they give in to this culture of individualism and make church and church membership all about individual self-fulfilment—it's all about ME.

The result is that church membership is either removed, or it becomes all about benefits rather than mutual commitments. In other words, membership functions more as a membership rewards club or a 'no lock in contract' arrangement that you might see at a gym or a club. That is, it is all about what a member will get. And when expectations are not met or a better option presents, the member leaves.

Discussion question: In what ways can a "church exists for ME" attitude negatively impact our church community?

'GOSPEL CENTRED' COMMUNITY

We believe that Christian community is created by the Lord Jesus who calls us to commit to one another the way he has committed to us.

As we observed in the first paper (*The Church & Its Purpose*), the church is **created by God and it is for God's glory**. It logically follows then that Christian community is 'God centred', and not 'me-centred.'

Indeed, this is what we see all throughout the Bible. For example, in the book of Ephesians, the Apostle Paul reminds us that Jesus is the head of the church: *“And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.”* (Ephesians 1:22–23)

A little later in Ephesians, the Apostle Paul goes on to explain that this church of which Jesus is the head is all about individuals being brought together for the glory of God: *“Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.”* (Ephesians 2:19–22)

It is clear that the church is not about individuals, but about Jesus and his body. As a consequence of this, when we come to Jesus, we are called to die to ourselves and to live for Jesus and his body—the church (1 Cor 12:12-27). This means that in contrast to our culture that exalts individualism, **we believe** that Christians are called to be people that pursue the good of the body over their own self-interest.

This is why Paul says that no Christian should seek their own good, but rather the good of their neighbour (1 Cor 10:24 cf. Gal 2:20; Phil 2:1-11). Similarly, Jesus reminds us that our unity and love for one another demonstrates the authenticity of our faith to the world (John 17:22-23). **We believe** that this is also a key part of the way that God matures and grows us (Eph 4:11-16).

Explaining the New Testament teaching on the church, Jamie Dunlop writes that: *“Our new society of the church is not a mutual admiration society, but a shared admiration society. Our affection for each other is derivative. It derives from our worship of God—a God who saved us from a million different communities of this world to become his family.”*¹

In summary, **we believe** that Christian community is vastly different to any other form of community. It is not something we choose, rather it is formed by the shed blood of the Lord Jesus who brings peace and tears down the dividing wall (Eph 2:14), creates one new body (1 Cor 12:27), and a spiritual family (1 John 4:19-21). In this family we put the corporate good over individual interests as we together seek to glorify God.

Discussion question: What practical difference do you think it makes when a church together embraces the idea that Christians are called to seek the good of their church over their own self-interest?

“GOSPEL CENTRED” LOCAL CHURCHES

We believe that the local church is the primary place where Christians fulfil their self-giving commitment to the body of Jesus.

As we observed in the first paper (*The Church And Its Purpose*) it is common today, and even seen by some as spiritual, not to commit to a single local church. The argument is that the universal church takes priority over the local church. But this neglect of the local church belies a spiritual immaturity and is an excuse for avoiding the radical nature of “Gospel Centred” community.

For example, if we do not wholeheartedly commit to a local church, then as soon as the elders make a decision we don’t like, we leave. Or when relationships become difficult, instead of modelling the beauty of repentance and forgiveness, we find another local church. The result is that instead of self-giving love that reflects the beauty of the gospel, we return to a “Me-Centred” view of the local church.

In contrast, to a low view of the local church, the New Testament always assumes that local gatherings of believers are the place where radical “Gospel Centred” community is realised. A local church is a gathering of believers that submit to one another in love (Eph 5:21-33), pursue the one another commands (e.g. Eph 4:32; Col 3:13), embrace godly authority (Acts 14:23; Heb 13:17; 1 Pet 5), and celebrate the ordinances together (1 Cor 11:17-34).

Drawing this together, Mark Dever helpfully explains: *“By identifying ourselves with a particular church, we let the pastors and other members of that local church know that we intend to be committed in attendance, giving, prayer, and service. We allow fellow believers to have great expectations of us in these areas, and we make it known that we are the responsibility of this local church.”*ⁱⁱ

This does not mean that Christians from different local churches cannot fellowship with one another! But **we believe** that Christians have a special responsibility to their own local church. And as we fulfil this responsibility, without regard for our own self-interest, we truly love the universal church and most accurately reflect the self-giving love of the Lord Jesus. In other words, true love for Jesus and the universal church is reflected by a deep love and commitment to a specific local church.

BUT FORMAL MEMBERSHIP?

We believe that membership is an appropriate way to express our gospel commitment to one another. Many today see formal membership as a frustrating and unbiblical administrative requirement of churches. It is likely that this is because we've lost sight of the biblical freight behind the use of this word.

When the New Testament speaks of 'members' (e.g. 1 Cor 12:12) it refers to the members of flesh that make up a body. John Hammett helpfully explains that, *“Membership in a physical body is vital, organic, life giving and essential. Severing a member of one's body involves intense pain, and the whole body suffers when a member suffers.”*ⁱⁱⁱ In other words, to be a Christian while not being a member of a local church is like a leg or a hand trying to survive while being separated from the heart. This is why Mark Dever writes that: *“Biblically, if we are Christians, we must be members of a [local] church. This record is not simply the record of a statement once made or of an affection toward a familiar place. It must be the reflection of a living commitment...”*^{iv}

Some will still argue that this does not prove the administrative formalisation of membership. Yet it is difficult to understand how a local church can fulfil its biblical 'membership' responsibilities without a process to formalise 'membership.' For example, the church discipline process that Jesus

institutes and the Apostle Paul builds upon presuppose that it is known who a member of the church is to begin with (Matt 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 5:12-13; 2 Cor 2:6). Similarly, we must also ask how elders are to know which sheep they are to shepherd (Acts 20:28-31) if there is no clear means of determining who is part of any given local church.

It is also clear that the early church used lists to identify people and took votes. For example, Paul gives instructions to Timothy to enrol widows on the list of those receiving support from the church (1 Tim 5:9-12). Such a command evidently assumes that members of the church are clearly known. Further, Paul implies that the Corinthian church decided upon disciplinary measures based on a vote requiring a majority (2 Cor 2:6). This assumes that those who were part of the Corinthian church were known and that they met together to make decisions.

In summary, it is trendy to assume that the early church was more organic and less structured than our churches today. But a thorough exploration of the New Testament reveals a far less 'trendy' church than often assumed. Mike McKinley rightly concludes that *“the Bible prescribes a certain organization and inter-relation within the church that is inconceivable without formal church membership.”*^v Consequently, **we believe** that formal membership is an important way of fulfilling biblical expectations.

MEMBERSHIP & DISCIPLESHIP

We believe that it is right to have expectations of members and these expectations are ultimately about discipleship. It is easy to assume that because we are saved by grace it is legalistic to have ongoing expectations of members.

This is a well-meaning assumption, yet **we believe** that this confuses the difference between the means and goal of our salvation. Yes, we are saved by grace, but God's purposes in salvation is that he would redeem for himself a holy people (Lev 19:2 cf. 1 Pet 1:16; Tit 2:14). There are at least seven broad discipleship responsibilities that all members should be seeking to fulfil:

1. **Assemble regularly**
(*Matt 18:20; Acts 10:7; Col 3:16; Heb 10:25*)
2. **Submit to one another**
(*Matt 18:15-20; Eph 5:21; Phil 2:3*)
3. **Share communion together**
(*Mark 14:22-25; 1 Cor 11:17-34*)
4. **Encourage and love one another**
(*John 13:34; Rom 12:10; 1 Pet 4:8*)
5. **Pray regularly**
(*2 Cor 1:11; Eph 6:18; 1 Thess 5:17*)
6. **Serve others and advance God's mission**
(*Mark 10:42-45; Rom 12:9-13; Gal 5:13-14; Matt 28:16-20; Acts 1:7-8*)
7. **Give regularly**
(*2 Cor 9:7; Phil 4:17-20; 1 Tim 5:18*)

The important question is not whether a church has expectations of its members, but rather how it applies these responsibilities. Mark Dever writes: *'I think such [high] expectations actually help. By high expectations, I simply mean that if you're a member of our church we will treat you as if you're converted. We'll assume that you increasingly love God and hate sin, and that you are living accordingly, and wanting us to help you do so.'*^{vi}

In other words, membership needs to be understood in the context of discipleship (e.g. Heb 10:19-25). They are a shared commitment, fostered by mutual bonds of accountability, as we seek to help one another increasingly and passionately follow Jesus in every area of life.

Discussion question: What are some ways that you think we could make membership more meaningful at Eastside?

ⁱ Jamie Dunlop, *The Compelling Community*. Illinois: Crossway, 2015 (pg. 30).

ⁱⁱ Mark Dever, *IX Marks of a Health Church*. Illinois: Crossway, 2013 (pg. 168).

ⁱⁱⁱ John Hammett (edited by Mark Dever & Jonathan Leeman), *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*. Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2015 (pg. 170-171).

^{iv} Mark Dever, *IX Marks of a Health Church*. Illinois: Crossway, 2013 (pg. 274).

^v Mike McKinley, *Church Membership and the N.C.L.H.G.A.* (<https://www.9marks.org/article/church-membership-and-nclhga/>) Published on 3 January 2010.

^{vi} Mark Dever, *IX Marks of a Health Church*. Illinois: Crossway, 2013 (pg. 174).