

MEMBERSHIP REQUIREMENTS

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 third 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.

RECAPPING MEANINGFUL MEMBERSHIP

As we explored in the last paper (*Meaningful Membership*), **we believe** that being a member of a local church is the 'here and now' embodiment of a spiritual and universal reality.

To borrow from Jonathan Leeman: "*Church membership...is not about "additional requirements." It's about a church taking specific responsibility for a Christian, and a Christian for a church. It's about "putting on," "embodying," "living out," and "making concrete" our membership in Christ's universal body.*"ⁱ In other words, the local church is the place where we express our membership of the universal church this side of eternity.

MEMBERSHIP – WHO DECIDES?

We believe that the local church is responsible for determining membership of the local church. In our culture submitting to someone's judgement is a foreign and unreasonable idea. Yet a careful reading of the Bible makes clear that Jesus commissioned the church to make decisions about who are members of the local church.

This responsibility finds its genesis in Jesus giving the '*keys of the kingdom*' to those who, following Peter's example, confess that Jesus is the Christ (Matt 16:15-20). Unlike Roman Catholics we don't believe this passage is teaching that we need to trace a line of succession from Peter to the Pope. Yet we do believe a direct line should be traced between what we believe, and the confession that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God.

This is why Jesus in Matthew 18 gives authority to the assembled congregation—not to a group of elders or Apostles alone—to determine whether someone should be removed from a congregation because of sin. Greg Gilbert rightly concludes, "*The last step Jesus mentions is to "tell it to the church," not "tell it to elders" or appeal to the college of cardinals or to the pope. What the church says goes.*"ⁱⁱ In case there is any doubt, this pattern is also built upon by the Apostle Paul in the church at Corinth (1 Cor 5), and the church at Galatia (Gal 6).

Given that Jesus' name is tied to his church, **we believe** it is essential that we understand the significance and importance of this task. Further, taking this seriously will help protect the unity and the maturity of our church and our evangelistic witness before a watching world.

Discussion question: Does it surprise you that the Bible expects the local church to determine who can be a member, in effect, affirming people's profession of faith?

MEMBERSHIP – CRITERIA

The logical question then is; what criteria need to be met for a local church to affirm somebody's membership? Answering this question can be divided into two parts.

First, there are things that are made explicit in scripture. In this respect, **we believe** that a church must see clear evidence that someone is a Christian—that they have repented of their rebellion against God and put their trust in Jesus as King (Mark 1:15). It makes no sense to let someone into a local body if they are not united to Christ's body. This would be a contradiction and could have devastating impacts on the church and the individual.

Second, there are things that are less explicit but are a clear consequence of the New Testament's teaching on the church. **We believe** that this includes:

1. *A desire to submit to leaders* (1 Tim 3:1-13; Heb 13:17; 1 Pet 5; Titus 1:5-9): As a Baptist Church we believe that the final *human* authority rests with the membership. Yet this does not mean that leadership is not important. The New Testament is clear that there should be a relationship of trust and mutual respect between the elders and the membership.

Greg Gilbert rightly explains that: "*Jesus intends the relationship between elders and local churches not to be one fraught with tension and conflict, but a beautiful one of trust and love. After all, the Bible says elders are gifts to the church, given by the King from the throne of heaven.*"ⁱⁱⁱ Thus, it would be unhealthy to admit someone into membership that has no intention or desire to submit to the shepherding of the elders.

2. *A willingness to submit to the teaching of the church* (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:9; 2 Tim 2:24): As a natural consequence of being willing to submit to the elders, it is also necessary that a member is willing to submit to the teaching of the elders. The primary way that elders shepherd is through the 'doctrinal teaching of the church' (1 Tim 3:2; 2 Tim 4:2; Titus 1:9). Because of this, the elders must be wise not to bind the consciences of members where scripture does not. While all scripture is important, the Apostle Paul made clear that not all scripture is equally important (1 Cor 15:3).

In this respect, determining the difference between primary, secondary and tertiary matters is important. *Primary matters* go to the heart of the gospel (e.g. divinity of Christ, Jesus' death and resurrection) and would be reflected in a statement of faith and historic creeds that go to the heart of our faith (e.g. Apostles Creed).

Secondary matters create boundaries between local churches (e.g. views on things like church governance, men and women in ministry). At a minimum, members must be willing to accept the church's teaching on these matters. If not, there will be a constant tension. These matters would be reflected in papers like this and would be available for members to read. Given that we believe that every Christian should be a member of a local church, we would lovingly shepherd these people towards becoming members at another local church.

Tertiary matters are disputable matters where Christians have freedom to arrive at a different position but still fellowship in the same family (e.g. pre, post or amillennial, view of Sabbath, drinking alcohol). The church and elders should not bind the conscience of members on these matters.

3. *Attendance & membership expectations* (Heb 10:25; Col 3:16; 1 Thess 5:11): Although there are exceptions to this (i.e. those in nursing homes or homebound), it is generally true that a church cannot oversee and affirm a person's profession of faith if they do not regularly gather with the local church.

Similarly, it makes little sense to receive someone into membership if they do not agree to the church's view of the purpose and responsibilities of a member. That is, that we view membership in the context of discipleship and helping one another to increasingly and passionately follow Jesus in every area of life (see previous paper).

Sometimes the question of age is raised with respect to membership requirements. Because church membership is a spiritual reality, **we believe** that this means those under 18 (i.e. teenagers and children), if they so desire and with the permission of their parents, should be encouraged to undertake the membership process. If they were accepted as members, they would be welcome to participate in all of the activities and responsibilities of members, except for voting in members meeting. This is because we believe it is unwise to burden them with the legal responsibilities that are shared by voting members. At the age of 18 these non-voting members would be able to vote in meetings.

Discussion question: Can you think of other things that should form part of the membership criteria?

WHAT ABOUT BAPTISM?

To this point we have not yet addressed the question of whether believer's baptism (credo-baptism) is necessary for membership. Throughout Baptist history some churches have required credo-baptism (believers' baptism) for membership, but there have also been others that have not. We will briefly summarise the reason behind the two positions.

The reason that some churches have required credo-baptism for membership is that baptism is seen as the 'doorway of entry' into the new covenant community. This view draws a close relationship between circumcision under the old covenant and baptism under the New Covenant.

In other words, just as circumcision was required to be part of the old covenant community (Gen 17:14; Ex 31:14), valid credo-baptism is required to be part of the new covenant community. A secondary argument is that Jesus commands all people to believe and be baptised, therefore it is

disobedient not to do so. Reflecting this argument, Bobby Jamieson writes: *"Baptism is the initiating oath-sign of the new covenant. Therefore, it is necessary for entry into the new covenant community on earth—the membership of the local church."*^{iv}

The reason that some churches have not required credo-baptism for membership is that baptism is important, but it is not essential to our faith. The basis of this argument is that circumcision under the old covenant is not directly replaced by credo-baptism. Instead it is argued that circumcision anticipates the circumcision of the heart (Rom 2:25-29). This argument finds its genesis in the Old Testament (Lev 26:14-39; Deut 30:6-10), and its fulfillment in Jesus and the giving of the Holy Spirit (Rom 2:25-29; Gal 3:26-29; Phil 3:3).

Flowing out of this, it is argued that someone should not be automatically excluded from membership if there is evidently a newness of life brought about by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 13:13; 2 Cor 3:7-18; Gal 5:14-26). John Piper writes: *"excluding from membership a truly regenerate person who gives credible evidence of his saving faith is a more serious mistake than viewing the time and mode of baptism as essential to the qualifications for membership."*^v

~

It is important to recognise that there are compelling arguments on both sides of this discussion. On the one hand, it is important to be clear that **we believe** that baptism is commanded by Jesus and therefore is not unimportant (Matt 28:16-20). We must also be clear that as a Baptist church **we believe** wholeheartedly that the normative pattern to be practiced and taught by our church is belief followed by immersion baptism—credo baptism (Acts 2:38-41; 8:36-38; 16:31-33).

Yet on the other hand, **we believe** that there are limited situations where it is appropriate to allow someone into membership who has not been credo-baptised. The basis of this conviction is that it is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that regenerates a person's heart and ultimately joins them to body of the Christ. In other words, we accept that circumcision of the heart is the new covenant fulfillment of circumcision of the flesh.

The logical question then remains; shouldn't disobedience to Jesus' command to be baptised be enough to exclude someone from membership? The problem with this question is that some who have been paedobaptised, in good conscience, believe that they have been obedient to Jesus.

While we evidently don't agree, **we believe** that it is a bigger mistake to prevent someone from joining our membership where there is credible evidence of saving faith. We also don't want to pre-emptively discipline people or put them in a position where they are being baptised to 'tick a box' so that they can become members. Instead, we'd rather include them in our family, and be upfront that we will continue to teach and uphold the importance of credo-baptism.

We would expect that those in this situation must demonstrate:

1. Credible evidence of saving faith, including a written or verbal testimony;
2. A clear understanding of the Bible's teaching on baptism (e.g. attend baptism course);
3. Accept that Eastside will teach and always encourage credo-baptism.

It is important to be clear that this process would mean that those who were paedobaptised in churches that held to a sacramental understanding of baptism (i.e. that baptism saves us) would not be able to seek membership, unless credo-baptised. This is because such a view of baptism demonstrates a wrong view of how we are saved. Consequently, the exception being created would only be for those who, like us, see baptism as a sign of the inner circumcision of the heart (e.g. Presbyterians and evangelical Anglicans).

We believe that this holds the tension between our belief that we are saved by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, and our conviction about the importance of credo-baptism.

ⁱ Jonathan Leeman, *Church Discipline: How the Church Protects the Name of Jesus*. Illinois: Crossway, 2012 (pg. 43).

ⁱⁱ Greg Gilbert, Is There Such a Thing as Church Authority? (<https://www.9marks.org/article/is-there-such-a-thing-as-church-authority/>) Published 30 September 2016.

ⁱⁱⁱ Greg Gilbert, Is There Such a Thing as Church Authority? (<https://www.9marks.org/article/is-there-such-a-thing-as-church-authority/>) Published 30 September 2016.

^{iv} Bobby Jamieson, *Going Public: Why Baptism is Required for Church Membership*. Nashville: B&H, 2015 (pg. 79)

^v John Piper, More Clarifications on the Baptism and Membership Issue. (<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/more-clarifications-on-the-baptism-and-membership-issue>) Published 12 October 2005.