



WHAT WE
BELIEVE
ABOUT
BAPTISM AND
MEMBERSHIP

commonground
church

WHAT WE BELIEVE ABOUT BAPTISM AND MEMBERSHIP

WE BELIEVE IN WATER BAPTISM.

Every believer should be baptised in water as an expression of their faith in Jesus - the sooner, the better. Each baptism speaks of yet another believer taking God at his word – doing the very thing Jesus did (Matt 3:16), and doing what Jesus (Matt 28:19) and his apostles commanded we all do (Acts 2:38).

In Common Ground Church, we have baptised 100's of people in the last few years. We have witnessed the joy and celebration believers – both new and seasoned – experience when they do the very thing Jesus commanded.

We intend to continue our strong teaching about baptism as well as our enthusiastic encouragement that one be baptised. We will also continue to provide practical opportunities to be baptised. In fact, we plan to step these up, as we trust God for 1000's of baptisms in the years to come.

WE ALSO BELIEVE IN MEMBERSHIP.

Anyone who trusts in Jesus is automatically a member of the universal church. However, they also need to commit to a local church, which is not as automatic.

In the first century, membership would have been far less complicated because there was only one church in a town, and the idea of following Jesus independent of a faith community did not exist. Everyone who came to faith would connect to the church in their proximity.

But now we live in a time where there are often 100's or 1000's of churches in a city. And the unfavourable idea that church involvement is an optional extra for a Christian has taken root. As a result, membership has become critically important.

Every follower of Jesus needs to follow Jesus...

- 1) not in isolation, but in community with other followers of Jesus, and
- 2) not independently, but under the shepherding care of a group of elders or pastors, whom they recognize as 'their leaders' (Heb 13:7,17).

Likewise, every eldership team needs to know who these people are so they can give

account to God for those whom he has entrusted to them (Heb 13:17).

It is for these reasons that the idea of church membership exists, and why we do the DNA course – to help people who already believe the Gospel to become members.

This poses the question: what is required of those Christians who are accepted into membership? There are at least 3 things:

- 1) Genuine faith in Jesus and the biblical Gospel, and a willingness to work out the implications of this faith in the years to come.
- 2) A willingness to invest in building community.
- 3) Recognizing and agreeing to fall into the slip-stream of the church and under the care of the elders in that church.

But what else? Historically, we also included water baptism. But that is changing. And that is what this document is about...

WHY WE HISTORICALLY MADE BAPTISM A PREREQUISITE OF MEMBERSHIP.

1) We took baptism as an early indicator of real faith in the Gospel.

Although all kinds of people are welcome to attend church, and even experience a measure of belonging, membership requires that one is saved, believes the Gospel, and is ready to obey it. We have seen baptism as the token of both one's faith, and one's willingness to follow Jesus according to his Word.

2) Out of a respect for church tradition.

Many churches have held this line in the past. Being a church with a positive orientation to the high standards of Jesus, we didn't want to let our standard slip.

3) We did this because Acts 2:41 seems to connect membership and baptism.

We're told that 'those who received his word were baptised, and there were added that day about three thousand souls'.

BUT OUR PREVIOUS POSITION – AS NOBLE AS IT SEEMED – HAS OFTEN LED TO UNINTENDED SIDE-EFFECTS...

Many believing but unbaptised people doing the DNA course have told us that baptism felt like a hoop to jump through in order to be accepted by the church.

Of course, this was never our intention. We regularly told people not to be baptised for us but for Jesus, but still so many told us that the lasting emotional impression is that baptism is a kind of hoop. In many instances, a person who would likely have been baptised if it was just a matter of trusting and obeying Jesus, was not baptised – because they perceived encouragement to do so as human or institutional pressure, rather than a divine instruction.

Many believing people have wanted to join us who had been taught in their previous church that their infant baptism was legitimate.

Although some people could quickly change their mind on this, others have seemed to take some time to come round to accepting Common Ground's take on Scripture with regard to baptism. Many times these people were fully devoted to Jesus in other ways – generously giving, committed to community, sharing their faith – and yet this point became the disqualifier for their membership. Some people perceived this as downright rejection by our church. Many have remained in our church - giving, serving, being part of a small group - but despite feeling like this is their preferred spiritual home, they have not yet been accepted into membership.

The result is that most Common Ground congregations have had a growing 'pending' list.

A pending list of people, who have wanted to join the church, did the DNA course, met with an elder, but for whatever reason did not get baptised. In an ideal world, all of these people would have been followed up every few months for further conversation. But in our real and busy world, and in our real church, led predominantly by marketplace pastors with the limited capacity most of us experience, this has not always happened. The result is 100s of people who, over the years, have remained on the pending list, feeling they sort of belong, but not being members.

THIS LED US TO REVISIT THE 3 REASONS WE HAD PREVIOUSLY CONNECTED BAPTISM TO MEMBERSHIP...

1) Questioning reason one: Is baptism the early indicator of real faith in the Gospel?

We still believe that believers should be baptised as soon as possible. But surely anyone who believes in Jesus is already part of the universal church of Jesus Christ?

No outward work saves, including baptism. These works are an expression of one's salvation.

For whatever reason, many saved people nowadays take a while before taking the plunge, and yet they have real faith in Jesus. In addition, many have even begun engaging in spiritual disciplines like Bible reading, prayer, fellowship and obeying Jesus in those things that become clear. Surely faith in the Gospel, and being born of the Spirit, is enough to be sure that somebody is saved? And if they are part of the universal church of Jesus, surely they cannot be too far off from being part of a local church?

And, as already mentioned, what of those who have had years of vibrant relationship with Jesus, but were in a church that did not teach believer's baptism? Baptism is an important step for every disciple. But, in the world we live, where Christendom has taken all kinds of expressions for 2000 years, surely we need to be a little less dogmatic in the application of our convictions to other authentic followers of Jesus? Particularly with regard to barring them from membership because they don't yet agree with our view on this particular, non-moral issue? Especially when many sincere, devout people who cling to infant baptism clearly display real faith in the Gospel?

2) Questioning reason two: Is respect for a church tradition required when that church tradition is lacking in biblical support?

Many churches have insisted on baptism as a prerequisite for membership. Most notably, baptism and communion have been seen as ecclesiological sacraments – rituals that relate to one's membership in the church.

But as we studied the Scriptures afresh, we saw that baptism in the book of Acts was not ecclesiological at all. In fact, baptism was not the public act to be performed before the church that we have often made it to be. One only needs to ponder the Ethiopian's Eunuch's lonely baptism in Acts 8, where his baptiser, Philip, disappears moments after his baptism in a river desert in the middle of nowhere. Or we think of the Philippian jailor in Acts 16 who is baptised in the middle of the night, apparently in his home, by the apostle Paul. These baptisms had nothing to do with the church. They were simple expressions of faith in Jesus.

The fact that 1000's of churches have made baptism ecclesiological should no more govern us than the fact that 1000's of churches have baptised infants. The simple question is: what does the Word say?

3) Questioning reason three: Does Acts 2:41 really connect membership and baptism.

Read it again carefully ... 'those who received his word were baptised, and there were added that day about three thousand souls'. It does not say, 'those who were baptised were accepted into membership that day'. It simply affirms that people believed the Gospel, got

baptised like Peter instructed them (in Acts 2:38) and joined the church! In fact, Acts 2:47, a few verses later, says clearly what the requirement for joining a church actually is: 'the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved'. Salvation, not baptism, is how one gets accepted into both the universal and local church.

WE ARE NOT CHANGING OUR THEOLOGY OF BAPTISM. WE ARE, HOWEVER, AMENDING OUR APPLICATION OF THIS THEOLOGY IN 3 WAYS.

Over the last 18 months, the congregational leaders invested what feels like 10s of hours in thorough conversation on the matter. We then looped all our elders who serve across the city into the conversation over a period of several months and referenced deacon teams in each congregation. These are the changes to our application...

1. We will no longer make baptism a membership pre-requisite, but at the same time, we will intensify our efforts to baptise people.

We still plan to fulfil the Great Commission – leading people to Christ, baptizing them in his name, and teaching them to align their lives with his Word.

Metaphorically, we will keep a pool at the entry doors of our church – both the doorway into membership, and the subsequent doorways into service. In the DNA content, as well as the conversation one has with an elder as part of this, there is a fantastic opportunity to guide people to be baptised. As such, every DNA event will be connected to a calendar date on which to be baptised. And whenever an unbaptised member signs up to serve in a ministry – we will take the opportunity to encourage baptism where they have not yet done this.

It is our hope that by removing the perception that baptism is a hoop to jump through to please the pastors, and instead asserting that baptism is an opportunity to do something for Jesus and Jesus alone - many more people will be baptised. Besides, baptism should never be experienced as a hoop that achieves one's acceptance

by the church. Rather, it is a chance to demonstrate one's existing, blood-bought acceptance by Jesus.

2. We will lovingly journey with members who delay in being baptised or who are disobedient in response to God's word, while at the same time remain understanding of the fact that it takes time to move to complete obedience.

The membership process is designed for beginners. As such, we cannot expect the kind of high levels of consistent obedience that we can expect from mature believers. However, we can expect that each new member understands exactly where the path of following Jesus leads.

Where people claim to follow Jesus, but don't want to be baptised - and the reason is disobedience or apathy - we become concerned as pastors. In love, we will urge such a person to align their lives with Jesus and his clear teachings.

But, let's not be Pharisee-like and only preoccupy ourselves with one aspect of God's commands - namely baptism. We must be equally concerned when we find any follower of Jesus, ourselves included, who is apathetic on any imperative where Jesus is clear in his Word - whether it is love for the poor, or generosity toward the cause of Christ, or sexual purity, or love for God's Word.

At the same time, we must give people time: time to understand God's Word, time to make the changes, time for the Holy Spirit to work in their lives, time to move from believing the Gospel to letting it change their lives, and time to progress from immaturity to maturity and from partial obedience to full obedience.

Of course, baptism is important. But so is obeying every command of Christ. We aim to disciple people into the whole counsel of God. In DNA we will make this intention emphatically clear. No one will be surprised by the radical call of Christ to give up everything to follow him - a call that will continue to echo in our Sunday teaching.

Unless a person is openly rejecting or defiant of the authority of God's Word, refusing a spiritually immature person membership should not be our default response. In the same way we wouldn't let the immaturity of a baby stop them from entering a physical family; we do not want to disqualify a spiritually immature believer from entering the spiritual family. This, especially when their continued exposure to God's Word is sure to do them much good in the years to come.

When a person doing DNA hears that this is what they can expect to experience in our church and still wants to join, and says that they would like to move towards full obedience over time, surely their stated intention is enough to start with?

3. We will continue to challenge people with differing theological positions regarding baptism, but we will be respectful and hopefully winsome about this.

We still disagree with those who seek to legitimize infant baptism. And it is our hope – whether short-term or long – to winsomely persuade people to change their mind about this. Not because we want to be right, but because we believe it is in their highest interests to follow a clear and simple reading of God’s Word over and above any position that argues for infant baptism.

But we must not confuse this with disobedience to God’s Word. For pastors, the cases in which people who claim to follow Jesus but don’t want to be baptised due to apathy or disobedience is far more concerning than the cases of those who claim to follow Christ but don’t want to be baptised due to their theological position based on Scripture as they understand it.

Their decision to refrain from getting baptised up to this point is not a form of open disobedience to God. Most times this is a person who sincerely does want to obey Jesus, but whose understanding on the matter of baptism makes them feel unconvinced that this is something Jesus wants them to do - perhaps even a violation of conscience.

This is a chance for us to weigh the matter correctly. If we have learned anything in 2000 years of church history, it is to separate central issues – like faith in Jesus as the Son of God, and belief in the Bible as the Word of God – from secondary ones – like baptism - even while we hold to some convictions about these secondary issues.

That said, we will ask a person who doesn’t share our theological perspective to avoid promoting their view to others. Surely this is a simple form of courtesy to us, as well as a deterrent for needless divisiveness. And we will limit high levels of leadership from people who have these differing views (please refer to your eldership team for clarity on this aspect of application)

We did submit this conversation to Michael Eaton. Eaton is a highly respected theologian who has played a major theologically-shaping role in our church. We asked him his opinion on the matter. He confirmed our discovery that, biblically speaking, baptism relates to one’s existing faith in Jesus more than it does one’s

membership in the church. (As such, he takes baptism out of the category of church in his written Systematic Theology called 'The Plan and the Purpose of God' – which is where it is often found in other systematic theologies.) He also told us that, in his years of church leadership, he has many times taken into membership people who came from Anglican or Presbyterian backgrounds, who believed their infant baptism was sufficient – and after a while, he was privileged to baptise each and every one of them.

His advice seems wise to us. We want to be wary of refusing access to godly followers of Jesus at the front door when doing so means we might deprive them of the safe harbour we might be for them, but also because it means they will likely not be baptised if we refuse them. In most cases, we believe that it's once we let them into the house, where they can live under our teaching and regularly witness the joy on the faces of people who come out the baptism waters, that they are afforded the time to change their mind, and be baptised themselves.

Please stand with us in this change. We are not changing our theology (we still believe in baptism and membership) as much as the application of our theology. We are simply no longer making one a hard-and-fast pre-requisite to the other.

Let's pray that God's Spirit leads more and more saved people to take the plunge – both into meaningful commitment to God's family through membership, and also into the baptismal waters.

*The Common Ground Eldership Team
October 2016*