

## Rationale for Church Membership

### The Church's Foundation

The church's foundation is the gracious, life-giving actions of Father, Son, and Spirit, who, from eternity, willed that God's own joyous life should not be self-contained or self-enclosed but should overflow, creating human creatures for joyous fellowship. Despite humanity's attempt to refuse this fellowship through sin, God in Christ overturns our rejection, adopting us in Christ, uniting us to Him by the Spirit, and fulfilling God's loving intention that we might participate in the life of God (Eph 1:1-6). The church's primary rationale—its reason for existence—is not located in the temporal affairs of daily life (it is not a society or club designed to inculcate certain values, to provide various benefits to the community or society, or to attain certain—even certain *valuable*—earthly purposes such as spreading the gospel or building institutions). The church's reason for existence relates directly to the end for which humans were created. The church is the community of those who by the Spirit's perfecting work, are being brought to completion through coming to participate in the union of all things in Christ (Eph 1:7-14). It is because God's loving intention for humanity involves Him relating to us not merely as individuals, but as joint-heirs and co-participants *in Christ*, that the church, the body of Christ, has been brought into existence by Him (Eph. 1:22-23). All of the aspects of the church's life—evangelism, teaching, sacraments, worship, hospitality, community, *etc.*—serve to constitute a visible space in the midst of a broken world in which men and women corporately receive, attest, and with their actions and words represent God's gracious intentions for humanity (Eph. 2:19-22).

Rooting the life of the church in the loving intentions of God for fellowship and in the gracious missions of the Son and Spirit gives an *evangelical*, or gospel shape to the church's common life. The church is organised not merely to secure instrumental goods, such as structural or institutional integrity, financial stability, or rapid numerical growth. Rather, questions regarding the church's organisation, leadership, and proper functioning are derivative from and founded in God's prior, gracious actions which found the church and give to her a purpose and shape. What the church *is*, is defined by the gospel, not the plans or dreams of the church's human leadership. Thus, when ascertaining how a church is to be organised, the question can never be merely, 'what sort of organisation will allow us to achieve the ends that are desirable for the flourishing of this institution?' But rather, 'what sort of structure most organically flows from the life-giving intentions of God for humanity laid forth in the gospel of Jesus Christ?' If the reason for the church's existence is the reaffirmation of humanity's purpose to corporately participate in the life of God, then the goal of the church's existence is something which remains utterly out of her control. The vitality of the church continually requires her to look outside herself, to indicate and attest the life-giving work of God's Spirit upon which she continually depends.

This implies that we are not free to constitute the church however best suits the needs or preferences of our particular time and situation. While there is of course a necessary cultural contextualisation involved in organising the church and a certain plasticity in how elements of the church will be organised (*i.e.* it is a matter of discernment as to what title church leaders should receive, how they will be identified, elected, and/or ordained, *etc.*), this cannot eclipse the fact that the church ultimately exists not as a western, eastern, middle-class, working-class, or any other sort of human society, but exists as the household of God (Eph. 2:19), the society of Christ, the space within which God builds up his people as recipients and agents of his reconciliation and restoration (2 Cor. 5:18-19). It is the shape of the gospel which defines the church, as the church as institution serves to secure a space in which the grace of God is heard and received. To participate in the life of the household of God is to experience in the present a foretaste of our future fulfilment and completion, as we will corporately know and love, and be known and loved, by the Father in union with His Son by His Spirit.

### Why Church Membership?

Given all of this, it might seem strange that throughout the history of the church, formal membership processes have been the norm (since formal membership is not *explicitly* mentioned in the New Testament). Yet while a process of formal membership is not explicitly delineated, it seems to be implied in various ways in the New Testament, and more importantly, if the purpose of the church is to provide a visible space within the world wherein the life-giving, gracious word of Jesus Christ can be heard and responded to and humans can begin to corporately live in the household of Christ, then the shape of the church's life will need *something like* formal membership if it is to be faithful to this calling. *Something like* membership is assumed when the New Testament asserts a distinction between those who are *within* the church and those who are 'outside' (cf. 1 Cor. 5). This distinction between insiders and outsiders seems to be at least somewhat formalised, as a counting of those 'inside' the church occurs as they are brought *in* to the church by conversion (see the descriptions of various numbers of people 'added' to the church in the book of Acts). The means of delineating between those who are within the visible body of Christ and those who are 'outside' is baptism. *For by one Spirit are we all baptised into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit.* 1 Cor. 12:13 (cf. Acts 2:41) Thus the various ways in which the New Testament outlines the rights and privileges of the baptised, are simply what it means to be a 'member' of the church. This does not exclude those who are 'outside' the visible church, *i.e.* non-members, from participating and enjoying many (even *most*) of the benefits of the fellowship, community, and pastoral care experienced by a local congregation, rather, it implies that the mutual expectations obtaining between a church member and a church leader do not apply to those who are 'outside' the fellowship.

Church membership then, is not a means of determining who is 'saved' and who is 'not,' nor is it a tool for identifying the social 'inner-ring' or power-brokers of a congregation. Rather, membership specifies to which local body a baptised person is committed to,<sup>1</sup> with all the privileges and obligations this involves. This sort of 'membership-like commitment' to a local body is also implied in the way the New Testament speaks about church leadership and discipline:<sup>2</sup>

## 1. Leadership

The true shepherd of the sheep is not any earthly authority, but Jesus Christ (Heb. 13:20; 1 Peter 2:25; 1 Peter 5:4), yet without usurping his authority, church leaders are tasked by Christ with lovingly and sacrificially guiding and instructing those who are in their care in the ways that lead to eternal life, to fellowship with God, and to faithfulness to our calling to represent Him in the world. For church leaders, this is a calling to sacrificial service, which never takes the place or role of Christ himself. In response, those who are under the care of elders and pastors are not to blindly submit, but to respect and follow the loving instruction of their leaders insofar as their leadership is agreeable with the gospel and those leaders themselves are likewise

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<sup>1</sup> For those who question whether the distinction between the local and universal church is necessary at all, a survey of the various references to *the* or *a ἐκκλησία* across the New Testament, suggests that 'the church' is a flexible designation which refers at times to the universal church of all believers past and present, at others to the believers in an individual community meeting in a single location or house, at others to a broader associations of believers in a given region or locality, and more. Participation in the church universal seems to in usual circumstances involve participation in a local church, it is through participating in a local church that one is joined to the church universal.

<sup>2</sup> Further, given that a person, previously baptised into *one* local congregation, can then move to another congregation and be admitted to fellowship therein without being re-baptised (again, baptism is the normal way of 'entering into' a church) requires *something like* formal membership.

submissive to Christ and to other forms of Godly authority.<sup>3</sup> This relationship, in which elders are to ‘shepherd the flock of God that is among [them], exercising oversight’ (1 Peter 5:2) and in which the flock is to ‘be subject to the elders’ (1 Peter 5:5), implies a *particular* group of leaders and members in a local church engaging in this relationship. The call of the elders is not to shepherd and lead all Christians indiscriminately, but to care for the flock they are ‘among’. Likewise, the flock is not placed indiscriminately under the spiritual authority of *any* person claiming spiritual leadership, but of the elders tasked with shepherding their particular flock. As Hebrews suggests: *Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.* Hebrews 13:17.

## 2. Discipline

The vocation of the church to attest to the grace and goodness of God requires as a last resort, in lamentable situations approached with a heavy heart, the process of church discipline. Church discipline is not exercised for the protection of the institution or the leadership of the church, nor is its aim to harm the person placed under discipline. Discipline exists only for rare cases when those who claim to follow Christ but by their lives betray the goodness of his grace are excluded from Christian community as an act of love in the hope of their restoration. Discipline is never exercised in anger or with a desire for retribution, but always in order that the disciplined person’s ‘spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord’ (1 Cor. 5:3). Discipline aims to ensure that at least to some degree, the household of God *truly does* attest to the grace of God and not something else entirely (becoming a community of hypocrisy, judgment, or any human set of values or behaviours which undermine God’s grace). The exercise of church discipline requires a delineated group who comprise ‘the church.’ This is necessary, first, because as Paul argues, we apply discipline to those who are ‘among you’ or who are ‘inside the church’ rather than to the ‘pagans’ or the ‘outsiders’ (1 Cor. 5:1-12). While Paul insists that we are to ‘not associate’ with those who are *inside* the church and yet visibly and without repentance live in ways contrary to the values of the gospel, this prescription does not apply to those *outside* the church, who are not to be expected to live according to the standards of the gospel (1 Cor 5:10). Finally, the practice of church discipline also requires a delineated community to whom instances of church discipline can be brought for evaluation as the final court of appeal (Matthew 18:15-17).

In sum, while the details regarding how ‘membership’—or *something like* membership—should function are not explicitly prescribed in scripture, there is an assumption that the church will be a defined body of people with particular responsibilities. This is to ensure that the community maintains its vocation of attesting and visibly embodying God’s gracious intentions for humanity. We are highly consciousness of the ways that church leadership, discipline, and membership have been abused and distorted, hence our insistence that Christ *alone* is head of the church and that the rationale for the church’s existence is not the programme, intention, or vision of a church’s earthly leadership but the loving and gracious intention of God that human creatures might participate with Him in loving fellowship.<sup>4</sup> Church leadership and discipline are exercised solely for the good of the congregation, to direct them to God, and the ultimate rationale for something *like* church membership is to safeguard the integrity of the church’s witness to God’s grace. In the church, which is built on the foundation of Christ, redeemed men and women exercise the diversity of gifts granted by His Spirit, and are formed corporately into a place in which God’s life-giving intentions for

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<sup>3</sup> Ideally this includes local authority (*i.e.* other elders) and wider forms of authority (for our tradition this includes presbytery and general assembly). While again, such wider bodies are not prescribed in the New Testament in one particular form, there are patterns of wider authorities beyond local congregations in the book of Acts and in Paul’s epistles, *e.g.* the oversight of the apostles, the Jerusalem council, the reference to elders in a given ‘city’ and/or region not merely in a house church, *etc..*

<sup>4</sup> These convictions are embodied in our church’s confessional basis, the *Westminster Confession*, and in our denomination, the *United Free Church of Scotland*.

humanity are put on display (as a sort of temple, as Ephesians suggests). To be a Church member, is to be one committed to this corporate endeavour of embodying and attesting the loving intentions of God by the grace of God.

### Applying these principles to Church Membership at Cornerstone

Church membership, as outlined above, has an important but also *limited* function in the life of the church. The function of membership is not to distinguish between saved and unsaved, nor to mark out the social bounds of who receive the love, hospitality, and care of the church (we expect and hope that non-members, both Christian and non-Christian, will experience and enjoy most aspects of our church's life). For the Reformed tradition, a key text for understanding the nature of the church is Jesus's parables of the 'wheat and the tares,'<sup>5</sup> which warns us that it is not possible for *us* to determine who is saved and unsaved, this is something reserved for God. This means that the role of church discipline and membership is not to whittle out doctrinal or moral error. It is rather a limited, fallible attempt to preserve the visible witness of the church by marking out those who are baptised and committed to believing and practicing what is involved in being the church of God by corporately witnessing to God's grace. This means that in the Reformed tradition (unlike in some reformation-era Anabaptist traditions for example) there has been a relatively 'low-bar' for membership, not because of moral laxity or laziness, but because of an insistence that our judgments should not be mistaken for or identified with God's. A relatively 'low-bar' for membership is required because we are inadequate to determine who is in the kingdom, and therefore our judgments regarding discipline and membership should be hesitant and provisional, respecting that Christ alone is the church's king and judge. We will call one another to a 'high bar' of discipleship and service in the context of personal relationship, but the mechanisms of membership and discipline should not be overused as a replacement for this interpersonal process of discipleship. We will not seek to 'weed-out' those whose faith is unstable or in doubt, but will self-consciously allow our community to remain an imperfect and mixed body, which strives to live according to the implications flowing from God's gracious intentions for humanity. We expect—and hope—that our community, and even to a degree our membership, will include a diversity of people in different stages of their walk with God.

In light of these convictions. Cornerstone requires of members the following:

1. Cornerstone expects members to subscribe to and fully endorse the Apostles Creed.
2. We ask that members recognise that the doctrinal basis of Cornerstone is the substance of the faith as expressed in the Westminster Confession. We do *not* require subscription to the Westminster Confession on the part of members, but if a potential member were to object to the fact that the substance of the gospel as expressed in Westminster is the doctrinal basis of Cornerstone church, this would make commitment to the church impossible. While members need not subscribe to particular teachings of the confession, they must recognise its role in the life of the church as a whole.
3. We expect members of Cornerstone to strive to the best of their ability to be faithful to the moral teachings of scripture. There is no requirement for moral perfection, and one is 'disciplined' not for moral infractions, but only for the refusal to repent of one's sins and to take hold of the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Yet therefore, we will not admit to membership anyone in a state of unrepentant, public sin, because to do so would require placing such a person immediately under discipline, and would not accord with the role of membership, which is to identify the space within which the moral claims of the gospel are heard and in which we strive to embody them in our practice. The moral teachings we have in mind, are the mainstream moral teachings of the universal Christian church.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See for example Calvin's interpretation of the passage in: Calvin, Institutes, IV.i.19.

<sup>6</sup> For further details, see the reports commissioned by the United Free Church of Scotland on particularly pressing contemporary moral issues.

4. We ask for wholehearted affirmation of the membership vows of the United Free Church (which includes a commitment to serve and provide with ones time, talent, and finances for the work of the church).

Further, and again in light of the foregoing convictions, we hope and expect that most aspects of our church's life will be open to non-members. Anything not delineated below is open to non-members and to non-Christians, including participation in Home Groups, various types of service, pastoral care, discipleship, etc.<sup>7</sup> However, given that some aspects of our church's life are particularly central to the role of the church in proclaiming and embodying the grace of God revealed in Jesus, the following key roles will only be open to members. Only members may: serve as elders, participate in the election of elders, lead a Home Group, be the 'primary teacher' in children or youth work (non-members may be involved in various other ways in these ministries), teach and/or lead a Sunday service, lead prayer and/or read scripture at a Sunday gathering, and be the primary worship leader at a Sunday service (members of other churches may fulfil these roles from time to time).

In all this, our aim is humble submission to Christ's calling on the church and recognition of our dependence upon His ongoing work and guidance in and of the church: *Such confidence we have through Christ before God. Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.* 2 Corinthians 3:4-6

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<sup>7</sup> Even for those roles for which membership is not a requirement, the leadership of Cornerstone will exercise oversight and use discernment with regards to those who are asked to serve.