

## **WHY CHURCH MEMBERSHIP?** **Eden Worship Center**

Eden Worship Center has been around for over 20 years and has never had an official church membership, so why start now? Are we becoming legalistic? Why all the hoops? Why box the Holy Spirit into member/non-member categories? Why bother joining a local church when I'm already a member of the universal Church? Isn't my relationship with Jesus all that really matters? Such questions are common, and not altogether surprising given our individualistic culture and natural tendency toward independence. However, such questions also reveal a misunderstanding about the church and God's purposes in and through the church.

The very word "membership" sends chills up the spine of those who have endured an abusive, controlling, religious, and ultimately destructive version of it in a former church. For others, it conjures up images of stale, stiff, tradition-based church experiences completely devoid of any tangible evidence of life in the Holy Spirit. If you are in one of those two camps, rest assured, we are not interested in that kind of membership either.

So why is EWC introducing official membership after all these years?

### **IT IS BIBLICAL**

The primary New Testament metaphors for the church – body (1 Corinthians 12:27), temple (Ephesians 2:21), household (1 Timothy 3:15), and flock (Acts 20:28) – have as a key characteristic the idea of separate individuals joined together into a single entity. Paul's whole argument, in 1 Corinthians 5, is based upon the idea that there is a defined church which includes membership. He writes, "Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge?" (1 Corinthians 5:12). There is an inside and an outside. They are to "purge the evil person from among you" (1 Corinthians 5:13). He is to be cast outside the church. What is outside and what is inside if the membership itself is not defined? Paul does the same thing in 2 Corinthians 2:6, "For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough." How does one define a "majority" if there is no defined body?

We know from the list of widows mentioned in 1 Timothy 5:9, that lists of people were kept and tracked. If widows were listed, it is likely that a list of current members was kept and updated as well. And we see that the Lord Himself keeps a list of those within the Church in Philippians 4:3 and Revelation 21:27

## **IT IS A VISIBLE COMMITMENT TO CHRIST AND HIS PEOPLE**

Jesus said, in [Mark 8:38](#), “For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels.”

Membership is one way to raise a flag of faith. You state, before God and others, that you are part of this local body of believers. It is easy to talk in glowing terms about commitment to Christ and membership in the invisible church (the body of all believers near and far, living and dead), but it is in the local church that God expects you to live out your faith. Sadly, this often has less appeal to us because real fellowship with a community of people is hard work, because most people are a lot like us – selfish, petty, and proud. But that is the kind of group God calls us to.

All but a small handful of Paul’s letters, in the New Testament, were written to a local body of believers (and the few letters addressed to individuals were mostly written to pastors). We see the same thing in Revelation – Jesus spoke to individual congregations in places like Ephesus, Smyrna, and Laodicea. There are more accounts of talking animals in the Bible than there are of Christians floating around claiming: “I don’t have to commit to a specific church, it’s just me and Jesus.” Believers belong to churches.

## **IT MAKES A POWERFUL STATEMENT IN A LOW-COMMITMENT CULTURE**

There is a deeper level of commitment required for membership at Sam’s Club than there is at most churches. The church is often a sad reflection of its culture. And ours is a consumer culture, where everything is tailored to meet our needs and satisfy our preferences. When those needs aren’t met, we can always move on to the next product, store, job, or spouse.

In a culture like ours, joining a church makes a statement that is the polar opposite of that consumer mindset. It says: “I am committed to this group of people and they are committed to me. I am here to give, more than get.”

In every area of our lives, we are used to having more options than we know what to do with. The result (of our seemingly limitless choices) is that we have forgotten what it means to make a decision and stick with it. We prefer to keep our options open, just in case something better comes along. Unfortunately, we often approach the church with this same consumer mindset. We like “dating” the church (having her around for special events, taking her out when life feels lonely, and keeping her around for a rainy day), but we don’t want to be asked to take a leap of further commitment. Membership is one way to stop dating churches, and marry one.

## **IT KEEPS US ACCOUNTABLE TO EACH OTHER**

Hebrews 3:13 – “But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.”

Some people make the claim: “I am accountable only to God.” True, only God has ultimate authority over you. But the doctrine of sin cautions us not to make ourselves sole judges over our own hearts. Jeremiah 17:9 – “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?”

When we join a church we are offering ourselves to one another to be encouraged, rebuked, corrected, and served. We are placing ourselves under leaders, and submitting to their authority. We are saying, “I am here to stay. I want to help you grow in Godliness, and I want you to help me do the same.”

“Church membership is our opportunity to grasp hold of each other in responsibility and love. 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. We assure the church of our commitment to Christ in serving with them, and we call for their commitment to serve and encourage as well.” – Mark Dever

## **IT HELPS PASTORS AND ELDERS BE MORE FAITHFUL SHEPHERDS**

Hebrews 13:7 – “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

According to Hebrews 13, every believer must obey and submit to their leaders (but not treat them as infallible – 1 Timothy 5:19–20). This command assumes that you will have a covenant with specific spiritual leaders. The second part of this verse says that those spiritual leaders will have to answer to God for the way that they kept watch over your soul. This is a responsibility and a burden, before God, that the pastors and elders at EWC take very seriously. However, without clearly defined membership, it becomes difficult for pastors/elders to know who they will be responsible to give an account to God for.

The way Peter speaks to the pastors and elders, in 1 Peter 5, helps shed some light on this issue. 1 Peter 5:2–3 – “Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.” The phrases “that is among you” and “those in your charge” imply that the elders knew exactly who they were responsible for.

## **MEMBERSHIP MATTERS**

Ultimately, we (the pastors and elders) believe that a formal membership process will be helpful in fostering true discipleship among our people. We do not believe that official membership is an explicit Biblical command required for salvation. We do, however, believe that it is wise for us to take this step as a church at this time. It is our hope that membership will call us all to a deeper level of commitment and mutual accountability.

The sin of legalism (adding rules to the Gospel) is not something we take lightly. We are aware that many legalistic, and destructive, traditions began with good intentions. That being said, the sin of legalism doesn't just belong to churches who are organized, it is every bit as easy to fall into a legalism that proudly celebrates, "We are not like those legalistic churches...we do things THIS way." Same legalism, different clothes. Equally dangerous, though, is the sin of license (doing whatever you want with no accountability). This sin causes us to reject the Biblical mandates to walk in mutual accountability and submit ourselves to spiritual authority. Entire denominations have walked away from the clear teachings of Scripture because of this sin, while individuals usually express this sin by getting offended and church-hopping any time they are confronted with the sin in their lives.

We believe that Gospel-Centered, Covenant Membership will help us to avoid these two common sins. We ask for your prayers, that we will shepherd the flock well and lead it in a direction that glorifies God and produces good fruit in all of our lives.