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WELCOME

Dear Friend

Welcome to Get Connected – a time where we take a look at the inner workings of our church to help you decide if we are the church for you.

We are thrilled that you are thinking of joining Godfirst. There are many wonderful churches in Joburg that it always amazes me that people join ours! But, actually, that is the Kingdom of God in action, isn't it? All the churches are part of the same fishing fleet, all under the command of 'Admiral Jesus'! And, each fishing boat seems better suited to fish in a certain part of the 'lake'. This way, together, we can reach everyone with the gospel. Of course, each boat will have a slightly different way of doing things.

We hope that this short time together will help you understand the way that we are trying to do things on our 'boat'.

We would love you to join our church if you feel that is what God is saying. If you don't end up joining our family, then we hope you will soon join another church. But remember that you are very welcome to visit our church at any time.

Ask lots of questions! Enjoy!

PJ

CHAPTER 1

BEGINNINGS

Twenty modern-day urban missionaries arrive in Joburg...

After planting and leading churches for seven years in Harare, PJ and Ashleigh felt God speak to them about moving to Joburg to do the same again – build a reproducing church that would impact Joburg and beyond. They invited 20 friends from Zimbabwe, England and Cape Town to sell up and move to Joburg and find new jobs, as modern-day urban missionaries. Godfirst Church launched January 2005, and welcomed our first 60 people into membership in July 2005.

Looking back it was a great way to start a church, laying in the DNA of Godfirst being a community of modern-day urban missionaries. And as for the name...

Godfirst: By name and by nature...

We wanted a name that simultaneously provoked believers to an energetic devotion to God, whilst also providing an easy point of reference for non-believers, i.e. becoming a Christian is about putting God first in your life. It is also theologically accurate: the first commandment is that nothing else should come before God in our lives (Ex 20v3) and Jesus said 'seek God first' (Mt 6v33).

Does God come first in my life or does business hold the supreme place? Is it God first or pleasure? God first or money? What about my family, my loved ones? Do they come first or does God? What then are the terms of discipleship? Let me give the answer in just two words: God first. And if I could, I would put them on a banner in the sight of every congregation in the world - GOD FIRST.

(Oswald Smith: A Man God Uses)

Newfrontiers...

Godfirst is part of the Newfrontiers family of churches. Newfrontiers is a group of about 500 churches worldwide, led by Terry Virgo and his team, of which PJ Smyth is part. Our church enjoys all the privileges of encouragement and accountability that come to us via Newfrontiers. For more information see www.newfrontiers.org.uk.

CHAPTER 2

VISION

There is nothing quite like a compelling vision to touch the depths of our being, align us together, and motivate us to action. Here it is:

***To see God first in people's lives
through being a
gospel-centric, mission-driven, city-loving church
that
engages with culture and empowers the poor***

Let's break that down...

God first in people's lives

The first commandment is that nothing else should come before God in our lives (Ex 20v3) and Jesus said 'seek God first' (Mt 6v33). Our mission is to help unbelievers get God first in their lives, and help believers keep God increasingly first in every area of their lives.

Gospel-centric

A gospel-centric church is one that believes the simple message of the gospel is the motivation not only to become a Christ-follower, but also to live the life of a Christ-follower. Although the gospel starts with an event (hearing the gospel for the first time) it is also a process (Col 1v6). For example, Paul used the gospel to motivate believers to generosity with their money (2 Cor 8) and husbands to love their wives (Eph 5). Thus, the gospel is as relevant and motivating for the believer as it is for the unbeliever. Man is prone to pursue a relationship with God in one of two ways: religion or gospel – the antithesis of each other. Take a look:

- Religion says that if we obey God He will love us. The gospel says that it is because God has loved us through Jesus that we can obey.
- Religion says that there are good people and bad people. The gospel says that the world is filled with bad people who are either repentant or unrepentant.
- Religion says that you should trust in what you do as a good moral person. The gospel says that you should trust in the perfectly sinless life of Jesus because He alone is the only good and truly moral person who will ever live.
- The goal of religion is to get from God such things as health, wealth, insight, power, and control. The goal of the gospel is not the gifts God gives, but rather God as the gift given to us by grace.
- Religion is about what I have to do. The gospel is about what I get to do.
- Religion is about me. The gospel is about Jesus.
- Religion leads to an uncertainty about my standing before God because I never know if I have done enough to please God. The gospel leads to a certainty

about my standing before God because of the finished work of Jesus on my behalf on the cross.

- Religion ends in either pride (because I think I am better than other people) or despair (because I continually fall short of God's commands). The gospel ends in humble and confident joy because of the power of Jesus at work for me, in me, through me, and sometimes in spite of me.

Mission-driven

The Great Commission from Jesus was actually not to plant churches, nor build healthy churches, but rather to go into the world and make converts and disciples (Mt 28v18-20). But as the early apostles did this, the inevitable result was the establishment of local churches. But here's the thing: the mission shaped local church life, not the other way around. Tragically, as the centuries rolled by, the roles have been reversed and the priority has become 'doing church' rather than 'doing mission'. The result is churches that are pastoral-driven (prioritizing caring for each other and creating a beautiful church culture) rather than mission-driven (prioritizing reaching the unchurched). We are committed to allowing missiology to shape our ecclesiology, and not the other way around! This affects the whole tone of church life – the language we use, the things that we emphasise, the way that we 'advertize' sermon series, and our willingness to expand and plant more churches.

City-loving

This is what the LORD Almighty says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: "Build houses, settle down, marry, have sons and daughters, increase in number there, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper" (Jeremiah 29v4). We believe that God has brought us to Joburg to settle down, engage, and work for the health and prosperity of the city. We thank God for the pace, passion, wealth and entrepreneurial spirit of the city, and for its influence across the nation and Africa....and we are working to harness these characteristics for the advance of God's kingdom.

Engaging with culture

Culture refers to the way that people think and live. The two extremes to avoid are: the 'Mirror' Church that engages so thoroughly with culture that it compromises in the name of being relevant and simply reflects society back to itself, and the 'Bomb Shelter' church that fails to engage with culture at all, content to create an isolated community, relieved that all those wicked people out there can't get in. Paul in Athens (Acts 17) is a superb model where he examines their culture to gain understanding of how they think, then he uses their culture to point to Christ. This is the Godfirst approach – relevant without compromise.

Empowering the poor

We believe that right at the heart of the gospel is “remembering the poor” (Gal 2v10) and we embrace the warnings and promises of Isaiah 58. To this end, we (a) give money and means directly to the needy and also to other churches that are effective in empowering the poor, and (b) we have our own **Philile** – three pre-schools that we have started and that we run in underprivileged areas of Joburg.

CHAPTER 3

VALUES

Quality not just quantity

The following represents what we feel are the most ***prominent biblical values*** that a church should have. It is not an exhaustive list, but rather a list of possibly our most ***distinctive values***:

1. A People of the Word and the Spirit
2. A People of Grace
3. A People of Diversity
4. A People of the Kingdom and the Church
5. A People committed to Serving
6. Given to Evangelism
7. Given to the Next Generation
8. Given to Hospitality, Friend-Making and Strong Community

1. A PEOPLE OF THE WORD AND THE SPIRIT

The Word: The centrality of the bible is undisputed. The early church ‘devoted themselves to the apostles teaching’ (Acts 2v42). Paul instructed his churches saying, ‘Devote yourself to the public reading of scripture, to preaching and teaching’ (1 Tim 4v13). So fundamental was the spread of the Word in the New Testament church, that Luke described the growth of the church in these terms: ‘The word of God kept on spreading’ (Acts 6v6). So, along with worship, the preaching of God’s Word is the primary ingredient in our Sunday meetings, and we set aside at least half an hour for preaching from the Bible.

The Spirit: The early church was born through a powerful experience of the Spirit (Acts 2), and was a community that pulsed with the life of the Holy Spirit. The book of Acts records repeated instances of people being filled with, and operating in the power of the Holy Spirit, and Paul even defines the church as people *being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit* (Eph 2v22). To this end, we try to allow the Holy Spirit to lead our meetings, we eagerly desire the spiritual gifts, and we have regular opportunities for being filled with the Holy Spirit. **Application:** If you are not yet filled with the Holy Spirit, please sign up for the next Holy Spirit Morning that happens every month or so on a Saturday morning.

***Just Word** and you dry up. **Just Spirit** and you blow up.
Word and Spirit you grow up.*

2. A PEOPLE OF GRACE

Newcomers often remark on the atmosphere of friendliness and loving acceptance. This flows directly from our theology of grace. Here's how it works:

God's Grace to Us: Salvation is by grace. This means that salvation is a free gift from God to us that we cannot earn by works. God's love for us is complete, unchanging and unconditional. We are accepted just as we are, whether we do well or badly, sin or stay pure, we are completely accepted because the righteousness of Jesus has been given to us as a gift.

Grace towards each other: Jesus said that we should love each other as he has loved us (Jn 13v34). This means that we also accept one another unconditionally, not on the basis of performance, but on the basis of grace. Grace makes for a secure, free and joyful church of people who don't need to strive to impress God or each other....because we are 100% accepted already!

3. A PEOPLE OF DIVERSITY

We are deeply committed to building a *diverse* church that includes many different cultures, languages and age groups, which is expressed in leadership, worship and in every area of our life together. This is not an attempt at being politically correct or a 'rainbow nation' – rather it stems from our theological conviction that diversity glorifies God more than uniformity.

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3v28) and “With your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev 5v9).

Did you see it? Who could make us all one – only Jesus! Who has the ability to be relevant to all nations – only Jesus! God is more glorified by diversity than by uniformity because it reveals His Lordship over ALL things!

4. A PEOPLE OF THE KINGDOM AND THE CHURCH

The Kingdom of God refers to God's desire to reign in all areas of society, not just within the 'four walls' of the church. Within the kingdom, all callings are sacred and we are all in 'full-time' Christian work, being salt, light and yeast in the workplace. Jesus taught that the Church holds the keys of the Kingdom (Mt 16) to open the way for the influence of God into homes, schools, business and government. To this end, we are committed to empowering believers to influence society with the values of the Kingdom.

5. FAITHFUL IN SERVING

This is a very high value in Godfirst, and has a direct impact on every member. Serving is a fundamental characteristic of the Christian life, and we take our lead from Jesus himself who did not come to be served, but rather to serve (Mt 20v28). We don't just serve in order to get the job done, but rather to imitate Christ, to serve others, and to develop godly maturity. The first words out of Paul's mouth as he became a Christian were, '*Lord, what wilt thou have me do?*' (Acts 9v6 KJV) not '*Lord, how wilt thou bless me?*' This is the difference between consumers and contributors. At Godfirst we are all contributors understanding that '*we are joined and knit together by what every joint supplies...as each part does its share* (Eph 4v16 NKJ).

6. GIVEN TO EVANGELISM

According to Jesus' commission in Matthew 28, the Church is supposed to be an outward looking full-on mission agency. He told us to *go and make disciples...*and to emphasise the point two-thirds of God's name is Go! At Godfirst we are seriously focused on helping people become Christ followers. To keep evangelism high on our agenda we give ourselves to:

- A steady drip of **training to equip and stir** to friendship evangelism.
- Guarding against becoming **so busy with church meetings** that we do not have time to spend with our unsaved friends.
- Ensuring that all we do as a church is **inclusive of outsiders**.
- Continuously running a variety of events to **give outsiders a positive first-touch** with our church, such as Quiz Nights; Dinners; Carols.
- Running events and courses that give people a chance to hear and **respond to the gospel**.

7. GIVEN TO THE NEXT GENERATION

The race that we are running is not an individual time trial; rather it is a relay race where success includes getting those behind us to the tape as well as ourselves. As Joshua found out, this does not happen automatically: *Joshua died...after that another generation grew up who did not know the Lord* (Jud 2v8f).

Whilst of course honouring the unique role of the nuclear family, we also feel a **corporate responsibility** for raising *all the children* in the church. To this end we try to have **top-notch kids & youth departments**, have our kids in with us for some **worship on Sundays**, be especially alert and helpful to **single parent families**, and generally place a high value on **marriage and parenting**.

8. GIVEN TO HOSPITALITY, FRIENDLINESS AND STRONG COMMUNITY

We value this value so highly that it is actually one of our four expressions of togetherness...see Chapter 8.

CHAPTER 4

DOCTRINE

We are a reformed, charismatic and missional church with the following core beliefs. Core beliefs refer to non-negotiable absolutes of scripture such as 'Christ will return' or 'you must be filled with the Holy Spirit'. There is of course room for respected interpretations of scripture such as 'exactly when and how Christ will return' and 'exactly when and how you get filled with the Holy Spirit'.

1. Bible: We believe that the Scriptures of the Old Testament and New Testament in their original writing are fully inspired by God and accept them as the supreme and final authority for faith and life.

2. Trinity and Sovereignty: We believe in the sovereignty of one God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God upholds and rules over all things. He governs and reigns supreme over the entirety of creation including over mankind, accomplishing through nature and man his eternal purposes. Yet, at no time is God's integrity violated, and at no time does he violate our integrity, responsibility or our freedom to choose (Is 46v9-10; Eph 1v11; Eccl 7v13; 1 Tim 6v15; Ps 115v3; Dan 4v35).

3. Sin: We believe that human beings, though created in the image of God, are sinful, guilty, and lost without Christ.

4. Deity and work of Christ: We believe that Jesus Christ, as begotten by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary, is fully God and fully man. We believe that on the cross Jesus Christ became sin for us, was judged by God and died in our place. We believe in the bodily resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, His ascension into Heaven, and His present ministry as our High Priest and advocate with the Father.

5. Conversion: We believe that all who are justified by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ are born again of the Holy Spirit and thereby become children of God. We believe other religions and ideologies are not alternative paths to God, and that human spirituality, if unredeemed by Christ, does not lead to God but to judgement and damnation.

6. Eternal Security and Assurance of Believers: We believe that all the redeemed, once saved, are kept by God's power and are thus secure in Christ forever (John 6v37–40; 10v27–30; Romans 8v1, 38, 39; 1 Corinthians 1v4–8; 1 Peter 1v5). We believe that it is the privilege of believers to rejoice in the assurance of their salvation through the testimony of God's Word, which clearly forbids the use of Christian liberty as an occasion for the flesh (Romans 13v13, 14; Galatians 5v13; Titus 2v11–15).

7. Holy Spirit: We believe in the ministry and gifts of the Spirit. We believe in the importance of each believer being filled with the Holy Spirit by which believers are empowered and equipped for service. We believe that baptism of the Spirit is usually a post-conversion event as it was for Jesus (Lk 3 and 4), the disciples (Acts 2v11-4), the Samaritan believers (Acts 8v14-17), Paul (Acts 9), and the Ephesian believers (Acts 19v1-7). **Application:** If you are not yet filled with the Holy Spirit, please sign up for the next Holy Spirit Morning that happens every month or so on a Saturday morning.

8. Heaven and Hell: We believe in the resurrection of the just and the unjust, the eternal blessedness of the redeemed, and the eternal damnation of those who have rejected God's offer of salvation.

9. Second Coming: We believe in the personal and visible return of the Lord Jesus Christ in power and glory to judge the living and the dead.

10. Church: We believe that the local church should be the expression of the one true and universal Church and therefore that the new birth and personal confession of faith in Christ are essentials of Church membership. We desire to fellowship and work with other ministries and congregations of like profession of faith for the spreading of the gospel.

11. Communion: We believe that the Lord's Supper is the partaking of the emblems, which symbolise the broken body and shed blood of Christ, in remembrance of His sacrificial death until He comes. We take it twice per month – once on Sundays and once in Life Groups.

12. Water Baptism: The scriptures teach that baptism should follow repentance, as the external sign of our internal salvation. This is what we call believer's baptism, as opposed to infant baptism. **Application:** In accordance with the command and example of Christ, water baptism is a requirement of church membership at Godfirst for those believers who have not already been baptised. Please refer to the appendix at the end of this booklet for further information on water baptism, and sign up for the next baptism class that happens every month or so.

CHAPTER 5

MULTI-SITE STRUCTURE

Godfirst is a multi-site church. This means that we are one-church-with-multiple congregations (battalions), or one-church-fighting-on-multiple-frontiers. The bible gives considerable latitude to what model you go for, but we are intrigued by the 'city' feel of the epistles in that they were usually written to the elders and believers in, for example, 'Ephesus'. And multi-site around the city helps us feel that we are mission to the city. Also, we love the **one-but-many** models in scripture, such as the different groups that built Nehemiah's city wall, the tribes that made up Israel, and don't forget God himself...three yet one!

What are the benefits of multi-site over standard church plants?

1. **Geographical accessibility for the unchurched:** it is easier for the unchurched to attend a church near-by than far away.
2. **Local impact:** it is great for a believer to be involved in a *local* church in his *local* community.
3. **Synergy of gifting:** often a normal church or church plant expects the leader to be a super-hero who must pastor, administrate and preach all at a super-high level, which is unrealistic for most leaders. But multi-site allows the various congregations to 'share' the giftings of a large group allowing, for example, pastors-to-pastor and preachers-to-preach.
4. **Economies of scale:** the sharing of finance and assets amongst the congregations is economical and efficient. For example, one website, bookkeeper and office serves all seven congregations.
5. **Stimulation and security:** each congregation enjoys the security and stimulation of being part of something bigger around the city.

Why does video preaching work?

- A. Because even 'non-anointed' TV/movies work:** movies impact us hugely keeping us riveted for hours, producing laughter and tears...even when we know it is make-believe! How much more will be the impact of a preacher on a screen: someone who is real and not acting, who knows us and loves us.
- B. Because the Word of God is supernatural:** the Word of God is living and active (Heb 4) and is not limited by time or space. Although we may be used to a live preacher, the biblical imperative is not a 'live' preacher, but rather the 'live' (living) Word of God.
- C. Because the Bible is also a form of media communication:** The bible is a book that we read, but we never say, *'I can't receive God's word to me through a book! I mean, I need the writers of this book to be here to tell me what it says in person!'* No. The median of the book 'works' for us today like it

did back then. Take a look at what Paul says: *Col 4v16: After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Loadiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea.* Paul was not present, not visible, and the letter had been written months beforehand, yet it was the living word of God to those churches and even to us today! Paul used letters to communicate God's word to the churches as they were the best tool available. It is not hard to image Paul using DVD's, video-conferencing and satellite feeds to spread the gospel if he were alive today.

CHAPTER 6

LEADERSHIP

Leading and following are two vital components of a healthy church and the advance of God's Kingdom. Remember, *when leaders lead and the people follow – praise the Lord! (Judges 5v2)*

The Atmosphere

Leading: In keeping with the leadership layout of Jesus and Paul, we try to lead *gently, humbly, down-to-earth and approachably, with servant hearts, through example, with God's authority but respecting individual conscience, and through team (based on Heb 13v7-24).*

Following: We encourage followers to follow by *emulating our example, honouring the reality that we must give account to God, obeying us, helping us enjoy life and leadership, and by praying for us (based on Heb 13v7-24).*

The Layout

- **Jesus** is the head of the Church (Eph 1v18-23)
- **Apostles and prophets** (mostly via Newfrontiers) continuously help lay in solid foundations and help us stay on course (Eph 4, Acts 11-14).
- **Elders/overseers/pastors:** scripture presents a team of elders who oversee the church by guarding, guiding and governing the local congregation (see Acts 14v23, Acts 20v28, 1 Tim 5v17, 1 Tim 3, Titus 1 & 2, 1 Pet 5).
- **Deacons:** these are men and women who work closely with the elders by serving as senior leaders (see Acts 6, 1 Tim 3).
- **Pastoral Team:** this is a team of men and women who assist the elders in pastoring the flock, and they do this mostly through our Life Groups.

How does this work for our multi-site structure?

Each Godfirst congregation has its own elders, deacons and pastoral team. The eldership team governs the local congregation under the authority of a Central Eldership Team that oversees Godfirst as a whole. We have a leadership model that is more about heart than structure. The things that we draw on to hold us together are (1) deep relational equity (2) honouring each other's gifts (3) shared vision (4) a conviction that we can do more together than apart.

CHAPTER 7

FIVE REASONS FOR MEMBERSHIP

Individuals who have never experienced the joy and delight of belonging to a loving and vital Christian body have missed one of the thrills of the Christian life. Mere 'church-going' was never in God's plan for you. He wants you very closely knit with a group of dear friends with whom you can share your life. (Terry Virgo)

Five reasons why we believe in membership

1. **The New Testament's structure:** The epistles are written to local churches on the assumption that all believers would be members of local churches.
2. **It is stated in the Bible:** *Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about 3000 thousand were added to their number...and the Lord added to their number daily (Acts 2v41&47).*
3. **It is implied in the Bible:** The descriptions of life amongst the early believers implies an up-close-and-personal local church community (e.g. Acts 2-4). Furthermore, a consistent biblical metaphor for the church is that of a body – an intimate, functioning body, not just a worldwide 'cyber' body.
4. **New Testament language of leadership and followership:** The Bible cautions church leaders that they will be held to account for how they lead (1 Cor 3; Heb 13), and equally followers are instructed to obey their leaders. This obviously presupposes a situation where you know who is leading and following who!
5. **New Testament discipline:** Paul instructed his churches that in cases of ongoing unrepentance, they should finally resort to putting people out of the church. It is indeed staggering that some believers voluntarily choose to live in this state!

CHAPTER 8

FOUR PRIMARY EXPRESSIONS OF MEMBERSHIP

There are many ways that each individual may get involved, but here are four main things that we all commit to doing together:

1. Together through Hospitality, Friendliness & Strong Community

It's vital: The primary biblical metaphor for the church is a family, and we are passionate about protecting the family atmosphere of our church. The main gift that ensures this is that of hospitality - words, actions and attitudes of love and acceptance towards others.

It's a challenge: building relationally is a challenge with (a) the fast pace of city life, (b) an increasingly individualistic culture, and (c) the bombardment of apparently 'successful' models of church that hinge on meetings and events rather than on a healthy grass-roots community of genuine love.

It's everywhere in scripture: *Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling (1 Pet 4v8). No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she...has been hospitable (1 Tim 5v9). Be given to hospitality (Rom 12v9-12). Gaius, whose hospitality I and the whole church here enjoy, sends you his greetings (Rom 16v23). The church plant in Philippi began primarily because of Lydia's gift of hospitality (Acts 16v14). And a non-negotiable characteristic of an elder is to be hospitable (1 Tim 3v1 & Titus 1v6). The early church in Jerusalem, although large, had a wonderful sense of community and they were in and out of each other's homes (Acts 2v43f).*

Here is the genius of it: Clearly, scripture regards hospitality as an essential for all believers, especially leaders, and entire local church communities. It is a bulletproof way of developing and protecting the essence of the church, namely that of a loving family. Also, it is a bulletproof way of keeping leaders humble, down-to-earth and engaged with those that they lead. And, so long as it is deliberately inclusive of outsiders and newcomers then it is a key to keeping the church evangelistic.

The How-Too's: Some may prefer a more structured approach, others a more spontaneous approach. But start with this: regard the **Sunday venue as your living room at home**: be there early and late; meet and greet and engage; keep an eye out for those not 'connected', and, here comes the killer one...**invite people home to lunch on Sunday**, or sometime soon!

Application: We all take responsibility and initiative for friendliness and friend making.

2. Together through Sunday Meetings

In today's individualistic and independent culture where many things compete for our time and energies, it is important to reaffirm the importance of meeting together as a church on Sundays. We do this:

- **To imitate Christ and the early church:** *On the Sabbath day Jesus went into the synagogue, as was his custom (Lk 4v16). They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship (Acts 2v42).*
- **As a forum for believers to grow:** corporate worship and preaching of God's Word is a powerful cocktail to grow.
- **As a forum for unbelievers to be won to Christ:** the Sunday dynamic of acceptance, normality, diversity, work of the Holy Spirit and penetrative gospel-centred preaching is a powerful assist to the God-seeker.
- **As a forum to serve:** Service is a mark of Christ-likeness (Mk 10v45) and a great way to express our togetherness, so all members are part of a Sunday Serving Team of some sort that serves about once per month.

Application: Each member is committed to attending on Sundays, and joining a Sunday Serving Team that serves once per month.

3. Together through Life Groups

Research suggests that the average church member can know no more than 50 people, so once a church is bigger than 50 people, then of course it is not possible (or essential) to know everyone. We do not have to know everyone in the church to feel a sense of belonging, but we do need to know some people really well, and this can happen through being part of a Life Group - groups of 8-20 people that meet weekly and 'do life' together. Life Groups are simultaneously:

- **The Fishing Net:** Life Groups are missional communities, always dreaming and scheming how to draw our unbelieving friends in a God-ward direction.
- **The Care Net:** Life Groups are pastoral communities where the bulk of friendship, caring and support is expressed.

Application: Each member is part of a Life Group.

4. Together through Financial Giving

A major hallmark of the togetherness of God's people in the Old and New Testament is giving. The entire Bible is full of references to radical and consistent giving by believers to the temple in the Old Testament and the local church in the New Testament. The pooling of money is an undeniable and important part of church membership, and experience shows that trying to be a member without being financially committed doesn't ever seem to work, with the member's heart not really being with the church. This is no surprise as Jesus said that our hearts would be where our treasure is (Mt 6v21).

In this City of Gold where the power of money is very strong, and sadly some churches have the reputation of being money-grabbing corporations, the challenge is of course how to be radical givers without it feeling either legalistic or 'all about the money'. The trick is to get the following three things: **Get the doctrine right. Get the heart right. Get the expectations right.**

4.1 Get the doctrine right

A. Biblical giving is about two things: Grace and Excellence

- *But just as you excel in everything – in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness, and your love for us – see also that you excel in this grace of giving (2 Cor 8v7).*
- A correct understanding of grace produces excellent giving. Take a look:

B. We are now under grace not law:

- In the days before Christ came, God's people related to God essentially by obeying laws to show their love and devotion to him. This included obeying laws related to giving such as tithes (giving 10% of gross income to the temple) and offerings (ad hoc gifts over and above the tithe).
- But once Christ came, the law fell away and the New Testament thunders out that we now relate to God through his grace, not our works – we no longer have to obey laws to please him because we have already been made 100% righteous by Jesus' death (Eph 2v8-10).

C. And grace raises the bar, not lowers it: Grace, when understood, is way more powerful and effective in our lives than the law was. Take a look:

- *Mt 5v21-28: Jesus said that under the law doing murder was murder, but now under grace just thinking murderous thoughts is murder.*
- *1 Cor 15v10: His grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them, yet not I but the grace of God that was in me.*
- *Titus 2v11-14: Grace teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age ...eager to do what is good.*
- So we see that giving less than 10% per month would be a declaration that the law is more powerful than grace – how tragic that would be!

4.2. Get the heart right

Jesus pointed out that giving is ultimately an issue of worship, saying that you cannot serve both God and Mammon (Mt 6v24). The heart that loves money will ask *'what is the minimum I have to give? Is the tithe on net or gross? If I give to an orphanage can that come out of the tithe?'* But the heart that loves and serves God will ask *'what is the maximum I can get away with giving? Any excuse to give more is great! I am so grateful for the provocation to tithe and give more because I know that giving money is a privilege and keeps my heart serving God and not money!'*

Our hearts can be pretty sneaky so let's be tough on ourselves and not dodge the issue: whilst we are paranoid that this should not feel legalistic, we are equally paranoid that we should not try to justify our own short-comings of lack of discipline or stinginess in the name of avoiding legalism! For example, we never blame our bosses for consistently paying us a regular salary on a regular basis. On the contrary, we commend them for their discipline and commitment. John Piper says that *'another name for serious intention is planning... failure to plan ...results not in spontaneity, but the same old rut'*. The principle and discipline of the tithe helps us consistently excel in this grace of giving (2 Cor 8v7).

4.3. Get expectations right

In view of all this, the Godfirst expectation is that we would like all members to be comfortable and consistent in the principle of the tithe - giving at least 10% of gross income to Godfirst. Some of us will take a bit of time to work up to that, and others will give considerably more. Some of us also give to other situations once we have tithed to Godfirst.

In terms of Sundays, we do not want to talk about money all the time or do mini-preaches on giving each week as this is inhospitable to visitors and gives the wrong impression. So here's the deal: we agree up front what the expectation is and then we all keep to it and thus we excel in giving in an atmosphere of grace.

We encourage church members to give via electronic transfer where possible, as this is safer and easier. We also take up an offering each Sunday and there are regular Gift Days for specific needs. As a church, we give away 20% per cent of our income, which goes to apostolic advance (church planting & strengthening) and remembering the poor. We have an outstanding Finance Team that assists the Elders in stewarding the finance, and we are audited annually. We do periodic updates to the church on our finances.

Application: Each member is comfortable and consistent in giving at least a tithe on a monthly basis. Because money is a sensitive area, and because we are opposed to any hint of legalism, we want everyone to do this joyfully and out of a clear conscience. To this end, if you are not comfortable with this arrangement, then please let's chat about it.

CHAPTER 9

HOW CAN I BECOME A MEMBER?

Please come with us!

“Now Moses said to Hobab, ‘We are setting out for the place about which the Lord said he will give to us. Come with us and we will treat you well, for the Lord has promised good things to Israel. Hobab answered, ‘No, I will not go; I am going back to my own land and my own people.’ But Moses said, ‘Please do not leave us. You know where we should camp in the desert, and you can be our eyes. If you come with us we will share with you whatever good things the Lord gives to us.’” (Numbers 10v29-33)

Like Moses, we are quietly confident in our calling, therefore bold in asking you to join us and are serious about treating you well.

Like Hobab, you might be a little resistant to change and longing for a comfort-zone rather than a new thing.

If so, like Moses, we are not giving up on you so easily! Please join us. We are 100% secure in God and in our calling, but we are also 100% convinced that we need you... you may need us too. We can do more together than apart!

By joining us, you are basically signing up to help others put God first in their lives and giving the rest of us permission to provoke you to Godfirstness in your life!

How can I join?

At the end of Get Connected, please fill out and hand in the Members Info Form, and an elder will be in touch with you to meet up over a coffee to get to know you, chat about anything you might want to clarify, and help integrate into the life of the church. If you do not hand your form in, please understand that the ‘ball is in your court’ and we will not be chasing you.

N.B. If you are considering moving from your current church to us, then please be sure to read Appendix A.

APPENDIX A

WHAT IF I AM MOVING CHURCH?

Most people joining Godfirst don't have a church, either because we are the first church they have ever been part of, or they have been out of church for ages, or because they have relocated to (or across) Joburg and are looking for a church in their area. But occasionally people feel that their season is up at their current church and they want to join us. There are several viable reasons for changing church (either from another church to us, or from us to another church):

1. Doctrinal reasons

As individuals and churches develop, theology sometimes adjusts. For example, churches can either veer into more or less of the Holy Spirit, or more or less into grace or legalism, and more or less into belief in the sovereignty of God. If you are not able to line up your conscience with the core doctrines of your church, then you need to change churches to be in one where you are theologically comfortable. N.B. We are talking here about differences in major core beliefs, not peripheral interpretations or personal preferences (there will always be those!).

2. Leadership / vision reasons

You need to follow the leaders and vision of your church with faith and a clear conscience (2 Cor 4v2, 2 Cor 5v11, 1 Cor 16v12, 1 Tim 1v18). Again, we are talking about the bigger picture rather than smaller issues and rubs and niggles (there will always be those!). If you finally get to a place where you can't follow with joy, faith and a clear conscience then you need to respectfully relocate to a church where you can follow the leaders and vision with a clear conscience.

3. Fresh challenge reasons

If you are sure that by moving to Godfirst you will be significantly more provoked to (a) being a modern-day urban missionary, and (b) being a more radical and holy Christ-follower, then those are probably good reasons to move. Life is too short and hell is too hot to waste our lives in mediocrity.

4. Your heart, unity amongst churches, and other vital things

But only you know your heart, and if you are actually running away from your church because of rebellious or divisive attitudes, then you need to stay put and work through those issues. If you are leaving, it is important to leave as well as you possibly can with respectful and clear communication with your current leaders, and honesty about the reasons for your move with your new leaders at Godfirst.

APPENDIX B

CAN I BE PART OF TWO CHURCHES?

Common sense says no. You will have a split vision and all the tensions of trying to chase two rabbits at the same time. **Possible exceptions** might include students or others who are temporarily living away from their hometown.

Question: My church doesn't have Life Groups. Can I be in one of your Life Groups but go to my church on Sunday?

This would not work for long as you would feel torn and uncomfortable.

Question: What if I join the church but after a few weeks realise that I have made a mistake?

No problem. We will willingly release you from membership.

APPENDIX C

COMMON QUESTIONS ABOUT TITHING

Should I tithe 'gross' or 'net'? I suggest you tithe the net profit of your business, and the gross of your salary. This is because the *gross* is your actual income before tax. Someone once said, 'Gross tithe leads to gross blessing. Also, the issue is not how much we can get away with keeping, but how much we can get away with giving!

Should I tithe when my tithe is so small? Yes. Small as it is, it is precious to God.

Is the storehouse always the local church? I think so, yes. Bible scholars agree that New Testament local church ministry succeeded that of the Levitical priesthood.

What if I feel my tithe is too big for my local church? Our church has a world vision. I can't imagine an amount too big for that!

Should I pay my debts first, and then start to tithe? I suggest that you start to tithe right away as an act of faith. Honour God and he will honour you. He will make your 90% go further than you could make your 100% go. But also pay unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar (Mt 22v21). Then stay out of debt (Rms 13v8; Pr 22v7).

Should I pay my tithe weekly or monthly? I suggest you present your tithe in keeping with the frequency of your pay cheque.

Should kids tithe? I suggest that you teach them young! **Should students receiving 'grant' money tithe it?** I suggest that you just tithe on pocket money and any other income, but not on student loans or fees.

Should I tithe on increase through interest, appreciation etc? I would - any excuse to give! Should I tithe on my pension? Although pensions are partly formed from money that you should have already tithed on over the years, they are greatly subsidized by other 'increase'. I would say 'Go for it!' Remember, It's all about faith and cheerful giving!

If I am behind in my tithes, should I try and catch up? If you can do a lump 'catch up' amount like Zacchaeus (Lk 19) then do so. If not, just start afresh totally free of condemnation.

APPENDIX D

MORE ABOUT HOSPITALITY

Definition of hospitality

Hospitality is words, actions and attitudes of love and acceptance towards others. The result is that people feel loved, accepted and ... at home. In its purest form it doubtless involves opening our homes, but it must not be limited to that. We need to be hospitable at our Sunday meetings, at Life Group, and frankly, wherever we find ourselves.

Why this is an important issue for us?

Past success: By God's grace, it seems from the testimony of new members that our value of hospitality / community has been a key part of our development over the last two years.

Future fears: Some amongst us are understandably wondering if we will be able to maintain our value of family / community as we grow.

Other churches now looking to us: now that we are beginning to plant churches and assist existing churches, we have an apostolic obligation to build well.

It is a battle: in modern day big cities, a culture of hospitality and community is always going to be a battle because:

- An unchecked lifestyle can easily become too fast, busy and pressured to accommodate sustained and meaningful hospitality.
- We have all been somewhat tarnished by the influence of individualism in Western culture, a possible over-emphasis on nuclear family.
- We are bombarded by apparently 'successful' models of church that hinge on meetings, events and the exceptional gifting of one or two people, rather than on a healthy grass-roots community of genuine family love.
- And, dare we say it, we are all prone to selfishness...just a tinsy bit!

Let's look now at our theology, philosophy and practical expression of hospitality:

1. THEOLOGICALLY SPEAKING

Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling (1 Pet 4v8)

- Above all...this is a big one.
- Love is at the root of hospitality. Ouch.
- No grumbling: because there is a cost to it in terms of time, energy and money.

No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over sixty, has been faithful to her husband, and is well known for her good deeds, such as bringing up children, showing hospitality... washing the feet of the saints, helping those in trouble and devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds (1 Tim 5v9)

- It seems that hospitality was regarded as Christian characteristic 101: if she is not doing this, then she is so far from any measure of Christ-following that you must, sadly, not help her.

Love must be sincere....Be devoted to one another in brotherly love....Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord...Share with God's people who are in need. Be given to hospitality (Rom 12v9-12).

- Hospitality is about sincerity, love, honouring people, service to God, sharing, and we should be given to it.

Gaius, whose hospitality I and the whole church here enjoy, sends you his greetings (Rom 16v23)

- Paul singles out Gaius for this gift – I reckon that he was more than just an open-home kind of chap...he was probably relational glue in the church who knew people's names, loved them and made them feel at home.

The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us.....After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia's house, where they met with the brothers and encouraged them (Acts 16v14).

- Lydia's hospitality was the catalyst in the Philippi church plant. Colin Baron believes that hospitality is the most important gift in a church plant.

Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach... (1 Tim 3v1).

An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. Since an overseer is entrusted with God's work, he must be blameless--not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. Rather he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good...(Titus 1v6)

- Out of the few characteristics specified in scripture for eldership, hospitality makes the cut...in both of the key lists! Surely Paul's concern is to **protect the family nature of the church**, and if the leaders of leaders consistently and willingly practice hospitality, then it will permeate through the whole family. What is in the head is in the body.
- **Also, you can't fake it in the home.** It is pretty hard to be on a pedestal when your kids are throwing food or having a tantrum! When leaders are given to hospitality it protects a transparent, down-to-earth, and servant-hearted style of leadership that we believe was the way of Jesus and Paul.
- Alexander Strauch writes: *Hospitality practically displays the Christian family's generosity, closeness and love. Therefore scripture requires that church elders, as examples and leaders, practice hospitality.... A man who closes his door to God's family cannot be an elder. Indeed, such action is **symptomatic of more serious problems**. Lack of hospitality among the Lord's people is a sure sign of selfish, lifeless, loveless Christianity (Biblical Eldership; Lewis & Roth; 1986; Pg 226).*

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer....All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved (Acts 2v43f).

- Note the devotion to *fellowship as well as to the Word*.
- They were in each other homes.
- As a result there was a **pervading spirit of togetherness and sincerity**. And all this with a community of 3000-5000!
- And hospitality was evidently a key to adding a minimum of 365 people per year, and all done in a relational and loving manner. Wonderful!

Keep on loving each other as brothers. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering (Heb 13v1-3).

- Keep on loving as brothers...we are a family so let's be in each other's homes. Keep on at it.
- Also be hospitable to outsiders. NB NB NB: Hospitality is not just the key to keeping the church family feeling like a family, **but it is also the key to keeping the church outward-looking and evangelistic. Hospitality-based evangelism is powerful.** Mark Driscoll, leader of a church in Seattle that has grown to 4000 in 8 years, says that hospitality is a key to the growth of churches today in a post-Christian culture where meetings are not much of a draw to unbelievers. He is especially keen on hospitality that '*welcomes strangers, especially non-Christians, into our homes, lives and church*'.

Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers, even though they are strangers to you. They have told the church about your love. You will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God. It was for the sake of the Name that they went out, receiving no help from the pagans. We ought therefore to show hospitality to such men so that we may work together for the truth (3 Jn 1v5).

- Hospitality is essential to our calling to host other churches for training times and conferences.

Summary

Clearly, scripture regards hospitality as an essential for all believers, especially leaders, and entire local church communities. This is because:

- Hospitality is an inevitable expression of love – the most fundamental and greatest virtue (1 Cor 13).
- It is a bulletproof way of developing and protecting the true nature of the church, namely that of a loving family. It promotes a spirit of togetherness and sincerity (Acts 2).
- It is a bulletproof way of safeguarding other key values such as servant-leadership.
- And, so long as it is deliberately inclusive of outsiders and newcomers then it is a key to keeping the church evangelistic.

2. PHILOSOPHICALLY SPEAKING

A philosophy of ministry is a culture that emerges not only from direct biblical instruction, but also from other valid but rather less direct sources. Note how the following influences also compel us to hospitality:

- Values arising from various key doctrines (e.g. grace, one-new-man, leadership, the true nature of the Church as a family).
- Values arising from our heritage (e.g. father figures who built relationally).
- Persuasions arising from the gifting, personality and preferences of those leading the church.
- Prophetic words (e.g. counter culture to Joburg; strong foundation of love)
- Pragmatic success to date (i.e. hospitality and the resulting sense of community has been a key factor in the qualitative and quantitative development of our Church so far).

3. PRACTICALLY SPEAKING

Now, on the basis of our theological and philosophical convictions, we need to form a practical action plan that will help us, as individuals and a church, increasingly *do hospitality*:

Although there may be other areas that need consideration, let's try and work out what doing hospitality actually looks like for us in terms of Sundays and in the Home:

B. Sunday Hospitality

Here is the key: our Sunday venue and all that happens there is to be regarded as your very own living room where you have invited a group of people to join you for a couple of hours on a Sunday. If everyone has the attitude '*this is my home and these are my guests*' then everything else falls into place. For example:

- We would arrive before the guests do.
- We would meet and greet with the same fervor and sense of responsibility as in our own home.
- We would never just sit and wait for the meeting to start, but rather be circulating to welcome, engage with, and chat to people.
- We would be especially on the lookout for new people and lonely people, and in addition to trying to connect them with ourselves, we would be at pains to hook them up with other people to chat and to become friends with.

- And, beginning to link now to Home Hospitality, it is so, so powerful to invite people home after church, or the following Sunday (or in between). I feel that this is really the pinnacle demonstration of love towards a visitor.

C. Home Hospitality

Getting people into your home is so powerful. It sends an undeniable message that you are genuinely interested in them. If we are to be 'given' to hospitality we will need to plan our lives to enable us to do it in a sustainable manner, and also to learn to play to our strengths:

What are you good at?

- Sit down meals? Just soup & rolls? Coffee & games evenings? Bring & share braais? Big groups or smaller groups?
- Do you find that actually hosting & meaningfully interacting with people is actually too much for you? If so, how can you solve that...do it at someone else's house? Get someone else to cater for you at your house?

What times work best for you?

- Maybe plan in a weekly slot? Sunday lunches?
- Thursday evenings? Saturday breakfasts or 4pm teas?

Spinning a web of friendships

- Remember that you don't want to create dependency on yourselves, but rather to help form a tapestry of friendships around a person. So think through whom you should invite with whom.

A final tip: try not to think in terms of members & non-members....mush 'em all up together!

Here is an extract from a newsletter of some church-planting friends of Dave and Leena Clark: *Romans 12v13 says that we are to be "given" to hospitality, literally given over to or **addicted to hospitality**. It's not always easy, especially with Karin's headaches, and we often get tired out. But as one wise jokester said, "Hospitality is making people feel at home even though you wish they were." **Churches tend to grow due to a focus in one of three areas:** entertainment (music and activities for youth and adults), relationships, and good teaching. Entertainment and good teaching can grow a congregation quickly, and give the appearance of success ... until a church with better entertainment or teaching comes along. The focus is on the professionals up front (worship leaders and pastors), and great pressure is put upon them to perform up to snuff with the latest bells and whistles. We prefer the relational approach. A new family that started attending MountainView just told us, "Count us in; we like MountainView." I responded, "Good, start inviting people over to your home for meals." We firmly believe that the strength of a church lies in its relationships – with the Lord and with each other. **Developing relationships is the slowest and surest way** to grow a congregation, but it is also a more biblical and long-lasting approach.*

APPENDIX E

WATER BAPTISM

Why should we be water baptised?

1. Because Jesus was baptised (Mt 3v16).
2. Because Jesus told us to be baptised (Mt 28v19).

If these were the only two reasons that the Bible gave us to be baptised, then surely this would be enough reason to get baptised – after all, Christians are by definition those who imitate Jesus (1 Jn 2v6) and obey Jesus (Jn 14v15)!

3. The disciples baptised people (Jn 4v1).
4. Peter said we should be baptised (Acts 2v38).
5. Peter and John expected that all new believers would be baptised (Acts 8v16).
6. Philip endorsed it by baptising the Ethiopian (Acts 8v38).
7. Paul himself was baptised (Acts 9v18).
8. Paul expected that all believers had been baptised...and he made sure just in case! (Acts 19v1-5).
9. Paul often references baptism in his theological writings. Clearly water baptism was a huge deal for Paul, and his assumption was that all believers had been water baptised (Rms 6v3; 1 Cor 1v13-17; 1 Cor 10v2; 1 Cor 12v13; 1 Cor 15v29; Gal 3v27).
10. Peter also references baptism in his theological writings (1 Pet 3v20).

What is water baptism?

Our word “baptism” comes from the Greek word “baptizo”. It is one of the few words in our English bibles that has never been translated properly into an English word, but has been left in its original form. This hasn’t always helped people to understand what baptism actually is. Instead, “baptism” has become a very religious word used to describe a very religious event. It is important that we understand what baptism really is, and allow it to be something that brings life and grace to us rather than it simply being a strange religious rite, empty of real meaning.

Two well-known positions on water baptism that we would not be comfortable with include:

A. The Roman Catholic Position: baptism conveys grace to the person being baptised without requiring any demonstration of faith from them. This is why children are baptised. It is understood that baptising children brings them into the church and so somehow into salvation.

B. The Anglican Position: ‘christening’ the children of believing parents is understood as a sign of covenant – the New Testament equivalent of circumcision. Unlike in Catholicism it is not believed that this baptism earns salvation, so there needs to be a later response of faith by the individual, which is recognised when they are confirmed.

The problems with these positions:

1. According to the Bible, baptism doesn’t save anyone. Rather it is the outward sign of internal salvation.
2. According to the Bible, baptism should follow, not precede salvation.

Therefore, in contrast to these expressions of baptism, we believe that the biblical basis for baptism is that baptism is only for those who have already responded in faith to Jesus. Baptism does not save us, but it is a powerful sign and declaration of saving faith.

How should water baptism happen?

1. With lots of water – none of this sprinkling business!

The Greek word *baptizo* means, ‘to plunge, dip, immerse’. There is an expectation in the word itself that the person being baptised is completely immersed in water. In the New Testament accounts of baptism we can see that it always seemed to happen where there was lots of water, normally *in* a river. The person getting baptised was not sprinkled but was baptised – plunged, dipped, immersed. This was not because there is some magic about the amount of water used, but because of what the water symbolises. Water baptism represents our joining with Jesus in his burial and resurrection; a symbolism which sprinkling misses entirely. Take a look at Paul’s brief description of baptism in Romans 6v3-4, and try to imagine a polite little sprinkling of water!

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

2. With lots of people watching – none of this secret business!

Most of the biblical accounts of baptism occur in public places. Think of the masses getting baptised in the Jordan River like Jesus did, and thousands of new believers in Acts 2. Furthermore, as baptism is a public declaration of your faith in Jesus, then you will want to do it with a variety of believers and unbelievers watching. Most people find that the best way is to be baptised during a Sunday meeting, but be sure to make it a ‘guest service’ to ensure that there are the maximum possible number of unbelievers present.

3. Who actually does the baptising?

Church leaders (elders, pastors or Life Group leaders) are the ones who normally carry out baptisms, although it is often nice for believing friends or family to be part of the action. It is also great for the believer who 'won you to Christ' to be involved, rather like Philip was with his Ethiopian convert.

What does water baptism achieve?

Remember, baptism is not *necessary* for salvation

We see this in the account of the thief who was crucified next to Jesus and accepted into heaven, even though he was not baptised (Luke 23:43). However, this exceptional case should not make us think that baptism is somehow optional for Christians...

But baptism is an essential aspect of salvation

We need to understand that it is part of the normal order of salvation and without baptism we are missing out on an important part of God's grace to us. As baptism is a command of Jesus, it *is* necessary if we are to be obedient to him. Jesus instructed his disciples, *Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit* (Matthew 28v19).

What are the direct benefits to me of being baptised?

1. The pleasure of knowing that I have **imitated and obeyed** Jesus.
2. **Courage and boldness:** many people testify that once they 'nailed their colours to the mast' through public baptism, they experienced a new courage and boldness in living for Jesus. Baptism strengthens and encourages our faith.
3. **Encouragement for believers:** it is a great source of joy and strength to fellow believers who watch you being baptised – it is proof of the advance of the kingdom!
4. **Testimony to unbelievers:** baptism is a powerful visual picture to unbelievers of the gospel. Make sure you bring your friends and family along!

What if I was water baptised as a baby?

We would say – be baptised as a believer. Because your infant baptism preceded you becoming a believer, then it actually doesn't even class as a baptism, at least not according to the Bible.

Usually there are historical and emotional reasons why people who have been baptised as babies do not want to entertain the thought that they were actually doing something that wasn't biblical. Often well-meaning parents baptised their children out of either (a) obedience to the traditions of their church but without properly checking the scriptures, or (b) to clear their conscience that this ritual somehow will assist their children in their salvation, whether directly or indirectly.

However, there just doesn't seem to be any biblical evidence to support getting baptised before you actually believe. On the contrary, the bible is clear that baptism should *follow* repentance. **Look at the following scriptures that show baptism and repentance to be irrevocably linked – there is no kind of baptism in the Bible that isn't a direct response to repentance/believing. The Bible knows nothing of baptism that happens many years before the person makes a commitment to Christ for themselves.**

Confessing their sins, they were baptised by him in the Jordan River. (Mt 3v6)

And so John came, baptising in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptised by him in the Jordan River. (Mk 1v4-5)

Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. (Mk 16v16)

Peter replied, "Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins. (Acts 2v38)

But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptised, both men and women. Simon himself believed and was baptised. (Acts 8v12)

*(Paul was saved on the Damascus road) Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord--Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here--has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was **baptised**. (Acts 9v17)*

*Before the coming of Jesus, John preached **repentance and baptism** to all the people of Israel. (Acts 13v24)*

*The Lord opened her heart to **respond to Paul's message (must mean believe/repent)**. When she and the members of her household were **baptised**, she invited us to her home. (Acts 16v15)*

*They replied, "**Believe** in the Lord Jesus, and you will be **saved**--you and your household." Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were **baptised**. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to **believe** in God--he and his whole family. (Acts 16v31-33)*

*Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household **believed** in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard him **believed and were baptised**. (Acts 18v8)*

*So Paul asked, "Then what baptism did you receive?" "John's baptism," they replied. Paul said, "John's **baptism** was a baptism of **repentance**. He told the people to **believe** in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus." (Acts 19v3)*