

Church Membership and Baptism Guide



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What is Church Membership?

Without church members, there is no church. Think about it. Have you ever seen a body without body parts? Of course not. The body is the sum of the parts. So it is with the church.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. (1 Cor. 12:12 ESV)

It is easy to love the universal church, but quite another thing to love a local church filled with real people who might be hard to love. But this is precisely the context that God intends us to live in so that we might become holy. God wants all Christians to be members of local churches.

But what exactly is church membership?

"Church membership is a recognized relationship between a local church and a Christian characterized by the church's affirmation and oversight of a Christian's discipleship and the Christian's submission to living out his or her discipleship in the care of the church."

We want to notice three aspects of membership here:

- 1) **The Christian's side.** The individual Christian *submits to living out his or her discipleship in the care of the church.* The Bible has a lot of instruction for how Christians are to live with other believers. Membership is saying, "I want to live out my Christian life here in this particular church." Doing so invites the support, prayers, discipleship, and accountability of the other church members.
- 2) **The Church's side.** The church responds to that individual Christian by *affirming their profession of faith and overseeing their Christian discipleship.* Church membership provides assurance that other Christians can observe God's grace in you, that other Christians are committed to serve you, and that church elders are committed to shepherd you.
- 3) **Recognized.** This relationship must be recognized by the church and the Christian. How else would the church know who they are responsible to affirm and care for as part of the body? How else would the Christian know which church he or she has

submitted themselves to? Since membership requires commitments of the Christian and the church, it must be formally recognized, or it isn't truly membership.

Sometimes church membership is understood only as political status, and all the church wants that can go along with that. While membership does involve the church making important decisions together, membership is much more relational than political. It is about the relationship between Christians within the body of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is the individual saying, "I want to live my Christian discipleship in *this* local church" and the church saying, "We will affirm your profession of faith in Christ and we commit to support your discipleship according to God's Word."

4)

Is church membership in the Bible?

If church membership isn't in the Bible, we shouldn't do it and we certainly shouldn't require it. But indeed, it is in the Bible. It is not commanded but assumed. Church membership forms the basic shape of Christian discipleship in the New Testament.

In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul commands the church to have oversight in a professing Christian's discipleship by removing him from the church for grievous and unrepentant sin. That is, they are to remove their affirmation of him as a brother in Christ because his sinful actions betrayed his confession. This is the church caring for him, seeking to restore him in love. Paul is clear that the church is to disciple those who "bear the name of brother", those who are "inside the church" (5:11-12). He distinguishes between those inside the church and those "outside the church", those who are part of the world (5:10, 12-13). They understood who was inside and who was outside. That understanding is church membership.

In Hebrews 13:17, the writer states that leaders in a church will give an account for how they have kept watch over the souls of those in their church. The writer expects the leaders to know who they are responsible for. They are not accountable for every person in the world or even every Christian, but for those who have publicly committed themselves to that local church.

The shape of discipleship in the New Testament requires a public commitment. In other words, we have to know who is a member and who isn't a member. How else do we know who to disciple in that way? How else do the elders know who to watch over? How else do we know who is permitted to exercise the authority of the church? Church membership, a formal and recognized relationship between a Christian and the local church, is the pattern of New Testament discipleship.

What are the responsibilities of church members?

We can better understand what church membership is when we see what church members are required to do. In short, we could just say that church members are

required to keep the commands of Scripture within the context of a specific local church. But it can be helpful to see this spelled out:¹

1. Attend Church Regularly

The word translated as “church” in our Bibles simply means “called-out assembly” This means you cannot “do” church at home or alone in the woods. While those may be places where you fellowship privately with God, they aren’t church. We are to attend church and to meet together:

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. (Hebrews 10:24-25)

We are often told of the importance of attending church for our own encouragement, and that is certainly true. But here the idea is to meet together to encourage others. When members miss, they are unable to encourage the body. When they are present, they are an encouragement.

2. Help Preserve the Gospel

The apostle Paul says that the church is a pillar and buttress of the truth. While elders have a specific responsibility in protecting the gospel ministry of the church, the members of the church are ultimately responsible for this. In Galatians 1, Paul goes after the church for turning to a different gospel. It is the church (members) that are to reject false teachers. Therefore, a church members should always be growing deeper in their knowledge of the gospel so that they are able to protect the church from false doctrine.

3. Help Affirm Gospel Citizens

Every member is responsible to affirm and disaffirm gospel citizens. Church discipline is the job of the church, not just the elders (Mat. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5; 2 Cor. 2:6). This doesn’t simply mean that members show up and vote members in or out. To do this, we have to know one another and be involved in each other’s lives. Our goal is to preserve the purity of the church for the glory of Jesus Christ.

4. Attend Member’s Meetings

If a church is going to be at all efficient, not every matter of church life will be brought to the entire church. But in the most important matters that affect the gospel witness of the church, the decision lies with the whole church (members). This includes receiving and dismissing members, affirming and dismissing Elders and Deacons, approving the annual budget and other large expenditures, and anything else which might significantly impact the church’s ability to do faithful gospel ministry. If members aren’t at member meetings, they cannot fulfill the responsibilities God has given to them as members.

¹ Adapted from Jonathan Leeman: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/your-7-job-responsibilities-as-a-church-member/>

5. Disciple Other Church Members

Members do not *attend* ministry; members *do* ministry. A healthy church will build itself up in love as each part does its work (Eph. 4:15-16). Members are to speak the truth in love to one another (Eph. 4:25). Each member is to use the gifts that God has given him or her for the purpose of building up other believers to the glory of God (1 Cor. 12-14).

6. Share the Gospel with Outsiders

“Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” (2 Cor. 5:20) The mission of the church is to make disciples of all nations (Mat. 28:19). Every member shares in this responsibility. Evangelism is not the job of professionals, but the job of every member. In Acts 8:4, we see that the scattered church (which didn't include the apostles) went about preaching the word.

7. Follow Your Leaders

It is the job of the elders to equip the saints for the work of ministry, which includes the previous six responsibilities (Eph. 4:12). Therefore, if the elders are not faithfully teaching the Bible, they are not equipping the church properly. But if they are, the member is responsible to avail themselves of the elder's teaching and counsel. We are to remember that we are to follow our leaders who will give account for how they watch over our souls (Heb. 13:17). The same text says that if our leaders lead with joy, that is of great advantage to the church. Of course, we are never encouraged to follow church leaders into sin, but we should have a bent toward trusting and deferring to the leaders of the church.

How do we help affirm gospel citizens?

Member responsibility number four stated that members are to help affirm gospel citizens. What does this mean and how do we do that?

Dis-affirming: Church Discipline

This is perhaps most understood when we look at what it means to *dis-affirm* gospel citizens. We have seen this already in “Is Church Membership in the Bible?” but we want to investigate this deeper here. When a church member falls into sin, the other church members must see his or her repentance and restoration as their own responsibility.

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. (Gal. 6:1)

How does this work? It depends on the situation. The general principles are laid out for us by Jesus in Matthew 18:15-17:

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.

And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector

We see here a three-stage approach: personal confrontation, a small group intervention, and finally, full church involvement. And the aim, as in all areas of discipline, is the repentance, or the "gaining of" of the brother. Most situations will terminate on the first stage. The brother or sister will repent and reconciliation will take place. But if the sinful brother or sister should refuse to repent and not even listen to the church, the church is to treat him or her as an unbeliever.

In 1 Corinthians 5, we see that this means not to treat them like just anybody in the world, but like one who professes to be a brother yet is guilty of grievous, public, and unrepentant sin (5:11). There is to be disassociation with such a person, in order to communicate clearly to them that their sin is separating them also from God. It would not be loving to help a brother or sister believe that their sin doesn't matter.

Throughout the New Testament, we see that exclusion from church membership is the final act of church discipline, and that the purposes are to restore the sinner to repentance (1 Cor. 5:5; Mat. 18:15; 1 Tim. 1:20) as well as to protect the church from the impurity of sin (1 Cor. 5:6).

Affirming: Membership and the Lord's Supper

If membership includes the call to dis-affirm those who bear the name of brother who fall into unrepentant sin, this assumes that before this, there was an affirmation of the same brother. How does this happen?

When someone is baptized upon profession of faith (more on this later) they make a public statement that they follow Christ in that local church. This act visibly unites the individual to the local church. When a church baptizes an individual, they are *affirming* them as a brother or sister in the Lord. In cases of previous baptism, receiving someone as a member is the initial act of affirmation.

As long as a member maintains good standing in the church, the church continues to affirm their profession of faith. Essentially, the church is saying, "We continue to see the grace of God at work in your life." This ought to give us a sense of assurance as we are often unable to evaluate our own spiritual health. But how is this affirmation expressed and confirmed in an ongoing way? The answer is the Lord's Supper.

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. (1 Cor. 10:16-17)

Participating in the Lord's Supper is a proclamation of our participating in the gospel. When we eat and drink the Supper together, we are proclaiming that we together share in the body and blood of Christ. When we eat and drink together, we continue to affirm one another in the gospel. In the case of church discipline, we are to "not even eat" with the one who has been dis-affirmed by the church due to unrepentant sin. This

one is not permitted to participate in the Lord's Supper. This is to show that the church cannot affirm this individual until their lives demonstrate their participation in Christ.

Therefore, the Lord's Supper is an act where the gathered church affirms one another by eating of the same bread and drinking of the same cup.

How is baptism related to membership?

What is baptism?

Baptism is the immersion of a professing believer in water as an act of obedience to Jesus Christ. Baptism is *how* we profess faith in Christ publicly. In Acts 2:41, it was the act of baptism that added people to the church. They heard the Word, repented and believed, and were then baptized as the public and outer act of their conversion. Baptism, as commanded by Jesus, is the initial act of Christian discipleship (Mat. 28:19). The New Testament assumes that Christians are baptized, and often use the term "baptism" as a short-hand for the entire conversion experience (Rom. 6:3-5; Gal. 3:27).

Does baptism save you?

Baptism *doesn't* save in that it doesn't cause the new birth and doesn't cause us to be justified or declared righteous before God. We are saved by grace through faith alone. The thief on the cross was saved, even though he wasn't baptized. But at the same time, we need to recognize that those who had faith in Christ who weren't nailed to a cross did get baptized. Baptism is so closely connected with the moment of conversion that the biblical writers connect them almost inseparably.

And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins." (Acts 2:38)

And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name. (Acts 22:16)

Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. (1 Pet. 3:21)

What these verses have in common is that the act of baptism is connected to repentance, calling on Jesus' name, and appealing to God for a good conscience. Baptism without this act of faith and repentance is worthless. But if the faith is there, baptism is *how* that faith is expressed. Baptism is more than just a symbol. It is a public and formal declaration that you follow Jesus is Lord. In Muslim countries, you may not be persecuted if you profess Christ "in your heart", but if you are baptized, you family may disown or even kill you. Baptism, as a mere action, doesn't save you. But baptism authenticates your salvation. And if we aren't baptized, how can we truly say that Jesus, who commands baptism, is our Lord? (Mat. 28:19; Acts 2:38)

What if I was baptized in another church?

In any given church today, it is likely that most of the members were baptized in another local church. If that local church was like in faith, the previous baptism is once

and for all. In these cases, we transfer that baptism and affirmation from the other local church into this church.

What if I was baptized as a baby?

For a number of reasons, many church traditions practice infant baptism. While we don't deny the personal significance that one may place on that action, infant baptism is nowhere practiced or commanded in Scripture. The pattern throughout the book of Acts is that one hears the gospel, responds in faith and repentance, and then is baptized as a willing act of obedience (Acts 2:41; 8:12; 9:18; 10:48; 16:15; 16:33; 18:8; 19:5; 22:16). Those who are baptized are those who are united to Christ by conscious faith in him (Rom. 6:3-4). The biblical pattern of baptism requires those baptized as infants to be baptized as professing believers.

What if I wasn't immersed?

Immersion is the method of baptism that appears to be prominent in Scripture (John 3:23). Immersion is the method that Grace Life Church will practice. However, baptism upon profession of faith by pouring is still baptism, even if it is *irregular* baptism. A very early document accepted widely in the early church instructed churches to baptize by immersion when possible. But when water was not available, pouring three times on the head would still be baptism. This document isn't the Bible, but it shows us how the early church taught and practiced baptism, and it teaches us how Christians in the first century understood the word "baptism" itself. Someone who was baptized as a believer with a method other than immersion will not need to be rebaptized.

Can I get baptized without joining the church?

Except in very unusual circumstances, baptism will always be done in connection with entry into membership. Baptism without membership changes what baptism is. It makes baptism *private*, when it is a public act. Baptism is to declare publicly that we identify with Christ, and this, by definition, adds us to the local church. We cannot be connected to Christ yet severed from his body. It would be unwise for a church to affirm someone's profession by baptizing them and then to not have the authority to continue to affirm them in their walk with Christ.

Who can become a member of Grace Life Church?

One who has made a credible confession of faith

Every member of the new covenant is a born-again believer in Jesus Christ. The aim of church membership is to reflect that as best as possible. Therefore, only believers are members of the church. Unbelieving children of believers and visitors, as much as we love them present with us, are not considered members of the church. It is the responsibility of the Elders to meet with membership candidates to ensure they correctly understand the gospel and to discern with them their response to that gospel. This doesn't mean that membership is for mature Christians only. It is for all those who truly repent and believe.

One who agrees with the Statement of Faith

We may think that this places a burden on members that the Bible doesn't require. Isn't the Statement of Faith a man-made document? Consider this. When someone professes faith in Christ, their faith has a content. It is faith in specific spiritual truths. A statement of faith condenses biblical truth so that we can know who affirms the truth of Scripture. One who denies that Jesus is God incarnate may believe in a Jesus, but not *the* Jesus of the Bible. A statement of faith provides us with a basis for unity in terms of the gospel and in the practices of the church. While members may disagree with some matters in other church documents, they are nevertheless expected to submit to and live by those documents to preserve unity and order in the church.

One who agrees to submit to the discipleship of the church body

Joining a church is to submit to the church. In doing so, we open our lives to one another and give other members the right to speak into our lives. We are committing to accepting the decisions of the church leaders and the congregation in so far as our conscience allows us. This submission is spelled out in the Church Covenant, which is nothing more than a summary of clear biblical teaching in how we ought to relate together.

Have been baptized upon profession of faith

Since baptism is the initial sign of our covenant with Christ, baptism is required for all members of the church.

What is the process of becoming a member?

Statement of intent

By completing a membership intent form and submitting it to one of the Elders, you are indicating your desire to join Grace Life Church. This form will ask for some information including how you came to faith in Christ.

Membership training

Candidates will receive teaching on church membership and on the beliefs of the church. This may be done in a group class or one on one during the meeting with an elder.

Meeting with an elder

One or more elders will meet with you to hear your profession of faith and to ensure that you understand church membership. This is a great opportunity to ask any questions you may have about the vision and direction of the church. The Elders as a group will then recommend qualifying candidates to the membership. When female candidates meet with an elder(s), another female will be present.

Membership affirmation

Since the whole church is responsible with affirming gospel citizens, the church will affirm new members at a meeting. Prior to this, candidates for membership will be announced to allow people to pray for those candidates, to get to know them better, and to express any concerns they may have to the Elders. New members will be received by at least 50% affirmation of the membership.

Covenant service

Incoming members will take part in a service that makes public their intent to join the church and the church's intent to receive this new member. This service is a public commitment of the whole church to uphold the biblical practices summarized in the Church Covenant. After this, the new member has full member rights and privileges as spelled out in the Constitution and By-Laws of the church.



Membership intent form

Name _____

Contact phone _____

Email _____

Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability. We will follow up on these questions in the membership interview. The Elders of Grace Life Church will contact you to arrange a meeting for the purposes of hearing your faith confession and answering any questions you may have about membership or Grace Life Church. For questions, contact Pastor Mark at 204.266.0886 or markreimer@live.com.

1. On a separate sheet of paper, please write down how you came to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. Also answer the question, "What is the good news of Jesus Christ?"
2. Have you repented of your sins and placed your hope and trust in Jesus Christ alone?
3. Have you been baptized previously? If yes, when and where?
4. Are you currently a member of another church? If yes, which church?
5. Do you understand and affirm the Statement of Faith of Grace Life Church?
6. Are you willing to abide by the practices of Grace Life Church as spelled out in its Constitution and By-Laws?
7. Are you willing to commit yourself to love and serve Grace Life Church in accordance with the Church Covenant?