

GRACE LIFE CHURCH OF DALLAS

Statement Regarding Church Membership

Membership in a local church involves commitment to worship the Lord corporately, edifying brothers and sisters through mutual exhortation and service, cooperating in mission, and holding each other accountable to walk in a manner pleasing to the Lord as a witness to the truth of Christ in the world.

We believe that covenant “church membership” is a wise and helpful path for those who desire to walk together in obedience to the Lord and in a manner that is worthy of the gospel of Christ (Phil 1:27). This becomes evident when we consider how the New Testament teaching on church government and church discipline relate to mutual accountability and thus to the concept of covenant membership.

The New Testament teaching about church government and church discipline would be meaningless if some form of commitment to mutual accountability in a body of believers were not expected.

The Definition of “Church Membership”

When an individual is saved, they become a member of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13). Because they are united to Christ and the other members of the body in this way, they are therefore qualified to become member of a local expression of that body.

To become a member of a church is to formally commit oneself to an identifiable, local body of believers who have joined together for specific, divinely ordained purposes. These purposes include receiving instruction from God’s Word (1 Tim. 4:13; 2 Tim. 4:2), serving and edifying one another through the proper use of spiritual gifts (Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12:4-31; 1 Pet. 4:10-11), participating in the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, prayer and fellowship (Luke 22:19; Acts 2:38-42), and proclaiming the gospel to those who are lost (Matt. 28:18-20). In addition, when one becomes a member of a local church, they submit themselves to the care and the authority of the biblically qualified elders that God has placed in that assembly.

The Basis for “Church Membership”

Although Scripture does not contain an explicit command to formally join a local church, the biblical foundation for “church membership” permeates the New Testament. This biblical basis can be seen most clearly in (1) the example of the early church, (2) the existence and responsibility of church government, (3) the exercise of church discipline, (4) many of the epistles being written to specific local churches and (5) the exhortation to mutual edification.

The Example of the Early Church

In the early church, coming to Christ was always followed by coming to the church. The idea of experiencing salvation without belonging to a local church is foreign to the New Testament. When individuals repented and believed in Christ, they were baptized and added to the church (Acts 2:41, 47; 5:14; 16:5). More than simply living out a private commitment to Christ, this meant joining together formally with other believers in a local assembly and devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer (Acts 2:42).

The epistles of the New Testament were written to churches. In the case of the few written to individuals—such as Philemon, Timothy and Titus—these individuals were leaders in churches. The New Testament epistles themselves demonstrate that the Lord assumed that believers would be committed to a local assembly.

There is also evidence in the New Testament that just as there was a list of widows eligible for financial support (1 Tim. 5:9), there may also have been a list of members that grew as people were saved (cf. Acts 2:41, 47; 5:14; 16:5). In fact, when a believer moved to another city, his church often wrote a letter of commendation to his new church (Acts 18:27; Rom. 16:1; Col. 4:10; cf. 2 Cor. 3:1-2).

In the book of Acts, much of the terminology fits only with the concept of formal “church membership”. Phrases such as “the whole congregation” (6:5), “the church in Jerusalem” (8:1), “the disciples” in Jerusalem (9:26), “in every church” (14:23), “the whole church” (15:17), and “the elders of the church” in Ephesus (20:17), all suggest recognizable “church membership” with well-defined boundaries (also see 1 Cor. 5:4; 14:23; and Heb. 10:25).

Church Government Implies a Membership of Accountability

The consistent pattern throughout the New Testament is that a plurality of elders is to oversee each local body of believers. The specific duties given to these elders presuppose a clearly defined group of church members who are under their care.

Among other things, these godly men are responsible to shepherd God's people (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2), to labor diligently among them (1 Thess. 5:12), to have charge over them (1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Tim. 5:17), and to keep watch over their souls (Heb. 13:17). Scripture teaches that the elders will give an account to God for the individuals allotted to their charge (Heb. 13:17; 1 Pet. 5:3).

Those responsibilities require that there be a distinguishable, mutually understood membership in the local church. Elders can shepherd the people and give an account to God for their spiritual well-being only if they know who they are; they can provide oversight only if they know those for whom they are responsible; and they can fulfill their duty to shepherd the flock only if they know who is part of the flock and who is not.

The elders of a church are not responsible for the spiritual well-being of every individual who visits the church or who attends sporadically. Rather, they are primarily responsible to shepherd those who have submitted themselves to the care and the authority of the elders, and this is done through “church membership”.

Conversely, Scripture teaches that believers are to submit to their elders. Hebrews 13:17 says, “Obey your leaders, and submit to them.” The question for each believer is, “Who are your leaders?” The one who has refused to join a local church and entrust himself to the care and the authority of the elders has no leaders. For that person, obedience to Hebrews 13:17 is impossible. To put it simply, this verse implies that every believer knows to whom he must submit, which, in turn, assumes clearly defined church membership.

This whole picture of called leaders, and people who affirm that leadership, assumes the existence of “church membership” that consists in a corporate life of mutual accountability. Leadership and submission have no meaning where there is no commitment to accountability (that is, to membership).

Church Discipline Implies a Membership of Accountability

Jesus said, “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 word may be confirmed 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” (Matt 18:15-17).

What this implies is that Christians are to be members of churches where they are held accountable to walk in a way that pleases the Lord. If there were no relationship of accountability, it would be meaningless to “tell it to the church,” because the offending person would simply say, “That church has no jurisdiction over me.”

The same thing is implied in 1 Corinthians 5. A man in the church is living in blatant immorality and is proudly unrepentant (v. 2). Paul writes, “Let him who has done this be removed from among you” (v. 2). He goes on to say, “When you are assembled . . . you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (vv. 4-5).

None of this would be feasible if the immoral man could simply say, “I am not accountable to you. I can do what I please. You have no authority or rights over me.” In other words, the teaching of the New Testament on church discipline implies that church membership (involving mutual accountability among the members) is the will of God for all Christians.

The Exhortation to Mutual Edification

The New Testament teaches that the church is the body of Christ, and that God has called every member to a life devoted to the growth of the body. In other words, Scripture exhorts all believers to edify the other members by practicing the “one-anothers” of the New Testament (e.g., Heb. 10:24-25) and exercising their spiritual gifts (Rom. 12:6-8; 1 Cor. 12:4-7; 1 Pet. 4:10-11). Mutual edification can only take place in the context of the corporate body of Christ. Exhortations to this kind of ministry presuppose that believers have committed themselves to other believers in a specific local assembly. “church membership” is simply the formal way to make that commitment.

The Church Membership Covenant

The biblical call for a membership of mutual accountability in a local body of believers suggests the need for believers to make a covenant with one another. This is simply implied in agreeing to hold each other accountable to walk in a manner pleasing to the Lord.

The church covenant is a written summary of biblical practice that a church agrees should be the basis of its accountability. The covenant allows for freedom of conscience in areas where the Bible is not definite in its guidance. The covenant focuses on principles, especially as they relate to our corporate life together.

Membership Process at Grace Life Church of Dallas

Everyone coming for membership at Grace Life Church of Dallas:

1. Must have been baptized in accordance with the Scripture by immersion since their conversion, or be scheduled for baptism as a part of the membership process.
2. Must make a credible profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, a credible profession being one which is accompanied by continuing repentance and faith in the gospel.
3. Must have a life that exhibits the newness of life which is an evidence of the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit in the life of every true believer.
4. Must complete the Grace Life Church of Dallas new member class (6-8 week class, usually offered twice a year).
5. Must read *What is a Healthy Church Member?* By Thabiti M. Anyabwile.
6. Must complete a membership interview by the elders. The purpose of this interview is for the elders is to walk through #'s 1-3 with the individual coming for membership.
7. Must sign or verbally affirm the Church Membership Covenant.

Membership in Grace Life Church of Dallas will only be granted upon the unanimous consent of the elders of the church.

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