

Gospel of Grace Church Membership

Introduction

The Church of our Lord Jesus Christ belongs not to her members or leaders, but to Jesus Christ.¹ He laid down His life for her,² purchased her with His precious blood,³ builds her,⁴ and lives to defend her every member at the right hand of God.⁵ In the words of an old hymn:

The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ, her Lord;
 She is His new creation by water and the Word:
 From heaven He came and sought her to be His holy bride;
 With His own blood He bought her, and for her life He died.⁶

The Church exists for God's glory and our spiritual well-being. If Jesus' Church was a man-made institution⁷ we could take it or leave it at no cost to ourselves, but since Jesus' Church is His institution, we neglect it to our peril.

The Church of our Lord Jesus Christ is composed of believers and their children.⁸ The believers who have been baptized, have made public profession of their faith in Jesus Christ, and have submitted their lives to Jesus' lordship are *communicant* members⁹-they communicate or participate in the Lord's Supper. The children of believers are *non-communicant* members,¹⁰ for they do not

¹ Acts 20:28; 1 Corinthians 6:19.

² John 10:11, 15.

³ 1 Peter 1:19.

⁴ Matthew 16:18.

⁵ Hebrews 7:25; 1 John 2:1.

⁶ *The Church's One Foundation* by Samuel J. Stone, 1866.

⁷ Some churches are man-made institutions which have nothing to do with preaching the gospel, administering the sacraments, and exercising church discipline. No Christian is obligated to join such a church; in fact, Christians should not join these churches.

⁸ Luke 18:16; 1 Corinthians 7:14.

⁹ Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church (ARPC) *Form of Government*, 5.A.1:

The communicant member is one who has been baptized, who has made public his profession of faith in Jesus Christ and who has submitted his life to His Lordship and to the ministry of the Church. He is entitled to all the rights and privileges of the congregation, including the right to vote in congregational meetings, the right to hold office...the right to participate in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, and the right to present his children for the sacrament of Baptism.

¹⁰ ARPC *Form of Government*, 5.A.2:

participate in the Lord's Supper until such time as they can examine themselves and discern their relationship to the Lord's body,¹¹ His church, through public profession of faith (and baptism if not already administered).

To become a member of Gospel of Grace we ask that you familiarize yourself with our vision and values by reading this booklet. It is structured as follows:

1. Reasons for Membership
2. Place of Membership
3. Responsibilities of Membership
4. Procedure for Membership
5. Membership & Baptism

Reasons for Membership¹²

The children of believers by right of being born into covenant relationship are non-communicant members of the Church. They are entitled to the sacrament of Baptism and to the pastoral care, government and nurture of the Church with a view to their entering communicant church membership.

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 11:28-29.

¹² A helpful summary of reasons for church membership can be found at www.9Marks.org. Hereafter is quoted from 9Marks their definition of and biblical proof for church membership:

What is [church membership]?

According to the Bible, church membership is a commitment every Christian should make to attend, love, serve, and submit to a local church.

Where is it in the Bible?

1. Throughout Old Testament history, God made a clear distinction between his people and the world (see Lev. 13:46, Num. 5:3, Deut. 7:3).
2. Christ says that entering the kingdom of God means being bound to the church "on earth" (Matt. 16:16-19; 18:17-19). Where do we see the church on earth? The local church.
3. The New Testament explicitly refers to some people being inside the church and some people being outside (1 Cor. 5:12-13). This is much more than a casual association.
4. The church in Corinth consisted of a definite number of believers, such that Paul could speak of a punishment inflicted by the majority (2 Cor. 2:6).
5. Not only does the New Testament speak of the reality of church membership, but its dozens of "one anothers" are written to local churches, which fill out our understanding of what church membership should practically look like.

It is often asserted that membership in the universal or invisible church supplants any need for membership in a local, visible church. However, the Bible offers no evidence of a Christian living independent of a local, geographically identifiable congregation. The following is a biblical digest of the importance of committing to a local church:

1. It was to the church, His apostles, that Jesus Christ gave the sacrament of Baptism,¹³ which means that everyone baptized became a member of the local church which baptized them.¹⁴
2. The New Testament letters are written either to a specific congregation,¹⁵ a group of congregations,¹⁶ or to people vitally connected with local congregations.¹⁷ Simply put, the Bible is not addressed to autonomous, independent, self-governed Christians, but to Christians joined to a local body of Christ.
3. Each local church is one body composed of many members who have different functions and gifts.¹⁸ A Christian does not belong to himself/herself, but to Christ and His church. Each Christian, then, must commit themselves to a particular body in which their God-given gifts can be used.
4. The Bible *assumes* church membership, for without it there could be no excommunication (removal) from the church.¹⁹
5. The Bible knows nothing of conversion apart from the ministry of the church.²⁰ This is not to say that people are never converted through private Bible reading, but only to say that Christianity spread through the Roman Empire by means of the church's witness (especially the apostle Paul). It was through

¹³ Matthew 28:19.

¹⁴ Acts 2:41, "Those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls." Acts 2:47, "The Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."

¹⁵ Romans; 1 Corinthians; 2 Corinthians; Ephesians; Philippians; Colossians; 1 Thessalonians; 2 Thessalonians; 3 John.

¹⁶ Galatians; Hebrews; 1 Peter; 2 Peter; 1 John; 2 John.

¹⁷ 1 Timothy; 2 Timothy; Titus; Philemon.

¹⁸ Romans 1:4-5; 1 Corinthians 12:12-27.

¹⁹ Matthew 18:17; 1 Corinthians 5:2.

²⁰ Acts 8.

the persecution of the local church in Jerusalem that the gospel spread to Samaria.²¹

6. The Bible knows nothing of Christians living apart from the fellowship of local congregations.²²
7. The Bible teaches submission to church leaders insofar as the leaders follow God's Word:

Scripture repeatedly commands Christians to submit to their leaders (Heb. 13:17; 1 Thess. 5:12-13). The only way to do that is by publicly committing to be members of their flock, and saying in effect, "I commit to listening to your teaching, following your direction, and to submitting to your leadership." There's no way to obey the scriptural commands to submit to your leaders if you never actually *submit* to them by joining a local church.²³

8. The Bible knows nothing of sanctification (growth in Christ) apart from the church. Jesus said, "Go, therefore, and make *disciples*..."²⁴ Notice He said, "Make *disciples*" not "Make *converts*." The importance of the local church for individual Christians is not merely to become *saved*, but to become a *disciple*—a student, a pupil, an apprentice, a trainee of Jesus Christ. In order to grow in Christ, Christians need one another to stir each other up to love and good works, encouraging one another as Jesus' Second Coming draws near.²⁵
9. The Bible knows nothing of good theology apart from the church. Paul calls the church the pillar and buttress of the truth,²⁶ and Peter says that producing good theology is a community endeavor, not a private enterprise.²⁷ Therefore, Gospel of Grace Church is a *confessional* church, which means our doctrinal beliefs are adhered to by a larger group of churches and are written down so as not to be subject to the

²¹ Acts 8:1-8.

²² Acts 2:42,47.

²³ <http://www.9marks.org/answers/according-scripture-why-should-every-christian-join-church>

²⁴ Matthew 28:19.

²⁵ Hebrews 10:24-25.

²⁶ 1 Timothy 3:15.

²⁷ 2 Peter 1:20.

whims of church members and office-bearers. Every church has its doctrinal beliefs. Some churches do not have many beliefs, others have not carefully thought through their beliefs, and still others hide their beliefs from public view to avoid scrutiny. We believe the Bible teaches us many things necessary for our salvation and useful for a God-glorifying life; we believe it important to think through biblical teachings carefully; and we believe the most humble approach (not that we are humble) to theology is publicizing our beliefs for all to see and compare with Scripture. Therefore, for the sake of each person at Gospel of Grace Church, we abide by a written confession with which we agree.

10. The Bible knows nothing of love for Jesus Christ apart from love for His church. If we do not love Christians, messy as we may be, then we ought to wonder if we really love Jesus Christ:

If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.²⁸

The mantra, "Practice random acts of kindness" is not bad in and of itself, but it certainly does not describe a Christian's duty toward believers in the local church. Our duty toward fellow members is not merely random but intentional, consistent, and diligent. There is one way to tell if a Christian loves Christ, and that is by their love for other Christians in a local church. It is not enough to say, "I love the body of Christ." We must prove it. If we do not sacrifice ourselves for a specific congregation of Christians, then we may love the *idea* of Christ's body, but may not actually love Christ's body. The church is lovely in Christ, but unlovely in itself, and that is God's design to exalt His grace. We Christians are messy and will always offend one another, but if we love Jesus Christ, we will love those who offend us, and seek forgiveness from those we have offended.

²⁸ 1 John 4:20.

11. Church membership bolsters assurance of faith. Consider this quote from 9Marks:

Membership is the church's way of affirming the validity of someone's profession of faith (Matt. 16:19, 18:18). The church looks at a person's life, hears their explanation of the gospel and how they came to believe it, and says, "You look like a Christian to us. So join us. Watch over our lives and we'll watch over yours." So, while membership in a church doesn't guarantee that someone is a Christian, it should assure believers of the genuineness of their faith.²⁹

Church hopping can be spiritual suicide, leading to perfectionism whereby no church is ever good enough to join.³⁰ Join a church where you are blessed by the gospel and the Christians, and where you can be a blessing to the Christians, but by all means commit yourselves to a local congregation.

Place of Membership

Having explained *that* we should join a church, we address *which* church to join. Both are equally important. Remaining independent of a local body of Christians is as damaging to one's faith as joining a severely wayward body of Christians.

Does the Bible provide indicators or marks of a true church? We believe it does, and three marks in particular:

1. The true gospel preached
2. The sacraments (Baptism & the Lord's Supper) rightly administered
3. Church discipline faithfully exercised

The true gospel preached

A church which does not preach and teach the sound doctrine of the gospel, or preaches a false gospel, is either a tremendous failure as a church or no church at all of the Lord Jesus Christ. As harsh as this may sound, here is why we believe it:

²⁹ <http://www.9marks.org/answers/what-are-some-other-reasons-join-church>

³⁰ A wise man once said, "If ever you find the perfect church, don't join it, for the moment you join it will fall from perfection."

1. From inception, the church in Jerusalem continued steadfastly in the apostles' teaching.³¹
2. The churches of Jesus Christ are responsible to proclaim the gospel to the whole creation,³² to teach and preach sound (healthy) doctrine,³³ to guard the deposit of truth,³⁴ to stand firm in the traditions taught by the apostles,³⁵ to test the spirits and ensure they are from God,³⁶ to reject anyone not abiding in the teaching of Christ,³⁷ and to rid themselves of anyone teaching a gospel contrary to the gospel of God's free grace in Christ.³⁸
3. The church is "a pillar and buttress of the truth",³⁹ sent into the world by Jesus, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to bear witness to Jesus' death and resurrection.⁴⁰
4. As a pattern for the New Testament church, Paul explicitly states his job description: "Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel"⁴¹; "We preach Christ crucified"⁴²; "Him we proclaim"⁴³; and in his farewell address to the Ephesian elders he highlighted the most important aspect of the church's work: "I do not account my life of any value...if only I may finish...the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, *to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.*"⁴⁴
5. Nearing his death, the apostle Paul charged his pupil Timothy to rightly handle the word of truth⁴⁵ and preach the word.⁴⁶

³¹ Acts 2:42.

³² Mark 16:15.

³³ Galatians 1:8-9; 2 Timothy 1:13-14; 3:16-4:4; 1 John 4:1-3.

³⁴ 2 Timothy 1:14.

³⁵ 1 Thessalonians 2:15.

³⁶ 1 John 4:1-3.

³⁷ 2 John 9-11.

³⁸ Galatians 1:6-9.

³⁹ 1 Timothy 3:15.

⁴⁰ Acts 1:8; Matthew 28:18-20.

⁴¹ 1 Corinthians 9:16.

⁴² 1 Corinthians 1:23.

⁴³ Colossians 1:28.

⁴⁴ Acts 20:24.

⁴⁵ 2 Timothy 2:15.

⁴⁶ 2 Timothy 4:2.

What does all this mean? It means that preaching the sound doctrine of the gospel is a mark of Jesus' church. Churches which do not take doctrine seriously are not fulfilling their calling. Doctrine is vital for the Christian faith. If the good news of Jesus Christ is perverted into moral therapy, self-help, legalism, or dead orthodoxy, then the good news becomes bad news. Simply put, the gospel contains important doctrines, without which the gospel ceases to be the gospel.

The question yet arises, "How do I know if the church I attend preaches the gospel?" It can be difficult to tell, but remember the words of our Shepherd, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me."⁴⁷ When you hear the true gospel preached in all of its fullness and goodness, it will resonate with your entire being and you will grow in genuine godliness. You will feel as though Jesus Christ Himself was present in your midst, exhorting and comforting you, preaching peace to your soul.⁴⁸ That's because He was.

The sacraments (Baptism & the Lord's Supper) rightly administered

The second mark of a true church of Jesus Christ is the sacraments rightly administered. A church which does not administer the sacraments, or which administers them without the gospel, is either a tremendous failure as a church or no church at all.

Jesus Christ has instituted two, and two only, sacraments for the New Testament church: Baptism⁴⁹ and the Lord's Supper.⁵⁰ In obedience to Jesus' command, then, the church of Jesus Christ must administer the sacraments.

⁴⁷ John 10:27.

⁴⁸ Ephesians 2:17, "And *he* came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near." Paul writes something astonishing: "*He*" came and preached peace to you. The "*He*" refers to Jesus Christ, but Jesus never went to Ephesus during His earthly ministry. In fact, the church at Ephesus did not exist while Jesus was on earth. How, then, could Jesus have preached peace to the Ephesian Christians? The answer is this: where Jesus' message goes, so goes Jesus Himself. When the gospel is preached by a mere man, Jesus Christ Himself preaches peace to His people through that man.

⁴⁹ Matthew 28:18-19.

⁵⁰ Luke 22:19-20; 1 Corinthians 11:23-29.

Baptism and the Lord's Supper are the gospel of Jesus Christ made visible.⁵¹ As such, the administration of the sacraments should always be accompanied by the proclamation of the gospel. Without the gospel the sacraments are meaningless, but with the gospel they are powerful pictures of the work of Jesus Christ on our behalf. By means of the sacraments, God paints for us a portrait of what the gospel *looks* like: the broken bread depicts Jesus' body broken on our behalf; the cup of wine poured out depicts Jesus' blood poured out for our forgiveness; the water of baptism portrays the washing of regeneration.

Church discipline faithfully exercised

The third mark of a true church is church discipline. A church which allows unrepentant sin to fester unchecked within her walls, and which does not protect the sheep from the wolves,⁵² is either seriously failing as a church or no church at all. Church discipline is vital for the protection of the church and the glory of God. It is taught especially in four places in the Bible.⁵³

1. Matthew 16:19 highlights the *authority* of church discipline. Jesus Himself delegated His authority to human leaders in the church, authorizing them to exercise discipline concerning right and wrong conduct for those in the visible church. Since the apostles are the foundation of the new testament church, what Jesus entrusted to them belongs to each church in the new covenant era.
2. Matthew 18:15-20 highlights the *process* of church discipline. The first step of church discipling requires the offended party to approach the offender and call them to repentance. If the offender does not repent, the second step is the offended must approach the offender with one or two others and establish the charge against the offender in the presence of witnesses. If the charges are well established and the offender still does not repent, the third

⁵¹ Romans 6:1-4; Matthew 26:26-28.

⁵² Acts 20:28-31.

⁵³ Other passages which give evidence of church discipline: Acts 20:28-31; Romans 16:17-18; Galatians 6:1; Ephesians 5:11; 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15; 1 Timothy 1:20; 5:20; Titus 1:10-11; 3:10; Revelation 2:14-16,20.

step is to turn the matter over to the church. And if the church calls the offender to repent of their sin, and the offender does not repent, then the fourth step—excommunication—ensues, and the offender is treated as an unrepentant sinner who gives no evidence of being a Christian. The hope and prayer of the church is that the offender will repent of their sin and return to life in the body of Christ.

3. 1 Corinthians 5:1-13 highlights the *reasons* for church discipline. There are four reasons in particular:
 - a. *The church's witness to the world.* When the church tolerates within her walls sins which non-Christians do not tolerate,⁵⁴ the church ceases to be a light to the world.
 - b. *The repentance of the sinner.* Removing an unrepentant sinner from the privileges of fellowship with the body of Christ will give the sinner opportunity to consider the eternal consequences of his sin. By God's grace, the sinner's flesh will falter under the weight of being cut-off from the Christian community, and he will repent.
 - c. *The health of the Christian community.* A little leaven leavens the whole lump, which means that one unrepentant sinner allowed to live unchecked inside the church can ruin the entire church by dragging many Christians into unrepentant sin.
 - d. *The honor of Jesus Christ.* Christ Jesus, our Passover Lamb, was slain to redeem us from sin. Therefore, a church which allows her members to live in unrepentant sin is being disobedient to her Lord and Savior, and is compromising the good name of Jesus Christ among non-Christians.
4. 2 Corinthians 2:5-11 highlights the *goal* of church discipline: the restoration of the sinner. When God adds His blessing to church discipline the sinner repents. Upon repentance,

⁵⁴ 1 Corinthians 5:1.

the Christian community forgives, comforts, and welcomes back the person into full communion with the church.

So, wherever you join, make sure the church preaches the sound doctrine of the gospel, faithfully administers the sacraments, and pastorally exercises church discipline.

Responsibilities of Membership

Christians are called of God to offer their lives in service to all men, and especially to those of the household of faith.⁵⁵ Life in the church is not about happiness (the flimsy kind) or convenience. It is about glorifying God through sharing life together and reaching out. Life together in the household of God is a gift in much the same way that life together in a Christian household is a gift. In order for church-life to function according to the Maker's design, every member of the household must attend to his/her respective "chores." Christians who covenant with God and each other diligently take up the following responsibilities:⁵⁶

1. *Worship and Prayer.* Christians in fellowship with each other assemble regularly to worship God,⁵⁷ ensure the preaching and teaching they hear is healthy,⁵⁸ ensure the sacraments are administered properly,⁵⁹ and pray for one another continually.⁶⁰
2. *Generosity.* Christians are financially and materially generous with one another,⁶¹ giving freely to each other from the heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.⁶² Our generosity is fueled by the gospel alone: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was

⁵⁵ Galatians 6:10.

⁵⁶ The following list of responsibilities is an expanded version of the ARPC *Form of Government*, 5.B.

⁵⁷ Acts 2:42, 46; Hebrews 10:25.

⁵⁸ Galatians 1:8-9; Revelation 2:14-16, 20.

⁵⁹ Matthew 28:19; 1 Corinthians 11:17-34.

⁶⁰ 2 Corinthians 9:14; Colossians 1:9; 4:3; 1 Thessalonians 3:10; 5:17, 25; 2 Thessalonians 1:11; 3:1; Hebrews 13:18; James 5:16; Jude 1:20.

⁶¹ Matthew 19:21; Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35.

⁶² 2 Corinthians 9:7.

rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich."⁶³

3. *Self-sacrifice.* Christians render wholehearted service to Christ⁶⁴ and His Kingdom throughout the world.⁶⁵ As members of a church, Christians serve each other as if they were serving Jesus Christ Himself,⁶⁶ and they offer their bodies as living sacrifices to God through their service to one another.
4. *Peaceful living.* Our God is a God of peace.⁶⁷ On that basis each Christian must live at peace with others.⁶⁸ There are some Christians so contentious, controversial, and quarrelsome that peace with them is momentary at best, and often impossible,⁶⁹ but we should strive to live at peace with them in so far as we are able to.⁷⁰
5. *Humility.* Pride is the opposite of humility. Pride is self-centered; humility is God/other-centered. Pride thinks more highly of self than others; humility thinks more highly of God and others than self.⁷¹ No man is free from pride, and the more we have it, the more we dislike it in others.⁷² The church is a pleasant place when Christians are neither haughty nor wise in their own sight, but friends of the lowly.⁷³ Humble Christians do not focus on defending *their* status or reputation, but on defending the status and reputation of God and others, for that is what Jesus Christ did when He became nothing, taking the form of a slave, and humbling Himself even to death on a Cross.⁷⁴ Jesus Christ came with us in mind, to redeem us, to save us, to rescue us. He sacrificed His prerogatives for our sake. In other words:

⁶³ 2 Corinthians 8:9.

⁶⁴ Acts 20:18-19; Romans 12:11.

⁶⁵ Romans 15:25-28; 1 Corinthians 16:1-3; 1 Thessalonians 4:9-10.

⁶⁶ Matthew 25:31-46.

⁶⁷ Romans 15:33; 2 Corinthians 13:11.

⁶⁸ Romans 14:19; 2 Corinthians 13:11; 1 Thessalonians 5:13.

⁶⁹ 1 Timothy 6:3-5; Titus 3:10-11.

⁷⁰ Romans 12:18.

⁷¹ Psalm 131:1; Romans 12:3; Philippians 2:3.

⁷² C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity: The Great Sin*.

⁷³ Romans 12:16.

⁷⁴ Philippians 2:7-8.

True humility is not thinking *less* of yourself, it is thinking of yourself *less*.⁷⁵

If anyone wonders what humility may look like in a person, and wonders how to acquire such humility, C.S. Lewis may be of help:

Do not imagine that if you meet a really humble man he will be what most people call 'humble' nowadays: he will not be a sort of greasy, smarmy person, who is always telling you that, of course, he is nobody. Probably all you will think about him is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent chap who took a real interest in what *you* said to *him*. If you do dislike him it will be because you feel a little envious of anyone who seems to enjoy life so easily. He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all.

If anyone would like to acquire humility, I can, I think, tell him the first step. The first step is to realize that one is proud. And a biggish step, too. At least, nothing whatever can be done before it. If you think you are not conceited, it means you are very conceited indeed.⁷⁶

6. *Genuine Love*. Christians are to love each other not as actors in a show, but genuinely, sincerely, and truthfully.⁷⁷ Our love should not be sentimental or slushy, and not a fake display of lies, but real, sincere, truthful, and heartfelt, patterned after our God who is love.⁷⁸
7. *Truth in Speech*. Satan is a liar and the father of lies.⁷⁹ Conversely, our God is the God of Truth,⁸⁰ Jesus is the Truth,⁸¹ and the Holy Spirit is the Truth.⁸² Therefore, Christians must put off falsehood, speak the truth to one another,⁸³ and speak the truth in love.⁸⁴

⁷⁵ Tim Keller, *Ministries of Mercy: The Call of the Jericho Road*, p. 64.

⁷⁶ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity: The Great Sin*, p. 128.

⁷⁷ Romans 12:9

⁷⁸ 1 John 4:8,16.

⁷⁹ John 8:44.

⁸⁰ John 3:33; Romans 3:4,7.

⁸¹ John 14:6.

⁸² John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13.

⁸³ Ephesians 4:25.

⁸⁴ Ephesians 4:15.

8. *Repentance.* Christians are people who confess their sins,⁸⁵ and confess their sins to one another, “Confess your sins to one another.”⁸⁶ Confession of sin to another Christian is a gospel grace, a gift from God to relieve our wasting bones and zapped strength which silence effects.⁸⁷ We do not confess our sins to each other as some do, as a form of salvation by repentance and guilt (i.e. penance). Rather, we confess our sins to one another as a means of encouragement in the Christian life. All Christians sin. Those who speak as though they sin not are a great discouragement to others and regress in their own spiritual lives. Those, however, who speak of their sins are a great encouragement to others and live deeply.

In the presence of a psychologist I can only be sick; in the presence of another Christian I can be a sinner. The psychologist must first search my heart, and yet can never probe its innermost recesses. Another Christian recognizes just this: here comes a sinner like myself...The psychologist views me as if there were no God. Another believer views me as I am before the judging and merciful God in the cross of Jesus Christ. When we are so pitiful and incapable of hearing the confession of one another, it is not due to a lack of psychological knowledge, but a lack of love for the crucified Jesus Christ. If Christians seriously deal on a daily basis with the cross of Christ, they will lose the spirit of human judgmentalism...Wherever the Word of the crucified is a living reality, there will be confession to one another.⁸⁸

9. *Forgiveness.* The church is a community built on forgiveness, not personal perfection. We are called to forgive one another as God has forgiven us in Jesus Christ,⁸⁹ which means that we forgive the unworthy and the repeat offenders. Forgiveness in the church is not a matter of “*If* someone sins against me” but “*When* someone sins against me.” Sins will happen, so forgiveness must be a part of our daily life together, and

⁸⁵ 1 John 1:8-10.

⁸⁶ James 5:16.

⁸⁷ Psalm 32:3-4.

⁸⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, pp. 115-116 (Fortress Press, DBW, Vol. 5, 2005).

⁸⁹ Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13.

endlessly so.⁹⁰ An unforgiving church is a dying church; a forgiving community is alive and healthy. Where do we find the strength to forgive others? At the Cross. God forgave us an unpayable debt; when that permeates our hearts, we gladly forgive others the pennies they owe us.⁹¹

10. *Encouragement.* Outdoing one another in showing honor⁹² means we care not for being praised, affirmed, or recognized by others, but for praising, affirming, and recognizing others. Instead of picking each other apart and grumbling against one another,⁹³ we provide daily encouragement⁹⁴ and build one another up.⁹⁵ In words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer,

Christians need other Christians who speak God's Word to them. They need them again and again when they become uncertain and discouraged...They need other Christians as bearers and proclaimers of the divine word of salvation...The goal of all Christian community is to encounter one another as bringers of the message of salvation [the gospel].⁹⁶

11. *Outreach.* Christians live as sheep in the midst of wolves.⁹⁷ Our church community, then, is a place to share the struggles of witnessing for Christ, to encourage one another to be faithful to Jesus in our witness,⁹⁸ and to learn new methods for evangelizing the hurting and the lost in Springfield, MO. Also, when Christians inside the church learn to serve each other in a Christ-like fashion, then the church becomes a safe place for non-Christians to enter and learn about Christ. Thus, the

⁹⁰ Matthew 18:21-22. Peter thought himself a forgiving person, willing to forgive a Christian brother up to seven times. But Jesus exposed Peter's unforgiving spirit, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven." Seven is the number for completion (think creation days), so Jesus says, in effect, "Peter, you should forgive your brother endlessly; there should be no limit to Christian forgiveness."

⁹¹ See Matthew 18:23-35.

⁹² Romans 12:10.

⁹³ James 5:9.

⁹⁴ Hebrews 3:13; cf. 10:25.

⁹⁵ 1 Thessalonians 5:11.

⁹⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, p. 32 (Fortress Press, DBW, Vol. 5, 2005).

⁹⁷ Luke 10:3.

⁹⁸ Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:8.

church becomes a place for both Christians and non-Christians to rest in Jesus and learn of Him. Moreover, Christians should live in such a way that their lives promote the gospel among non-Christians.⁹⁹

Procedure for Membership

There are three methods for becoming a member of Gospel of Grace Church:

1. Profession of faith
2. Membership transfer
3. Reaffirmation of faith

Profession of faith

Anyone desiring membership in Gospel of Grace Church must be examined by the session (elders) in private as to their profession of faith in Jesus Christ.¹⁰⁰ The examination focuses upon the person's awareness of their sin, their faith in Jesus Christ, and their intention to be obedient to Jesus Christ in every aspect of their lives. A definition of a profession of faith is:

A profession of faith is the account of the applicant's personal faith in Jesus Christ, wrought in them by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, which faith has made them desirous of publicly professing Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord.

The following questions form the basis for discerning a person's profession of faith. The official questions are in italic style; clarification of each question follows in regular style:¹⁰¹

1. *Do you acknowledge yourself to be a sinner in the sight of God, justly deserving His displeasure, and without hope apart from His love and mercy?*

This question addresses spiritual poverty:¹⁰² do you believe that, in and of yourself, you are spiritually bankrupt and beggarly, in desperate need of God's love and mercy and

⁹⁹ Matthew 5:16; 2 Corinthians 9:13; Galatians 1:24; 1 Peter 2:12.

¹⁰⁰ ARPC *Form of Government*, 5.C.1.

¹⁰¹ These questions are taken nearly verbatim from the ARPC *Form of Government*, 5.C.1.

¹⁰² Matthew 5:3.

without hope unless our holy and just God extends mercy and grace to you? The apostle John says Christians *have* sin¹⁰³ and *commit* sins.¹⁰⁴ Anyone, then, who considers themselves *worthy* of God's love and mercy does not yet understand their depravity and need for Jesus Christ, for Jesus came not to call the righteous (the worthy) but sinners (the unworthy) to repentance.¹⁰⁵

2. *Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God and the Savior of sinners, and do you receive Him and trust in Him alone for salvation as He is offered in the Gospel?*

A personal relationship with Jesus Christ is here discerned. The question is not *when* you put your faith in Jesus Christ, but *whether* you have put your faith in Him. Do you trust in Jesus Christ *alone* for salvation, or do you think God loves you more if you attend church, obey authorities, help your neighbor, and avoid sin?

3. *Do you believe the Scripture of the Old and New Testaments to be the written Word of God, the only perfect rule of faith and practice?*

What is the ultimate authority in your life? Is all of God's Word breathed out by Him, or just parts of it? What do you do when you encounter passages in the Bible which are hard to explain? What do you do when you disagree with the Bible?

4. *Do you now promise, in humble reliance upon the guidance of the Holy Spirit, that you will endeavor to live as a disciple of Christ is called to live?*

How, or by what power, do you intend to live as a Christian is called to live? Does it frighten you to think about living for Jesus Christ as He has commanded us to live? Is your desire to profess your faith based on a recent moral reform? How many times in the past have you resolved to live obediently for God? What has been the result?

¹⁰³ 1 John 1:8.

¹⁰⁴ 1 John 1:10.

¹⁰⁵ Luke 5:32.

5. *Do you promise, with the Lord's help, to be faithful in the performance of your Christian duties, both in private life and in the work of the Church?*

Describe your resolve to live for God when no one is around.

Is it wrong to disobey your parents, law enforcement officers, or teachers when there is no possibility of getting caught? If you are failing in your public or private duties as a Christian, do you reinvigorate yourself via self-condemnation, asceticism, rigorism, or pulling yourself up by the bootstraps, or do you call upon the Lord to help you? How do you intend to serve the members of Gospel of Grace Church?

6. *Do you submit yourself in the spirit of love to the government and discipline of this Church, and seek the peace, purity and prosperity of this congregation so long as you are a member of it?*

If you and another member adamantly disagree about an issue, how would you handle the disagreement? If another member confronts you privately about one of your sins, how would you respond to them? What would you do if the elders were called in to ask you to repent of an obviously sinful lifestyle (habitual drunkenness; habitual disrespect; adultery; drug use)? Do you promise not to be divisive against the church's teaching, and not to quarrel about words which do not profit the hearers?

If the session discerns within the person a vital relationship with Jesus Christ (solid evidence of regeneration/new birth), the person will be received into communicant membership and a Sunday scheduled where they can be publicly welcomed (and baptized if needed) into Gospel of Grace Church.

Membership transfer

Anyone who is a member of another Christian church will be received into Gospel of Grace Church on presentation to the session of certificates of good standing from the congregation to which they belong. If you are transferring your membership to Gospel of Grace Church from another church, please ask your former church to send a letter of transfer to:

Gospel of Grace Church
P.O. Box 4733
Springfield, MO 65808

The letter should say two things:

1. You are a member in good standing (you are not under church discipline)
2. They are releasing you into the spiritual care of Gospel of Grace Church.

Reaffirmation of faith

Anyone who has previously made a public profession of faith in Jesus Christ and been baptized, but who is not currently a member of a church, may reaffirm (re-profess) their faith in Jesus Christ. Reaffirmation of faith is made by appearing before the session and giving an account of one's personal faith in Jesus Christ. The interview with the session is conducted in the same way, using the same basic questions, as the profession of faith interview mentioned above.

Membership & Baptism

All adults whose membership is approved by the session and who have never before been baptized will be baptized on the same Sunday they make their public profession of faith before the congregation in worship. Any adults who have previously been baptized with water, into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in a service where the gospel was proclaimed, need not be baptized again, for there is "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Eph. 4:5).

If the parent(s) desire, Gospel of Grace Church will baptize your infant(s) and/or young children (if they have not been baptized already) in the same worship service that the parent(s) are welcomed into the church.

We encourage Christian parents to baptize their infants because God has included the children of believers into the covenant since the days of Abraham.¹⁰⁶ The same sign of the

¹⁰⁶ Genesis 17.

covenant is applied both to adults and to children. Jesus Christ Himself said that the kingdom of heaven belongs to infants and children, and He touched them and blessed them (Mark 10:13-16; Luke 18:15-16); in his sermon on Pentecost, Peter said "Repent and be baptized every one of you...for the promise is for you and for *your children* and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself";¹⁰⁷ and Paul wrote that the children of believers are holy (distinguished from unbelievers).¹⁰⁸

However, though we *encourage* Christian parents who become members to baptize their infants, the parents are not *required* to do so and are welcomed into full membership privileges regardless of their child's baptism.

Regarding older children, Gospel of Grace Church will baptize them if the children are under the spiritual authority and guidance of a Christian parent whose membership is with us. If the children are no longer under the spiritual authority and guidance of a Christian parent, then we will baptize them only after they have made a public profession of faith in Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

We hope this overview of church membership has been helpful. Sadly, church membership in many congregations is little different than membership in a fitness club or a food co-op—come and go as you please, pay your dues on time, and have a nice day. If that was your view prior to reading this booklet, we hope the biblical explanation was clear enough to debunk the notion of church membership as social club. If you are still convinced church membership is not for you we understand completely. Joining a church must be done in good conscience and with much prayer, so we refuse to push membership upon you or anyone else. Whether or not you join Gospel of Grace Church we are glad you attend, and if we can be of service to you in any way please let us know. If you would like to join Gospel of Grace Church, we welcome the opportunity to get to know you, and we ask that you speak with an

¹⁰⁷ Acts 2:38-39.

¹⁰⁸ 1 Corinthians 7:14.

elder or contact our pastor by email:
pastor@gospelofgracechurch.com or by phone: (417) 887-8944.