

EXPLORING MEMBERSHIP *at Grace Christian Fellowship*

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SESSION ONE

Exploring the Gospel

INTRODUCTION

1. Have the class participants *briefly* share their names and what they hope to get out of the class.
2. Pass around and explain the sign-up sheet.

1 // What is the purpose of this course?

This course is designed to do two things:

1. Introduce you to the history, theological distinctives, leadership structure, and church culture of Grace Christian Fellowship.
2. Provide you with all the information necessary to make an informed decision about becoming a member of Grace Christian Fellowship. We are not assuming that you should become a member of GCF, but we hope this course convinces you to become a member of a healthy church somewhere.

2 // How will this course work?

Format of the course:

- *Friday*
 - 6-7 pm Dinner
 - 7-8 pm Session One: Exploring the Gospel
 - 8-9 pm Session Two: Exploring Church Membership
- *Saturday*
 - 8:30-9 am Breakfast
 - 9-10:30 am Session Three: Exploring GCF's Beliefs
 - 10:30-10:45 am 15 min Break

- 10:45am – 12pm Session Four: Exploring GCF's Practices
- 12-1 pm Lunch / Q&A with Elders

Participation in the Course:

- Come to class
- Ask questions
- Make friends
- Read all the appendices (this is required for your membership interview)
- Consider signing up for a membership interview

GOSPEL & RESPONSE

Introduction

- a. Play the audio clip from the Christian Book Sellers Association
 - i. We want everyone to be crystal clear on the gospel.

- b. Why start with the gospel?
 - i. The gospel is the main thing at Grace Christian Fellowship. It is our only hope, primary message, and motivation for Christian living. The gospel is not just the ABCs of the Christian life; it is the A to Z of the Christian Life. We want every member of Grace Christian Fellowship to be crystal clear on the nature and content of the gospel. Without the gospel, the church of Jesus Christ cannot exist.

- c. We will cover three things in this lesson.
 - i. The need for the gospel
 - ii. The nature of the gospel
 - iii. Our response to the gospel

1 // The Need for the Gospel

A. INTRODUCTION

- i. No one can gain an understanding of the gospel without understanding their rebellion against a holy God and the severe consequences they justly deserve. In short, we must understand the "bad news" before we can adequately appreciate the "good news."

B. ILLUSTRATIONS

- i. We can only see the stars against the night sky.

- ii. Diamonds look much brighter against a black velvet cloth.
- iii. “A person must confront his own sinfulness in all its ravaging depths before he can enjoy the comforts of salvation.”¹ — *Martin Luther*

C. MAN'S SINFULNESS

i. What is sin?

- Sin is any failure to conform to the moral law of God in act, attitude, or nature.
 - Not just actions, but attitudes.
 - Matthew 5:27–28 (ESV) — You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.
 - Not just acting wrongly, but also failing to act.
 - James 4:17 (ESV) — So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.
 - Not just actions and attitudes, but our very nature.
 - Genesis 6:5 (ESV) — The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

ii. What is sin's true nature?

- Sin is essentially rebellion against God.
 - Psalm 51:4 (ESV) — Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.

¹ Martin Luther, *How Can I Be Sure?*

iii. How universal is sin?

- Adam's sin brought guilt and corruption to all people. All people sin because they are descendants of Adam. He represented us in the garden of Eden.
- Romans 5:12 (ESV) — Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned.
- All people confirm this by their actions.
- Romans 3:23 (ESV) — For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

iv. How pervasive is sin?

- Man's sin extends to every part of his being; nothing in him has been unaffected by sin.
- Theologians call this pervasive depravity. This phrase does not mean that man is as bad as he could possibly be. It simply means that sin's corrupting effects have touched every part of his being: mind, will, emotions, and body.
- Romans 3:10–12 (ESV) — ...as it is written: None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.

So far we have looked at the definition, nature, universality, and pervasiveness of sin. Next, we will look at man's need for the gospel by looking at man's sinfulness and God's holiness and wrath.

D. GOD'S HOLINESS & WRATH

Humanity faces a grave dilemma because of the character of God.

The Bible portrays God as holy. Holiness has two components.

i. God is set apart from us.

- He is infinitely higher than man, separate, and different. He is wholly other than us.
- Isaiah 46:9 (ESV) — Remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me.

ii. God is morally perfect.

- He is infinitely pure, untainted by evil desire, motive, thought, word, or deed. Therefore, he can't be in the presence of sin.
- Isaiah 6:1–6 (ESV) — In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar.

iii. Because God is holy, He must respond with fierce opposition to sin.

- This is the meaning of God's wrath.

- Wrath is God's holy response to sin. It is His personal, active antagonism to sin that derives from His settled opposition to every evil thing. It is therefore *right* and *necessary* for God to hate sin and all who practice it.
 - Habakkuk 1:13 (ESV) — You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong, why do you idly look at traitors and remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?
- “The wrath of God is his steady, unrelenting, unremitting, uncompromising antagonism to evil in all its forms and manifestations.”²
—*John Stott*
- Some think that the idea of wrath is unjust or unbecoming for a God of love. This is largely because we underestimate both the seriousness of sin and the holiness of God. Not only is God perfectly justified in His wrath, But His very character would be compromised without it.

iv. In light of God's holiness, sin has grave and inevitable consequences.

- A broken relationship with God
 - Isaiah 59:2 (ESV) — But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear.
- Enslavement to sin and Satan
 - Colossians 1:13 (ESV) — He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son.
- Consequences in this life
 - All the sorrow, pain, suffering, sweat, tears, strife, sickness, and death we experience were not part of God's original good creation. They resulted from the entrance of sin into the world.
- Eternal punishment

² John Stott, *The Message of Romans*, 75.

- 2 Thessalonians 1:8–10 (ESV) — In flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.

So far, we have looked at man’s need for the gospel by looking at man’s sinfulness and God’s holiness and wrath.

2 // The Nature of the Gospel

A. INTRODUCTION

- i. How can we be saved from our sins and the righteous wrath of God? The answer is the gospel: the “good news” of God’s saving work on our behalf through the person and work of Jesus Christ.
- ii. “The gospel is not only the most important message in all of history; it is the only essential message in all of history.”³ — *Jerry Bridges*

B. THE MOTIVE FOR THE GOSPEL: GOD’S LOVE AND MERCY

- i. John 3:16 (ESV) — For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.
- ii. 1 John 4:9–10 (ESV) — In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

³ Jerry Bridges, *Disciplines of Grace*, 46.

C. THE NATURE OF THE GOSPEL: GRACE

- i. It is often said that "we are saved by grace" and so we are. Perhaps the best one-word summary we could use for what God has done for us through Christ's work on the cross is "grace".
- ii. God's grace is His free and unmerited favor to those who merit judgment.
 - God is not obligated to show kindness to anyone.
 - We are entirely unable to earn any merit from God.
 - Yet God resolves to extend mercy and favor to us despite our guilt.
- iii. Ephesians 2:8–9 (ESV) — For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

D. THE SUBSTANCE OF THE GOSPEL: THE PERSON AND WORK OF JESUS CHRIST

i. Introduction

- As stated earlier, the gospel is the "good news" of God's saving work on our behalf through the person and work of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the gospel; it is His holy history, the news of who He is and what He has done for us. The gospel includes Jesus' birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and coming return.
- This means that the gospel has at least five components. Each one is critical. If one of them is missing, the gospel is no longer the gospel.
- We will look at each one in detail.

ii. Jesus' Birth

- Jesus is fully God, yet He was born into this world as a man, conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of a virgin named Mary. Therefore, Jesus is both fully God and fully man.
 - John 1:1 (ESV) — In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
 - John 1:14 (ESV) — And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.
 - See Matt. 1:20-21, Hebrews 2:17, Phil. 2:5-8

iii. Jesus' Perfect Sinless Life

- Even though Jesus was subject to all the temptations to which we are all subject, He never once sinned in any way.
- His perfect sinless life is often called his active obedience. His active obedience is imputed to us when we believe the gospel.
 - Hebrews 4:15 (ESV) — For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.

iv. Jesus' Death on the Cross

- At the heart of Christ's life and ministry stands the cross. His entire life had been preparatory for that moment. At the cross, Christ provided the ground of our salvation—the basis upon which God saves us.
- Jesus' death was substitutionary. He died on our behalf, receiving the legal penalty for our sins and satisfying God's wrath towards us.
 - Isaiah 53:4–6 (ESV) — Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we

have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

- 2 Corinthians 5:21 (ESV) — For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.
- Because Jesus paid the penalty for our sins, God no longer holds us responsible for paying for our sins. All of our sins were forgiven: past, present, and future.
 - Colossians 2:13–14 (ESV) — And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.
- Not only are our sins forgiven, but we are also justified- that is, we are declared righteous by God.
 - *Righteousness* is a legal term: it speaks of a “right standing” before God.
 - God considers the righteousness that Christ achieved as belonging to us. (His active obedience)
 - Jesus suffered and died in our place. (His passive obedience)
 - This declaration is a once-for-all, permanent event in our lives that nothing can change.

v. Jesus’ Resurrection from the Dead

- The resurrection demonstrates that Jesus’ death was an acceptable and effective sacrifice on our behalf. Death is the penalty for sin, and Jesus’ conquest over death in the resurrection shows that sin and death have been defeated.
 - Romans 4:25 (ESV) — Who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

- 1 Corinthians 15:17 (ESV) — And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.

vi. Jesus' Ascension & Return

- The ascension marks the beginning of Jesus' reign. He now has all rule and authority and He reigns in heaven with the Father, building His church, defeating its enemies, and interceding for His people. At the time that God has determined, He will return to consummate His work and initiate a new heaven and a new earth. Then we will reign with Him for eternity, worshipping God and experiencing the full fruits of His saving work.
 - Matthew 24:30–31 (ESV) — Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.
 - See also Revelation 21:3-4

We have looked at the need for the gospel and the nature of the gospel. But how does one respond to the gospel? This question brings us to the last point in this lesson...

4 // Our Response to the Gospel

A. WE RESPOND TO THE GOSPEL WITH FAITH AND REPENTANCE.

- i. Faith and repentance are two sides of one coin.
- ii. There is no true repentance without faith and no genuine faith without repentance.

B. WE REPENT (ONE SIDE OF THE COIN).

- i. “The New Testament word for repentance means changing one’s mind so that one’s views, values, goals, and ways are changed and one’s whole life is lived differently. The change is radical, both inwardly and outwardly... Repentance means starting to live a new life.”⁴ *J. I. Packer*
- ii. Repentance is not merely feeling bad about sin or sin’s consequences. Real repentance involves turning away from sin.

C. WE BELIEVE (THE OTHER SIDE OF THE COIN).

- i. The New Testament word for faith, when used in the context of salvation, means a genuine commitment of oneself to God, an unwavering trust in His promises, and steadfast obedience to His will.
- ii. Genuine faith involves three elements.
 - *Knowledge*: We must know the basic facts of the gospel (Rom. 10:14, 17).
 - *Agreement*: We must agree that the facts are true (Heb. 4:2).
 - *Trust*: We must personally trust in Jesus to be saved (James 2:17, 22).
- iii. We are saved through faith alone, but saving faith is never alone. It is always accompanied by repentance which continues throughout the Christian life.

D. WE GET BAPTIZED.

- i. After we repent and believe, God commands us to get baptized.
 - Acts 2:38
 - Matt. 28:18-20

⁴ J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology*, 162.

- ii. If baptism does not save us, why get baptized?
 - Christ commands it.
 - It is a beautiful sign and symbol of the believer's union with the Lord in His death, burial, and resurrection.
 - Romans 6:4
- iii. We practice baptism by immersion upon a credible profession of faith. This vividly illustrates the believer's identification with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection.
- iv. We believe that baptism and church membership ordinarily go together (please read the appendix titled "Children, Sacraments, and the Church" for a fuller discussion of this topic).

E. SUMMARY

We have looked at three things:

- i. The need for the gospel
- ii. The nature of the gospel
- iii. Our response to the gospel

4. Conclusion

- a. "We never, therefore, move on from the cross of Christ—only into a more profound understanding of the cross."⁵ — *David Pryor*
- b. "The gospel is not only the most important message in all of history; it is the only essential message in all of history. Yet we allow thousands of professing Christians to live their entire lives without clearly understanding it and experiencing the joy of living by it."⁶ — *Jerry Bridges*

⁵ David Pryor.

⁶ Jerry Bridges, *Disciplines of Grace*, 46.

c. At Grace Christian Fellowship, our goal is to keep the gospel at the heart of all that we do. It will be the substance of our proclamation, the fuel for our adoration, and the source of our motivation. We will do all we can to ensure that our zeal for the gospel is never eclipsed by any other doctrine, teaching, or practice. Our commitment to you is that, with all our might, we will endeavor to “keep the main thing, the main thing.”

d. Any questions?

SESSION TWO

Exploring Church Membership

INTRODUCTION

1. Consider four different people:

- a. Jake: He says he loves Jesus, but he is not really into organized religion. He feels closest to God when he is out in nature hiking, skiing, or riding his bike.
- b. Rebecca: She is a church hopper. She spends a few months at First Baptist Church, then a few months at First Nazarene Church, then a few months at First Presbyterian Church. She has not stayed at any one church for more than five months. But she always makes sure to be at church every Sunday.
- c. Seth: He found a great singles group on Sunday evenings. He shows up every Sunday evening, especially when Sarah is there. He only shows up Sunday morning when the sermon topic interests him.
- d. Naomi: She loves the preaching at her church but usually slips out right afterward. She does not know anyone and has never really considered joining.

2. What do all these people have in common?

- a. They all claim to be Christians.
- b. But none of them understand the nature of the church.
- c. Furthermore, they don't understand the benefits of church membership.
- d. Most importantly, they don't understand what it means to be a Christian.
- e. Perhaps these vignettes described you at some point on your spiritual journey.

3. Overview

This lesson will try to address the question of why the local church is essential in the Christian life by looking at three topics:

- i. The nature of the church
- ii. The case for formal church membership
- iii. Objections to formal church membership

THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

1 // What is the church?

A. A TECHNICAL DEFINITION

- i. The New Testament word for church is the word *ecclesia*, which means the gathering, or the assembling of a group of people. It is used 114 times in the New Testament.
- ii. One scholar writes, “The church is the body of people called by God’s grace through faith in Christ to glorify Him together by serving Him in his world.”⁷
- iii. Bible scholars make a distinction between the universal church (all Christians for all time) and the local church (a local gathering of believers in time).
- iv. While this distinction is helpful, the New Testament has no category for a member of the universal church who is not also a member of a local church.

⁷ Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* page 3.

B. A PRACTICAL DEFINITION

- i. The church is a gathering of Christians who meet together in a specific place to celebrate the gospel.
- ii. This means that the church is not the physical building where Christians meet.
- iii. How do we know if a church is a true church? This brings us to our next question.

2 // What are the biblical marks of a local church?

- a. i. For 500 years, since the Protestant Reformation, all Protestants have agreed that there are three essential marks of a church.
 - i. The right preaching of the gospel
 - ii. The proper observance of the sacraments (baptism and communion)
 - iii. The practice of church discipline
- b. ii. Without these things, you can't have a church. Which means that...
 - i. Path of Life is not the church
 - ii. UGM is not the church
 - iii. Campus Crusade for Christ is not the church
 - iv. Moody Bible Institute is not the church
 - v. The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association is not the church
 - vi. Watching a preacher online with your family or roommates is not the church
- c. The local church is a group of Christians who gather to hear God's word preached, celebrate the sacraments, and exercise church discipline.
- d. You may be thinking, "I understand what the church is, but why should I join one?" This question brings us to the next point.

THE CASE FOR FORMAL MEMBERSHIP

Introduction

- i. Does it really matter if I join a church? Am I not already a member of “the universal church” if I’m a Christian? Isn’t my personal relationship with Jesus what really matters?
- ii. Such questions are common, and not altogether surprising given our individualistic culture and natural tendency towards independence. However, such questions also reveal a misunderstanding about the church and God’s purposes in and through the church.
- iii. The Scriptures make it clear: God’s specific purposes for His people are accomplished as individuals join themselves to and participate in local churches. While all genuine believers are members of the universal body of Christ, they are to express this tangibly through membership in a specific local church.

Here are six reasons why a Christian should become a member of a local church.

1 // Church membership was the practice of the early church.

- a. Acts 2:47 (ESV) — Praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Converts were “added” to a specific group of fellow believers.)
- b. Acts 5:13 (ESV) — None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. (Believers were a discernable group of people to whom other believers “joined” themselves.)

- c. These texts imply that it was normal for new converts to formally join themselves to the body of Christ, devoting themselves to the apostles teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer (Acts 2:42ff).
- d. Furthermore, the following New Testament phrases indicate that the church was a recognizable group.
 - i. “The whole congregation” (Acts 6:5)
 - ii. “The church in Jerusalem” (Acts 8:1)
 - iii. “The disciples in Jerusalem” (Acts 9:26)
 - iv. “The whole church” (Acts 15:22)
 - v. These phrases suggest that the early church had a recognizable membership with well-defined boundaries.
 - vi. One scholar writes, “Unless one knows who the members of the church are, one cannot say whether the ‘whole church’ is present.”⁸

2 // Church membership is seen in the biblical metaphors describing the church.

- a. The primary New Testament metaphors for the church—body (1 Cor. 12:27), temple (Eph. 2:21), household (1 Tim. 3:15), and flock (Acts 20:28)—have as a critical characteristic the idea of separate individuals joined together into a single entity.
- b. Christians are even said to be part of one another (Rom. 6:12-19; 7:23; 12:4-5; 1 Cor. 6:15).
- c. One Scholar writes: "God has given us four pictures of the church, not one. This is not just to emphasize and prove the point by repetition, but also to say four different things about what it means to be a member of a church. To be a stone in His temple means to belong to a worshipping community. To be a part of a body means to belong to a living, functioning, serving, witnessing community.

⁸ John MacArthur, Systematic Theology, p. 798.

To be a sheep in the flock means belonging to a community dependent on Him for food, protection, and direction. To be a member of a family is to belong to a community bound by a common fatherhood. Put together, and you have the main functions of an individual Christian. Evidently, we are meant to fulfill these not on our own but together in the church. Now can you see the answer to the question of why you should join a church?" — Eric Lane

3 // Church membership is necessary for the level of commitment required of New Testament saints.

- a. Consider the “one another” commands given to churches in the New Testament:
 - i. “Be at peace with each other (Mk 9:50), Love one another (Jn 13:34), Be joined to one another (Ro 12:5), Honor one another (Rom 12:10), Rejoice with one another (Rom 12:15), Weep with one another (Rom 12:15), Live in harmony with one another (Ro 12:16), Accept one another (Rom 15:17), Counsel one another (Rom 15:14), Greet one another (Rom 16:16), Agree with each other (1 Co 1:10), Wait for one another (1 Co 11:33), Care for one another (1 Co 12:25), Serve one another (Gal 5:13), Carry one another’s burdens (Gal 6:2), Be kind to one another (Eph 4:32), Forgive one another (Eph 4:32), Submit to one another (Eph 5:21), Bear with one another (Col 3:13), Teach, admonish each other (Col 3:16), Encourage one another (1 Th 5:11), Build up one another (1 Th 5:11), Spur one another on (Heb 10:24), Offer hospitality to one another (1 Pe 4:9), Minister with your gifts to one another (1 Pe 4:10), Be humble toward one another (1 Pe 5:5), Confess your sins to one another (Ja 5:16), Pray for one another (Ja 5:16), Fellowship with one another (1 Jn 1:7).”
- b. Obeying these commands requires an intense commitment to one another. Said another way, you can’t love this way without being intensely committed to one another.

- c. Church membership is the mechanism we use to express our biblical commitments to each other.
- d. Furthermore, church membership indicates who we are supposed to love with this level of commitment.

4 // Church membership is the necessary condition for pastoral care.

- a. Church membership enables pastors to know which Christians they will give an account for on the day of judgment.
- b. Hebrews 13:17 (ESV) — Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.
 - i. Are we supposed to obey every Christian leader that comes along? No. We only obey the leaders of our local church, the ones we have formally agreed to submit to through a membership process.
 - ii. Will church leaders give an account for every Christian? No, they will only give an account for those who have voluntarily recognized them as their leaders (through membership).
- c. Acts 20:28 (ESV) — Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.
 - i. This verse indicates that pastors are responsible for caring for an identifiable group of people, and they will give an account for those committed to their care.

5 // Church membership is the assumed context for church discipline.

- a. Please read our statement on Church Discipline in the Appendix before the membership interview.
- b. Matthew 18:15–17 (ESV) — 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.
- c. This verse (Matthew 18:15-17) and 1 Corinthians 5 teach that believers must confront other believers who persist in unrepentant sin. If they remain unrepentant, they must be removed from the church.
- d. This action is only possible when Christians are joined together in an identifiable membership committed to living a godly lifestyle distinct from the world.
- e. Removing someone from membership is not possible if they were never members in the first place.
- f. Without church membership, it is extraordinarily challenging to practice church discipline.

6 // Church membership is exceedingly practical.

- a. How do we decide who serves in the ministries of GCF?
- b. Practically speaking, many of the serving opportunities at GCF involve working with kids (nursery, security, youth ministry, etc...)
 - i. Anyone working with a minor needs to be background checked and approved by the elders.
 - ii. The membership process allows us to do both.
 - iii. Furthermore, data shows that most predators are not willing to go through a membership class and a membership interview to work with children. (See Depaak Reju's book *On Guard*, Chapter 1)

- iv. The membership process helps us protect our kids.
- c. How about the other ministries?
 - i. The other ministries of GCF use complicated scheduling software.
 - ii. We schedule people months in advance.
 - iii. We are reluctant to schedule non-members months in advance because we have no assurances that they will be around in nine weeks when they are scheduled to serve.
 - iv. Plus, many of our ministries require extensive training (production, security, and sound). Again, we are reluctant to spend hours training people when they are not formally committed to us.
- d. To summarize, we want to know people and make sure they know us before we entrust them with church leadership and responsibility. Serving is a privilege reserved for our members.

We looked at six reasons you should consider formal church membership...

OBJECTIONS TO FORMAL MEMBERSHIP

Objection 1: Isn't being a member of the universal church enough?

RESPONSE

1. The New Testament has no category for a universal church member who is not actively involved in a local church.
2. All the commands in the Bible given to the church are given to the local church, not the universal church.

3. It is nearly impossible to obey vast portions of the New Testament if you are not actively involved in a local church.
 - a. If you are not actively involved in a local church, how are you obeying the one another commands?
 - b. Which elders are you submitting to?
 - c. Which saints are you holding accountable?

Objection 2: You can't chapter and verse membership!

RESPONSE

1. You are right...
2. But, we can't chapter and verse the trinity either. We build a case for the trinity by putting together several texts. We do the same thing for formal church membership.

Objection 3: Why do I have to sign a sheet of paper?

RESPONSE

1. We are not primarily concerned about getting you to sign a sheet of paper. We are concerned about your heart. We want you to love the church. If you love the church, what do you have to lose by signing membership paperwork? Furthermore, we often express our heart commitments by signing something (i.e., marriage documents).

2. A good parallel is Christian marriage. People sometimes say, “Why can’t we just live together? We love each other. Where does the Bible say we have to have a wedding ceremony and sign marriage paperwork?”
3. The Bible does not require these formalities. But, the Bible does require that people get married before they live together. The process of getting married varies from culture to culture. In our culture, we get married by having a wedding ceremony and signing paperwork.
4. In a similar sense, the Bible does not require you to take a membership class and sign membership paperwork. But, the Bible does require you to be committed to a local church. The formal membership process is one way for you to express your commitment to a local church in our culture.

WHY SHOULD I JOIN THIS CHURCH?

1. We are not assuming that you should, but the rest of the class is intended to help you answer this question.
 - a. Session 3 will cover GCF’s Beliefs
 - b. Session 4 will cover GCF’s Practices
2. As we have said before, our main concern is not whether you become a member of Grace Christian Fellowship, but that you become a member of a church. Ultimately, this is not an issue of our personal preference or convenience, but God's glory. We exist for His glory and Scripture is clear that God desires to make His glory known through the church. This is why the church—the gathering of God's redeemed—is so dear to Him. We trust it will become dear to you as well.
3. “I know there are some who say, ‘Well, I’ve given myself to the Lord, but I don’t intend to give myself to any church.’ I say, ‘Now why not?’ And they answer, ‘Because I can be just as good a Christian without it.’ I say, ‘Are you quite clear about that? You can be as good a Christian by disobedience to your Lord’s commands as by being obedient?’ There’s a brick. What is the brick made for? It’s made to build a house. It is of no use for the brick to tell you that it’s just as good a brick while it’s kicking

about on the ground by itself, as it would be as part of a house. Actually, it's a good-for-nothing brick. So, you rolling stone Christians, I don't believe that you're answering the purpose for which Christ saved you. You're living contrary to the life which Christ would have you live and you are much to blame for the injury you do."— Charles Spurgeon

4. "If I had never joined a church until I had found one that was perfect, I should never have joined one at all. And the moment I did join it, if I had found one, I should have spoiled it, for it would not have been a perfect church after I had become a member of it. Still, imperfect as it is, it is the dearest place on earth to us." —Charles Spurgeon

CLOSING

- Any questions?
- Closing prayer.

SESSION THREE

Exploring GCF's Beliefs

1. INTRODUCTION

- a. The most important thing about a church is what the church believes. The church down the street may have the hippest youth ministry, the most exciting children's ministry, the safest nursery, and a studio-quality band. But, if it does not understand what the Bible teaches, you need to find a new church.
- b. A church's statement of faith summarizes what they believe the Bible teaches. This is why a church's statement of faith is so important.
- c. A statement of faith does not replace the Bible.
- d. What does GCF believe? This session will answer this question by looking at two key documents.
 - i. The GCF Theological Distinctives
 - ii. The GCF Membership Statement of Faith

2. THE GCF MEMBERSHIP STATEMENT OF FAITH

A. An Introduction to Our Statement

- i. The GCF Membership Statement of Faith affirms the essential doctrines that all Protestants have agreed on for over 500 years.
- ii. This statement can be affirmed by all Protestants, regardless of their theological tribe. In other words, it can be affirmed by both...
 - o Calvinists and Arminians

- Charismatics and Cessationists
 - Complementarians and Egalitarians
 - Congregationalists and Presbyterians
 - Dispensationalists and Covenant theologians
 - Premillennialists and Amillennialists
 - Baptists and Paedobaptists
- iii. It is intentionally broad. Why? This brings up our history.

B. A History of Our Statement

- i. We started with one detailed statement of faith for everyone to affirm. Now we have two:
 - One is for leaders (much longer and more detailed)
 - One is for members (much shorter and less detailed)
- ii. The shorter statement of faith allows virtually all Protestants to join GCF, regardless of their convictions on secondary issues.
- iii. Our longer statement of faith for leaders (elders and deacons) describes GCF's views on a broader range of secondary theological issues. While these issues are secondary, they are not unimportant. They shape our philosophy of ministry, determine who we hire, and determine what types of churches we will plant.
- iv. You can read the "Statement of Faith for Elders and Deacons" in the appendix of this notebook.
- v. We will cover many of these secondary theological issues in a few moments when we talk about our theological distinctives.

C. The Content of Our Statement

- i. We believe that the Bible is the inspired, truthful, and authoritative word of God.
- ii. We believe that there is one God, eternally existent in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, co-eternal, co-equal, and co-substantial.
- iii. We believe in the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ, in His virgin birth, in His sinless life, in His miracles, in His substitutionary and propitiatory death on the cross, in His bodily resurrection, in His ascension to the right hand of the Father, and in His bodily return in power and glory.
- iv. We believe in the deity of the Holy Spirit, that He indwells all Christians, and that He gifts Christians to serve the body of Christ.
- v. We believe that all humanity falls short of God's righteous standards and is worthy of God's righteous judgment.
- vi. We believe that the gospel is the good news of Jesus Christ's birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and return.
- vii. We believe that humanity's response to the gospel is grounded in the grace of God and is made possible by the work of the Holy Spirit.
- viii. We believe that gospel benefits are only applied to those who repent of their sins and trust in Jesus Christ alone to save them.
- ix. We believe that genuine repentance and faith are characterized by a changed life.
- x. We believe that a sinner is justified by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.
- xi. We believe that all Christians must express their membership in the universal church by joining themselves to a local church where they can submit to church leaders and use their God-given gifts to serve the body of Christ.
- xii. We believe that local churches exist where the saints gather, the gospel is preached, baptism, and the Lord's Supper are rightly administered, and church discipline is practiced.

- xiii. We believe that marriage is between one man and one woman, and that sexual activity outside the context of marriage is sinful.
- xiv. We believe that the rejection of one's biological sex at birth is sinful.
- xv. We believe that human life is sacred, begins at conception, and should only end from natural causes.
- xvi. We believe that the local church's mission is summarized by the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20).
- xvii. We believe that Jesus Christ will return bodily to judge the world in righteousness.
- xviii. We believe that after final judgment, the redeemed will dwell with God forever in the new creation in glorified bodies, and the unredeemed will dwell forever in hell with Satan and his demons.

Any questions?

3. THEOLOGICAL DISTINCTIVES

A // Introduction

- i. Our theological distinctives describe what makes GCF distinct from other churches, not better, but distinct. Every church has theological distinctives. We think it is wise to state them upfront so that there are no secrets.
- ii. These distinctives are the heart and soul of GCF.
- iii. These distinctives are also found in our "*Statement of Faith for Elders and Deacons.*"
- iv. Let me be very clear; you don't have to agree with these seven theological distinctives to be a member at GCF. At the same time, we do think it is

essential for you to understand the theological distinctives of the GCF leadership team before you decide to join GCF.

B // Our Seven Theological Distinctives

I. WE ARE COMMITTED TO THE AUTHORITY AND SUFFICIENCY OF SCRIPTURE

We believe that every word of the Bible and every part of the Bible is God breathed (2 Tim. 3:16-17), making the Bible free from error in all that it affirms to be true in the original autographs (Ps. 12:6; Tit. 1:2; 2 Tim. 3:16-17). This makes the Bible the authoritative rule for the Christian life, Christians ethics, and Christian doctrine. The Bible is totally sufficient and must not be added to, superseded, or changed by later tradition, extra-biblical revelation, worldly wisdom, psychology, medicine, anthropology, or science (Rev. 22:18-19; 2 Tim. 3:15-17). Consecutive expository preaching on the Lord's day is the best way to honor the authority and sufficiency of scripture. For a fuller formulation of the authority and sufficiency of scripture, see the Chicago Statement on Biblical inerrancy.

II. WE ARE COMMITTED TO GOSPEL CENTRALITY

We believe that the gospel—the good news of God's saving activity in Jesus Christ—is the pinnacle of His redemptive acts (Ephesians 1:9–12), the center of the Bible's story (Luke 24:44–47), and the essential message for our faith, life, and witness (1 Corinthians 15:3–11). Furthermore, the gospel is not just the ABC's of the Christian life but the A to Z of the Christian life. We are committed to preaching the gospel from all of scripture, singing the gospel, praying the gospel, and building our church upon the gospel (2 Timothy 4:2; Colossians 3:16; Matthew 16:18). Our ultimate hope in all that we do is not our plans and labors, but the virgin birth, perfect life, substitutionary death, victorious resurrection, ascension, and glorious return of Jesus Christ.

III. WE ARE COMMITTED TO REFORMED THEOLOGY

Scripture presents the all-glorious, triune God as the source and end of all things (Romans 11:36), sovereignly working all things according to His will (Ephesians 1:11). At the center of God's purposes in the world is the exaltation of His glory through the redemption of sinners (John 17:1–26). To this end, we believe that God sovereignly and unconditionally elects men and women to be saved in order to display His immeasurable grace and glory (Ephesians 1:3–6; Romans 9:11). God's sovereign grace in salvation humbles us, fills us with gratitude, and compels us to worship Him and share the message of His grace to all people.

IV. WE ARE COMMITTED TO COMPLEMENTARITY

We believe it was God's glorious plan to create men and women in His image, giving them equal dignity and value in His sight, while appointing differing and complementary roles for them within the home and the church (Genesis 1:26–28; Ephesians 5:22–33; 1 Timothy 2:8–15; Gal. 3:28–29). Because these roles give different expressions to God's image in humanity, they should be valued and pursued in joy and faith. As the redeemed community of God, the church has a unique opportunity and responsibility to celebrate this complementarity, to contend for it against cultural hostility, and to protect it from sinful distortions. For a fuller statement of these matters, please see the Danvers statement.

V. WE ARE COMMITTED TO CONTINUATIONIST PNEUMATOLOGY

With the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, God's purpose to dwell among His people entered a new era (Exodus 33:14–16; Leviticus 26:12; John 14:16–17; Acts 2:14–21). We believe the Holy Spirit desires to continually fill each believer with increased power for holiness and witness, including the giving of His supernatural gifts for the building up of the church and for various works of ministry in the world (Acts 1:8; Galatians 5:16–18; 1 Corinthians 12:4–7). We are eager to pursue God's active presence in all its breadth, that Christ may be magnified in our lives, in the church, and among the nations (Psalm 105:4; 1 Corinthians 14:1; Ephesians 2:22).

VI. WE ARE COMMITTED TO THE LOCAL CHURCH

The local church is at the center of God's plan to glorify Himself in human history (Eph. 3:10-11). Therefore, we exhort our members to pursue meaningful relationships within the church (Heb. 10:24-25; Acts 2:42-48), serve wholeheartedly in the church, and give their resources to the church. Furthermore, we honor formal church membership, practice church discipline (Matt. 18:15-20), train church leaders, and submit to biblical church government (Heb. 13:17). Finally, we give the majority of our mission money to ministries devoted to planting and building healthy local churches.

VII. WE ARE COMMITTED TO ELDER GOVERNANCE

Jesus Christ reigns as head over His church, and He gives to His church elders (or pastors) to govern and lead local churches under His authority (Colossians 1:18; Ephesians 4:11; Titus 1:5). We believe that men, qualified by both character and gifting, are to serve as elders, shepherding God's people as under-shepherds of Christ (1 Timothy 2:12; 3:1-7; 1 Peter 5:1-3). A church's health is to a great degree dependent on the spiritual maturity of its elders, and so our aim is to strengthen the current elders of GCF while identifying and training new ones (Acts 20:28; 2 Timothy 2:2).

GCF Elders

David Farley	Brian Ulrich (EIT)
John Kershinar	Josh Soehner
Dan King	Mark Williams

How does one become an elder at GCF?

GCF Deacons

- The office of Deacon is a non-governing office.
- Our Deacons assist the elders by leading our community groups.

Any questions?

4. SUMMARY

- a. What does GCF expect its members to believe?
 - i. The Membership Statement of Faith
 - o Full affirmation.
- b. GCF Theological Distinctives
 - i. Full awareness, but not full affirmation.
 - ii. You can disagree with these and still be a member of GCF, as long as you agree not to be divisive.
- c. This lesson describes what GCF believes, but how does GCF do life together?
This is the subject of the next lesson.
- d. Closing prayer.

SESSION FOUR

Exploring GCF's Practices (Life Together)

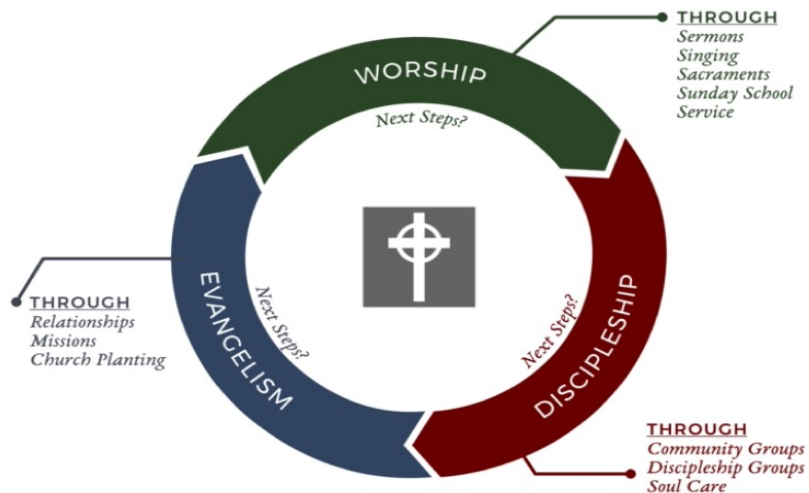
1. INTRODUCTION

- a. Acts 2:42–47 (ESV) - And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.
- b. Acts 2:42-47 provides a brief snapshot of life in the early church.
- c. What do you observe about their life together?
 - i. Intense love
 - ii. High commitment
 - iii. Etc...
- d. What does life together look like at GCF?
- e. It is summarized in two places.
 - i. The GCF mission statement
 - ii. The GCF membership agreement

2. MISSION STATEMENT

A // Introduction

- i. Our statement of faith describes what we believe, and our mission statement describes what we do as a church.
- ii. “GCF exists to glorify God through gospel-centered worship, discipleship, and evangelism.”
- iii. We will look at each phrase of this statement.



B // What does gospel-centered mean?

- i. We believe that the gospel is not just the ABC's of the Christian life; it is the A to Z of the Christian life.
- ii. Once we become Christians, we never move on from the gospel.
- iii. The gospel (the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus) is the engine that drives the Christian life by providing us with motivation and power for godly living.
- iv. We want the gospel to drive all of the activities of GCF.

C // Gospel-Centered Worship

I. WE WORSHIP GOD WHEN WE GATHER WITH THE SAINTS ON THE LORD'S DAY.

- We expect our members to gather for worship on a regular basis.
- Furthermore, we expect our members to come to the quarterly members' meetings.

II. WE WORSHIP GOD THROUGH A LIFESTYLE OF SERVICE.

- Here is a non-exhaustive list of opportunities to serve at GCF:
 - Children's Sunday school
 - Coffee bar
 - Communion prep
 - Youth ministry
 - Media production
 - Nursery
 - Security
 - Medical stand-by team (North)
 - Sound production
 - Worship
 - Hospitality
- We expect all of our members to serve the church in some capacity.
- Next steps:
 - Become a member
 - Indicate where you would like to serve

III. WE WORSHIP GOD BY GIVING OUR MONEY TO THE CHURCH.

1. What a person does with his or her money is an indicator of what they trust and worship.

2. According to the Bible, everything belongs to God, including our money. We are simply His stewards.
3. We expect our members to give their money generously to GCF. This probably means at least ten percent. Why do we say, "at least ten percent?"
4. The word tithe means ten percent. Under the old Covenant, the Israelites participated in three tithes, but one of the tithes was every third year. This means they gave roughly 23% of their money to God every year.
5. We live under the New Covenant. Therefore, we are no longer bound by the tithing laws.
6. But the Bible is clear to whom much is given, much is expected.
7. God has given us far more privileges than the OT saints. Under the new covenant, He has promised to forgive all of our sins, fill us with His Spirit, and write His law on our hearts (Jer. 31:31-34).
8. Furthermore, we have intimate knowledge of the gospel, motivating us to be generous. (2 Cor. 8-9)
9. The New Testament does not specify how much new covenant Christians should give. But, if the old covenant saints participated in three tithes with far fewer privileges, new covenant saints should consider at least starting with ten percent.
10. Ultimately, you need to pray about how much to give; there are no rules. This decision is between you and God. But you can never out-give God.
11. When you give of your hard-earned money to GCF, the elders and staff work hard at stewarding your money as wisely as possible.
12. Please read our position paper on financial stewardship in the appendix for a more detailed discussion of this crucial topic.

D // Gospel-Centered Discipleship

I. EXPLANATION

1. Matthew 28:18–19 (ESV) — 18 And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, (see also 2 Tim. 2:2)
2. Discipleship is not optional for the church of Jesus Christ. King Jesus mandated it before He ascended to heaven. He told His followers to make disciples of all the nations. This mandate included baptizing people and teaching them to obey all that Christ commanded them.

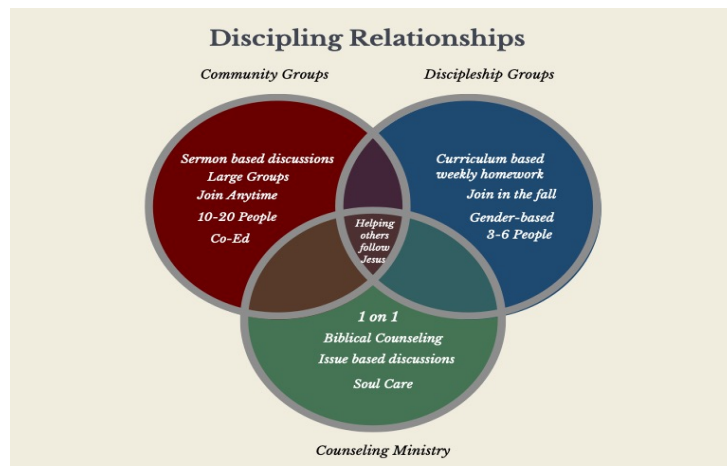
II. WHAT IS DISCIPLESHIP?

1. Discipleship is helping others follow Jesus, who in turn will help others follow Jesus.
2. Furthermore, discipleship involves spiritual multiplication.
3. In other words, real disciples make disciples who make disciples who make more disciples.
4. The New Testament assumes that Christians are intimately involved in the lives of other Christians (Heb. 10:23-25; Acts 2:42-48).
5. Close discipling relationships with other Christians are vital for all Christians.
6. Biblical fellowship and discipleship with other Christians are not a nice bonus, optional, or extra credit. They are crucial for the growth and perseverance of all Christians.
7. C-groups and D- groups help us obey the 30+ “one another” commands found in the New Testament.

III. GCF DISCIPLESHIP GOALS.

1. We expect every member of GCF to be involved in a discipling relationship.
2. This ordinarily happens in one of three ways.
 - a. Discipleship Groups

- i. 3-6 adults
 - ii. Single gender
 - iii. Reading assignments/Scripture reading/Scripture memory.
 - iv. You must sign up in the fall on our website (last nine months).
- b. Community Groups
 - i. 10-20 Adults
 - ii. Male and Female
 - iii. Sermon based discussions and fellowship.
 - iv. You can join anytime.
 - v. Sign up anytime on our website.
- c. Counseling ministry
 - i. One on one help in specific areas of interest.



E // Gospel-Centered Evangelism

I. PERSONAL EVANGELISM

1. We want every member to pursue evangelistic relationships with non-Christians.
2. We believe that relationships are the key to effective evangelism.

3. As a result, we don't do a lot of evangelistic programs.
4. The gospel motivates us to participate in evangelism.

II. MISSIONS

1. Our goal is to give ten percent of our annual budget to missionaries and ministries that share our theological distinctives.
2. We would prefer to give to a few missionaries significantly than give to a large number of missionaries sparingly.
3. Furthermore, we prefer keeping our list of missionaries small so that we can have meaningful relationships with them.
4. We believe that church planting is the best missions strategy both domestically and globally.

F // Summary

1. We have looked at what we do as a church by looking at our mission statement, "GCF exists to glorify God through gospel-centered worship, discipleship, and evangelism."
2. Are there any questions so far?

3. THE GCF MEMBERSHIP AGREEMENT

A // Introduction

- i. Although membership agreements may be a new concept for many of you, they have a long and rich history in the church.

- ii. Christians have long understood that committing to a local church meant not only committing to Scriptural truths, but committing to a way of life. Historically, Christians gave expression to this commitment through a Church Covenant (membership agreement). Rather than being a summary of the doctrinal teaching of Scripture (i.e., Statement of Faith), the church membership agreement outlined the kind of life that Christians were committing to living out and wanted to be held accountable to when they joined a church.

B // GCF's Membership Agreement

1. **Preamble:** A local church is more than a Sunday gathering. Fellowship in the church is realized in committed relationships as we seek to help one another grow in love and obedience to Christ. At Grace Christian Fellowship Church, our commitments to one another are summarized in the following church membership agreement.
2. **Membership Agreement:** Having been brought by God's grace to repentance and faith in Jesus,¹
and having been baptized upon profession of that faith,²
we now commit to one another, by God's enabling grace.³
3. We will seek to grow our relationship with the Lord through the Word and prayer.⁴
We will live in accord with the gospel we believe,⁵
honoring Jesus in public and in private, in every sphere of life and in all relationships,⁶
encouraging obedience to Jesus among Christians,⁷
and seeking the salvation of those who remain outside of Jesus.⁸
4. We will gather each Sunday, as God enables us,⁹
to worship the triune God together¹⁰
by listening to the reading and preaching of his Word,¹¹
praying and singing his Word,¹²
confessing our sins and our faith,¹³
and celebrating the Lord's Supper.¹⁴

5. We will also look for other opportunities to gather with one another, to encourage each other's obedience to Jesus in all things.¹⁵
6. We will care for one another¹⁶
by praying for each other,¹⁷
discipling each other,¹⁸
serving each other,¹⁹
speaking truth in love,²⁰
rejoicing in each other's happiness,²¹
and bearing each other's burdens.²²
7. If a member remains in clear and unrepentant sin, we will lovingly seek their repentance as directed by God's Word.²³
8. We will humbly pursue the unity of this church,²⁴
by avoiding gossip, grudges, and sowing discord,²⁵
by being quick to forgive,²⁶
and seeking reconciliation with those we have offended.²⁷
9. We will follow the leadership of the Elders as those who will give an account for keeping watch over our souls.²⁸ We will avoid promoting doctrine that directly opposes the public teaching of the Elders in a way that sows division.²⁹
10. We will regularly, generously, and cheerfully contribute toward the financial needs of this church³⁰
in order to support the ongoing ministry of the Word,³¹
purposes and ministries of this church,³²
and members in financial need.³³
11. If I leave this church,
I will seek to do so peaceably, notifying the elders,³⁴
while looking to join another church that celebrates the same gospel,
continuing to live out the spirit of this commitment to Jesus and his people.³⁵
12. **Benediction:** Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.³⁶

Any questions?

4. NEXT STEPS

Congratulations, you have officially completed the GCF membership class!

How does one become a member of GCF?

I. THERE ARE CERTAIN THINGS YOU NEED TO AFFIRM:

1. You need to affirm the Membership Statement of Faith.
2. You need to affirm the Membership Agreement.
3. You need to affirm the GCF Paper on Church Discipline.

II. THERE ARE CERTAIN THINGS YOU NEED TO DO:

1. You need to get baptized.
2. You need to read all the articles in the appendix of this notebook.
3. You need to call the church office to schedule a membership interview.

¹ Eph. 2:8-9

² Mt. 28:19-20

³ 1 Cor. 12:12-27

⁴ 2 Pet. 3:18; 1 Pet. 2:2; Col. 3:16; 4:2

⁵ Gal. 2:14

⁶ 1 Cor. 10:31

⁷ Heb. 3:13

⁸ 2 Cor. 5:19-20

⁹ Heb. 10:24-25

¹⁰ John 4:23-24

¹¹ 1 Tim. 4:13

¹² Eph. 5:19-21; Col. 3:16-17

¹³ James 5:16; 1 John 1:9

¹⁴ 1 Cor. 11:22-30

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- ¹⁵ Rom 12:13; 1 Pet. 4:9
¹⁶ 1 Cor. 12:25
¹⁷ James 5:13-16
¹⁸ Mt. 28:19; 2 Tim. 2:2; Tit. 2:1-6
¹⁹ Gal. 5:13; 1 Pet. 4:10-11
²⁰ Eph. 4:15-16
²¹ Rom. 12:15
²² Gal. 6:2
²³ Gal. 6:1; Mt. 18:15-20
²⁴ John 17:21-23; 1 Pet. 3:8; Eph. 4:1-6
²⁵ Eph. 4:31-5:2
²⁶ Rom. 12:14-18; Mt 5:23; 18:21-35; Phil. 2:1-2; James 1:19
²⁷ 1 Cor. 6:1-8
²⁸ 1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Pet. 5; Heb. 13:7, 17
²⁹ Rom. 16:17-18; Prov 6:19
³⁰ 1 Cor. 16:1-2; 2 Cor. 9:6-8; 1 Cor. 9:8-14; Heb. 13:16; Acts 20:35
³¹ Gal. 6:6; 1 Tim. 5:17
³² Phil. 4:15-20; 3 John 5-8
³³ Acts 2:45; Eph. 4:28
³⁴ Rom. 12:18
³⁵ Heb. 10:24-25
³⁶ Heb. 13:21

GCF STATEMENT OF FAITH FOR ELDERS & DEACONS

THE SCRIPTURES

We accept the Bible, including the 39 books of the Old Testament and the 27 books of the New Testament, as the written Word of God. The Bible is the only essential and infallible record of God's self-disclosure to mankind. It leads us to salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Being given by God, the Scriptures are both fully and verbally inspired by God. Therefore, as originally given, the Bible is free of error in all it teaches. Each book is to be interpreted according to its context and purpose and in reverent obedience to the Lord who speaks through it in living power. All believers are exhorted to study the Scriptures and diligently apply them to their lives. The Scriptures are the authoritative and normative rule and guide of all Christian life, practice, and doctrine. They are totally sufficient and must not be added to, superseded, or changed by later tradition, extra-biblical revelation, or worldly wisdom. Every doctrinal formulation, whether of creed, confession, or theology must be put to the test of the full counsel of God in Holy Scripture.

GOD IS TRIUNE

There is one God: infinite, eternal, almighty, and perfect in holiness, truth, and love. In the unity of the godhead there are three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, co-existent, co-equal, co-eternal. The Father is not the Son and the Son is not the Holy Spirit, yet each is truly Deity. One God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—is the foundation of Christian faith and life.

GOD THE FATHER

God the Father is the Creator of heaven and earth. By his word and for his glory, he freely and supernaturally created the world from nothing. Through the same Word he daily sustains all his creatures. He rules over all and is the only Sovereign. His plans and purposes cannot be thwarted. He is faithful to every promise, works all things together for good to those who love him, and in his unfathomable grace gave his Son, Jesus Christ, for mankind's redemption. He made man for fellowship with himself, and intended that all creation should live to the praise of his glory.

JESUS CHRIST

Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, was the eternal Word made flesh, supernaturally conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary. He was perfect in nature, teaching, and obedience. He is fully God and fully man. He was always with God and is God. Through him all things came into being and were created. He was before all things and in him all things hold together by the word of his power. He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation, and in him dwells the fullness of the godhead bodily. He is the only Savior for the sins of the world, having shed his blood and died a vicarious death on Calvary's cross. By his death in our place, he revealed the divine love and upheld divine justice, removing our guilt and reconciling us to God. Having redeemed us from sin, the third day he rose bodily from the grave, victorious over death and the powers of darkness, and for a period of 40 days appeared to more than 500 witnesses, performing many convincing proofs of his resurrection. He ascended into heaven where, at God's right hand, he intercedes for his people and rules as Lord over all. He is the Head of his body, the Church, and should be adored, loved, served, and obeyed by all.

THE HOLY SPIRIT

The Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, convicts the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment. Through the proclamation of the gospel he persuades men to repent of their sins and confess Jesus as Lord. By the same Spirit a person is led to trust in divine mercy. The Holy Spirit unites believers to Jesus Christ in faith, brings about the new birth, and dwells within the regenerate. The Holy Spirit has come to glorify the Son, who in turn came to glorify the Father. He will lead the Church into a right understanding and rich application of the truth of God's Word. He is to be respected, honored, and worshiped as God the Third Person of the Trinity.

MAN

God made man—male and female—in his own image, as the crown of creation, that man might have fellowship with him. Tempted by Satan, man rebelled against God. Being estranged from his Maker, yet responsible to him, he became subject to divine wrath, inwardly depraved and, apart from a special work of grace, utterly incapable of returning to God. This depravity is radical and pervasive. It extends to his mind, will, and affections. Unregenerate man lives under the dominion of sin and Satan. He is at enmity with God, hostile toward God, and hateful of God. Fallen, sinful people, whatever their character or attainments, are lost and without hope apart from salvation in Christ.

THE GOSPEL

Jesus Christ is the gospel. The good news is revealed in his birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension. Christ's crucifixion is the heart of the gospel, his resurrection is the power of the gospel, and his ascension is the glory of the gospel. Christ's death is a substitutionary and propitiatory sacrifice to God for our sins. It satisfies the demands of God's holy justice and appeases his holy wrath. It also demonstrates his mysterious love and reveals his amazing grace. Jesus Christ is the only mediator between God and man. There is no other name by which men must be saved. At the heart of all sound doctrine is the cross of Jesus Christ and the infinite privilege that redeemed sinners have of glorifying God because of what he has accomplished. Therefore, we want all that takes place in our hearts, churches, and ministries to proceed from and be related to the cross.

MAN'S RESPONSE TO THE GOSPEL

Man's response to the gospel is rooted and grounded in the free and unconditional election of God for his own pleasure and glory. It is also true that the message of the gospel is only effectual to those who genuinely repent of their sins and, by God's grace, put saving faith in Christ. This gospel of grace is to be sincerely preached to all men in all nations. Biblical repentance is characterized by a changed life, and saving faith is evidenced by kingdom service or works. While neither repentance nor works save, unless a person is willing to deny himself, pick up his cross, and follow Christ, he cannot become his disciple.

MAN'S INHERITANCE THROUGH THE GOSPEL

Salvation, the free gift of God, is provided by grace alone, through faith alone, because of Christ alone, for the glory of God alone. Anyone turning from sin in repentance and looking to Christ and his substitutionary death receives the gift of eternal life and is declared righteous by God as a free gift. The righteousness of Christ is imputed to him. He is justified and fully accepted by God. Through Christ's atonement for sin an individual is reconciled to God as Father and becomes his child. The believer is forgiven the debt of his sin and, via the miracle of regeneration, liberated from the law of sin and death into the freedom of God's Spirit.

SANCTIFICATION

The Holy Spirit is the active agent in our sanctification and seeks to produce his fruit in us as our minds are renewed and we are conformed to the image of Christ. Though indwelling sin remains a reality, as we are led by the Spirit we grow in the knowledge of the Lord, freely keeping his commandments and endeavoring to so live in the world that

all people may see our good works and glorify our Father who is in heaven. All believers are exhorted to persevere in the faith, knowing they will have to give an account to God for their every thought, word, and deed. The spiritual disciplines, especially Bible study, prayer, worship and confession, are a vital means of grace in this regard. Nevertheless, the believer's ultimate confidence to persevere is based in the sure promise of God to preserve his people until the end, which is most certain.

EMPOWERED BY THE SPIRIT

In addition to effecting regeneration and sanctification, the Holy Spirit also empowers believers for Christian witness and service. While all genuine believers are indwelt by the Holy Spirit at conversion, the New Testament indicates the importance of an ongoing, empowering work of the Spirit subsequent to conversion as well. Being indwelt by the Spirit and being filled with the Spirit are theologically distinct experiences. The Holy Spirit desires to fill each believer continually with increased power for Christian life and witness, and imparts his supernatural gifts for the edification of the Body and for various works of ministry in the world. All the gifts of the Holy Spirit at work in the church of the first-century are available today, are vital for the mission of the church, and are to be earnestly desired and practiced.

THE CHURCH

God by his Word and Spirit creates the Church, calling sinful men out of the whole human race into the fellowship of Christ's Body. By the same Word and Spirit, he guides and preserves that new redeemed humanity. The Church is not a religious institution or denomination. Rather, the Church universal is made up of those who have become genuine followers of Jesus Christ and have personally appropriated the gospel. The Church exists to worship and glorify God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It also exists to serve him by faithfully doing his will in the earth. This involves a commitment to see the gospel preached and churches planted in all the world for a testimony. The ultimate mission of the Church is the making of disciples through the preaching of the gospel. When God transforms human nature, this then becomes the chief means of society's transformation. Upon conversion, newly redeemed men and women are added to a local church, in which they devote themselves to teaching, fellowship, the Lord's Supper, and prayer.

All members of the Church universal are to be a vital and committed part of a local church. In this context they are called to walk out the New Covenant as the people of God, and demonstrate the reality of the kingdom of God. The ascended Christ has given gift

ministries to the church (including apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers) for the equipping of Christ's body that it might mature and grow. Through the gift ministries, all members of the Church are to be nurtured and equipped for the work of ministry. Women play a vital role in the life of the church, but in keeping with God's created design they are not permitted "to teach or to exercise authority over a man" (1 Timothy 2:12 ESV). Leadership in the church is male. In the context of the local church, God's people receive pastoral care and leadership and the opportunity to employ their God-given gifts in his service in relation to one another and to the world.

SACRAMENTS OF THE CHURCH

Water baptism is intended only for the individual who has received the saving benefits of Christ's atoning work and become his disciple. Therefore, in obedience to Christ's command and as a testimony to God, the Church, oneself, and the world, a believer should be immersed in water in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Water baptism is a visual demonstration of a person's union with Christ in the likeness of his death and resurrection. It signifies that his former way of life has been put to death, and vividly depicts a person's release from the mastery of sin.

As with water baptism, the Lord's Supper is to be observed only by those who have become genuine followers of Christ. This ordinance symbolizes the breaking of Christ's body and the shedding of his blood on our behalf, and is to be observed repeatedly throughout the Christian life as a sign of continued participation in the atoning benefits of Christ's death. As we partake of the Lord's Supper with an attitude of faith and self-examination, we remember and proclaim the death of Christ, receive spiritual nourishment for our souls, and signify our unity with other members of Christ's body.

THE CONSUMMATION

The Consummation of all things includes the visible, personal and glorious return of Jesus Christ, the resurrection of the dead and the translation of those alive in Christ, the judgment of the just and the unjust, and the fulfillment of Christ's kingdom in the new heavens and the new earth. In the Consummation, Satan with his hosts and all those outside Christ are finally separated from the benevolent presence of God, enduring eternal punishment, but the righteous, in glorious bodies, shall live and reign with him forever. Married to Christ as his Bride, the Church will be in the presence of God forever, serving him and giving him unending praise and glory. Then shall the eager expectation of creation be fulfilled and the whole earth shall proclaim the glory of God who makes all things new.

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STATEMENT ON CHURCH DISCIPLINE ¹

For Members of Grace Christian Fellowship

“And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? ‘My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. ⁶ For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.’” – Hebrews 12:5-6

I. Definitions

a. The Church

- i. The church is a holy community created by God and intended to reflect His character and glory in the midst of a fallen world. God loves the church and His ultimate purpose for His church is to make it a gift to His Son; thus He calls it the Bride of Christ. For this reason the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are constantly at work to purify the church and bring her to maturity (Eph 4:7-16; 5:25-27).

b. Life in the Church

- i. The Bible provides standards from God for the faith and life of all who are a part of the church. Elders² are commissioned by God to instruct, govern and preserve local churches within these bounds of doctrine and practice. In addition, He calls individual church members to both apply the Word to themselves and also to encourage and admonish one another in it.

c. Church Discipline

- i. Church discipline is the corrective process which God has given to the church when a member persists in sin. Such persistent sins may be:
 1. Personal – sins which wrong or injure particular individuals; e.g. slander, anger, bitterness, theft (Matt 18:15-20)

¹ This statement was crafted by Mark Mullery, senior pastor of Sovereign Grace Church of Fairfax Virginia.

² The terms “elder” and “pastor” are considered synonymous and are used interchangeably in this statement.

2. General – sins which are not directed at a particular individual; e.g. heresy, divisiveness, immorality, drunkenness (Gal 1:8-9; Rom 16:17-18; 1Cor 5)
 3. Private – sins known only to a few (Matt 18:15; Prov 25:9)
 4. Public – sins which are conspicuous and widely known (1Cor 5:13)
- d. Church discipline is neither intended to humiliate someone nor to seek revenge. It is an expression of God's fatherly love (Prov 3:11-12). Those involved in bringing this correction are to be motivated by sincere love and their words and actions are to combine both grace and truth.

II. Purpose

- a. The purpose of this gift from God is threefold:
 - i. The glory of God (Eph 3:20-21)
 - ii. The unity and purity of the church (Eph 5:25-27)
 - iii. The restoration of the straying church member (Matt 18:15-17)

III. Practice

- a. *Self-discipline.* God calls every believer to be conformed into the image of His Son. This involves hearing and obeying God's Word and results in each believer disciplining himself so as to conform to his Savior. We recognize that most "church discipline" situations start and end here, with the believer diligently applying God's Word to his life (1Tim 4:7).
- b. *Minor offenses.* Though in Christ every believer has been declared righteous, the Christian life is a process of gradual change, of becoming in character what God has declared us in standing. This means that every Christian will exhibit flaws and imperfections and every relationship will include some measure of tension and disharmony. Minor offenses are those which do not endanger the safety or well-being of a believer, a relationship or a church. In light of the gospel, these are best overlooked, in the manner in which God forbears and overlooks many such traits in us (Prov 19:11; Rom 15:1; 1Pet 4:8).
- c. *Process for addressing sin in a fellow believer.* Where self-discipline fails and where a believer sins in a manner that should not be overlooked, God provides direction for what to do. Ordinarily the process moves through stages, as described by Jesus himself in Matthew 18:15-17. At each stage the goal is to secure the repentance and restoration of the sinning brother or sister. For this reason each stage may include more than one meeting. The process ceases

whenever the straying member evidences believable repentance and is restored to the Lord and others.

- i. Private inquiry. When a Christian sees another church member that appears to be engaged in sin that is repeated, serious³, and unchristian, normally he should privately, gently and graciously approach that person to inquire and, if necessary, to confront. If repentance is required and takes place, the process ends. If there is disagreement over the need for repentance or if there is refusal to repent, he should involve one or two others (Matt 18:15; Gal. 6:1; Luke 17:3).
- ii. Establishing the matter with witnesses. The concerned Christian should now involve one or two other church members, perhaps including a home group leader or pastor, and return to the brother or sister caught in sin. If this group confirms that the brother or sister is in fact sinning, is unrepentant and is unwilling to change, then the pastors of the church should be informed so that they can confirm the facts and appeal for change (Matt 18:16; Deut 19:15).
- iii. Telling the church. If the straying brother or sister remains unwilling to change, failing to heed various appeals from members and/or pastors, the pastors normally will inform the church (which may include members and non members) of the sin. Church attenders and members will be urged to pursue the erring member and appeal for repentance (Matt 18:17; 1Tim 5:20).
- iv. Excluding from church membership. If, after a reasonable period of time, the member under discipline does not change, then the elders will inform the church (which may include members and non members) again, this time acting to remove that person from church membership and instruct the church to treat the excluded member as an unbeliever. This means the church will no longer treat the person as a Christian, in that sense having no 'fellowship' with him or her, and instead will seek to preach the gospel to him, calling him to repentance and faith in Christ (Matt 18:17; 1Cor 5:5; 2Thes 3:14-15; 1Tim 1:20).
- v. Appeal. If at any point a church member believes he is being treated unjustly or inappropriately in the disciplinary process, he is welcome to appeal to the pastoral team of Grace Christian Fellowship.

³ The following passages provide a helpful, but partial, accounting of biblical categories of sin: Mark 7:21-22, Rom 1:29-31, 1Cor 6:9-10, Gal 5:19-21, 2Tim 3:2-5, and Rev 21:8.

- d. *Public sins.* The elders may decide to abbreviate or eliminate the above process if the sin is especially conspicuous or serious, or if the member proves to be divisive, disruptive or is seen as a threat to lead others into sin (Rom 16:17; 1Cor 5:13; Titus 3:10-11).
- e. *Disciplinary actions.* As the disciplinary process progresses through the above stages, the actions that may be taken include, but are not limited to, private and public admonition, withholding of the Lord's Supper, withdrawal of fellowship and removal from membership (1Cor 11:17-34).
- f. *Restoration.* The restoration of the straying believer stands at the heart of the practice of church discipline. Throughout the disciplinary process the elders will seek to define a biblically informed pathway of repentance for the sinning member. If a member is removed from membership, the elders will urge the church members to continue to seek opportunities to call the person to repentance and faith in Christ. When the church has been made aware of an individual's sin, they will also be made aware of an individual's repentance in a way that is appropriate to the situation and the good of the church, ensuring that as many people as possible may rejoice (Gal 6:1; Luke 15:7; 2Cor 2:5-11).
- g. *If a member leaves the church to avoid or cut short the disciplinary process.* At times a member may withdraw from the church to avoid or cut short church discipline and its consequences. The elders and members of our church recognize our obligation and opportunity to restore the wandering member to the Lord and to His church. While the church cannot force a withdrawing member to remain in this congregation, the church has the right and responsibility to restore, to bring the disciplinary process to an orderly conclusion, and to make final determination as to the person's membership status at the time withdrawal is sought or acknowledged. If the elders learn that a member who left under church discipline is now attending another church, the elders may inform that church of the situation, seeking to encourage the brother or sister to repent and be restored to the Lord and to any people he or she have offended. The elders may also warn the other church to be on guard against harm that the accused might do to their members (Eph 4:1-6).
- h. *Receiving excluded members.* People who attend our church, but have been excluded from another church, will not be allowed to partake of the sacraments, become members or participate in the fellowship of the church until they have repented of their sins, made a reasonable effort to be reconciled, and satisfied any biblically legitimate requirements of their former church.

GCF POSITION PAPER ON FINANCIAL STEWARDSHIP

Every member of Grace Christian Fellowship has agreed to live out the GCF membership agreement. Part of the membership agreement states, “I agree to support GCF by generously giving GCF a portion of my time, talents, and finances.” The word “finances” brings up the topic of stewardship, which brings up a host of questions. For instance, what does the Old Testament say about giving? Does the New Testament mandate tithing? Where should I give my money? What does it mean to give generously? Can someone belong to GCF who thinks that tithing is an Old Testament mandate that no longer applies to New Testament saints? This paper is designed to answer these questions.¹ We will start by looking at Old Testament stewardship.

Stewardship in the Old Testament

The first biblical account of tithing is found in the story of Abraham. Abraham tithed a tenth of his possessions to Melchizedek (Gen 14:20). To tithe literally means to give ten percent. Melchizedek (a type of Christ) blessed Abraham. Abraham expressed his gratitude towards Melchizedek by giving him a tenth of his wealth.

¹ *This paper can't say all there is to say about money. Here are a few foundational convictions. First, money and possessions are inherently good. At the end of creation God “saw all that he had made and behold it was good” (Gen. 1:31). This means that Hondas, condos, dining room sets, blue jeans, stocks, bonds, and cruises are God's gracious gifts to unworthy creatures. Although the material world is inherently good, it also has capacity for harm. Recognizing this many have embraced asceticism. Ascetics aggressively reject blessings like human sexuality, food, alcoholic beverages, investments, and entertainment. Ascetics assume that created things are always harmful for our growth in godliness. Grace Christian Fellowship believes in the inherent goodness of creation. Therefore, we renounce asceticism. We affirm the legitimate use of God's creation. But, we also believe that inordinate attachment to money and possessions can be a serious sin. Over attachment to material wealth usually signifies double mindedness. It is a form of idolatry. Idolatry is the most common sin in scripture, and the worship of “things” is one of the most common forms of idolatry. Paul reminds us that all covetousness is idolatry” (Eph 5:5, Col 3:5). Jesus warned his disciples, “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness” (Lk 12:15). Paul warns us. “Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things [covetousness] the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience” (Eph 5:6). How we handle our money is also a key indicator of the depth and quality of our faith. The growing heart-conviction that God is infinitely good, that he can be trusted with everything, even my assets, is a first sign of a healthy, growing faith. The greater this faith, the greater our capacity for generosity. A stingy heart points to shallow faith. Last, how we handle our money is an important indicator of the quality of our relationship with God. “No one can serve two masters,” Jesus warned. “For either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money” (Mt 6: 24). Therefore, it is important that we learn to enjoy wealth without “serving” it. For all these reasons stewardship is an important subject. The discipline of biblical giving will do much to protect us from the sin of covetousness. It is our conviction that regular giving to a local church is an important way to begin breaking the power of covetousness. It also gives us the privilege and joy of supporting the mission of the local church.*

Centuries later, under the Mosaic Covenant, God commanded Israel to give three tithes. The first tithe supported the Levites (Num. 18:21-24). The second tithe was a festival tithe used to pay for communal feasts (Deut. 12:17-18). The third tithe was the poor tithe, given every third year to help the poor. This means that the faithful Israelite gave away 23% of his income each year—10% to the Levites, 10% for the festival tithe, and 3% (10% every third year) for the poor.² On top of this, the Israelites were encouraged to give free will offerings towards special projects like the construction of the tabernacle. Evidently, God expected his people to be very generous. When they did not tithe the prophets accused them of robbing God (Mal. 3:1-12). At this point, some may object, “But that was the Old Covenant, we live under the New Covenant and the Old Covenant laws no longer apply to us.” This brings us to our next subject, giving in the New Testament.

Stewardship in the New Testament

The main reference to tithing³ in the New Testament is Jesus’ statement to the Pharisees, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you *tithe* mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. *These you ought to have done*, without neglecting the others.” (Matthew 23:23).

Jesus upheld the Old Testament practice of tithing by saying, “these you ought to have done.” But, we must ask a simple question, to whom did Jesus speak these words? He spoke them to a group of Pharisees who lived under the Old Covenant. The New Covenant had not been inaugurated since Jesus had not died on the cross (Matthew 26:26-29). After the New Covenant was inaugurated there was no more mention of tithing in the New Testament. But there are many references to generous giving (see Paul’s letters). This has significant implications for one’s convictions about tithing. Like what? Some believe that New Covenant Christians are not obligated to obey any of the 613 Old Covenant laws unless they are repeated in the New Covenant.⁴ Since the tithing laws are not repeated in the New Covenant New Covenant Christians are not obligated to tithe.⁵ On the other hand, some Christians believe that tithing was established before

² Randy Alcorn, *Money, Possessions, and Eternity*, (Carol Stream, Tyndale, 1989) chapter 12

³There are other references to tithing (Luke 11:42, 18:12; Heb. 7:5-9, etc...) but they are made before the New Covenant is inaugurated or refer to Old Testament events.

⁴ Andreas Kostenberger and David Croteau, *Will A Man Rob God? (Mal. 3:8) A Study of Tithing in the Old and New Testament*. <http://biblicalfoundations.org/pdf/pdfarticles/bbrtithing1.pdf> See also *The Law of Moses a Christian Compromise* by David A. Dorsey (JETS 34/3 Sept 1991) 321-334.

⁵ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/7-reasons-christians-not-required-to-tithe>

the Old Covenant laws were given (Genesis 14:20); since tithing transcends the covenants New Covenant Christians are obligated to tithe.⁶ These are complicated theological issues requiring intricate knowledge of covenant continuity and discontinuity.⁷ As a result, members of GCF are free to disagree on the necessity of tithing under the New Covenant.

Although the Bible may be unclear on the necessity of tithing under the New Covenant the Bible is very clear that every member of the New Covenant is obligated to give their money away generously and sacrificially (2 Cor. 8-9). This raises an important question, what does it mean to give generously and sacrificially under the New Covenant? It probably means giving at least 10%. Why is 10% a good starting place if the Mosaic law no longer applies to us?⁸ The reasons have to do with the nature of grace and the glorious realities of the New Covenant.

Members of the New Covenant have far more blessings and privileges than members of the Old Covenant. First, under the New Covenant God promises to write his law on our hearts (Jer. 31:31-34). Second, God promises to fill us with His Spirit (Ez. 37, Joel 2). Third, God promises that every member of the New Covenant will know him personally and intimately (Jer. 31:31-34). Fourth, God has unconditionally promised to remove all of our sins (Jer. 31:31-34). Fifth, members of the New Covenant know much more about the specifics of Christ's sinless life, substitutionary sacrifice, victorious resurrection, the nature of justification, redemption, adoption, reconciliation, Christ's heavenly reign, and the promises of heaven. Considering these rich gospel blessings and the incredible wealth of our culture, why would we give less than the Old Testament minimum? This leads us to a clear biblical principal; to whom much has been given, much will be expected (Luke 11:20-24; 12:48). God has revealed much more of his grace, mercy, and love in the New Testament. Therefore, we should give away more of our money not less (Matt. 5-8).

We conclude that the privilege of being a New Testament believer brings greater, not lesser, financial obligation. Old Testament law mandated tithing. In doing so the Old

⁶ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/bible-commands-christians-to-tithe>

⁷ *The Law of Moses a Christian Compromise* by David A. Dorsey (JETS 34/3 Sept 1991) 321-334. This article is an excellent summary of the how New Covenant Christians should think about OT Laws.

⁸ *Why not 23% like the Old Covenant? Remember that 23% comes from combining three tithes, one paid every third year. Two of these tithes (the poor tithe and the festival tithe) were essentially taxes. Since we are members of the New Covenant we are not legally bound to keep these laws. Although we are not legally bound to keep these laws they reveal God's character and teach us helpful principals. For instance, under the New Covenant pastors not Levites serve the people of God. Since the Old Covenant people of God gave 10% to support the Levites and the temple work, it seems wise to give 10% to support pastors and the local church. The two other tithes have little relevance for New Covenant Christians since New Covenant Christians don't live under a theocracy.*

Testament revealed God's desire for his people to be generous. Jesus died to fulfill the law. Thus, we are no longer obligated to obey the law of Moses, instead we obey the law of Christ empowered by the Holy Spirit and motivated by God's lavish grace. Since God expects more from the recipients of grace than the recipients of law we should not be surprised that the new testament mandates that our giving be systematic (1 Cor. 16:1), sacrificial & generous (2 Cor. 8:2-3, Phil. 4:17-18), intentional (2 Cor. 8:4, Phil. 4:16), motivated by love for God (2 Cor. 8:9), motivated by love for others (1 Cor. 9:14-15, 2 Cor. 8:12-14, Gal. 6:6), cheerful (2 Cor. 9:7), and voluntary (2 Cor. 8:2-3, 9:7, Phil. 4:18).

So how much should we give? Since the New Testament does not give us a set amount or percentage we should earnestly pray to God about how much to give. With that said, it is hard to imagine giving less than %10, since 10% was the Old Covenant minimum for a people living with fewer gospel privileges. When all is said and done, we need to honestly ask ourselves if our giving is truly characterized by extravagant generosity and sacrifice. But don't be afraid, we can never out give God.

Where Should I Give Generously?

Once one agrees that generous and sacrificial giving is mandated under the New Covenant, a second question arises. Where should I give? The answer matters. Many worthy Christian organizations need money. They constantly appeal for funds.

For several reasons, it is our conviction that Christians should give first and foremost to their local church. First, the Jews in the Old Testament gave their first tithe to the Levites. The Levites were the Old Testament ministers. This set a significant precedent that is supported by the New Testament. Galatians 6:6 commands the one who is taught the word to give financial support to the one who teaches him. 1Cor. 9:3-12 reminds the Corinthians that pastors have the right to be supported by their local congregations. In addition, 1 Tim. 5:17ff exhorts the Ephesian church to give the elder who teaches well double honor (remuneration). Where will this support come from if God's people don't give generously to the local church?

Second, we should give first and foremost to the local church because the local church is God's only revealed plan to disciple the nations. The New Testament speaks of no other means to accomplish this end. In other words, there is no plan B. There are no para-church ministries in the New Testament, just local churches. With that said, we are thankful for the work of para-church ministries. In many cases, they serve an important function that the local church cannot. But, the Bible gives the local church, not the para-church, responsibility for missions, evangelism, charity, church discipline, Baptism, the Lord's Supper, worship, the preaching of the word, and the training of new leaders.

Para-church agencies can help the church with these tasks, but no para-church agency can *effectively* supplant the mandate that God has given the local church.

Third, we should give to the local church because the local church is more accountable to the giver. Local churches have Elders who are known by the donors. You see their lives. You talk to them often. The Elders are directly accountable to the congregation. This is not the case with many para-church ministries. They lack elders. They do not practice the sacraments. They are not responsible for church discipline. They are often hundreds of miles away. The donor often has little knowledge of how his money is spent.

Fourth, by not giving to the local church a Christian may be resisting God. The practical result of giving somewhere else is sometimes tragic. The local church (what God wants to prosper) is impaired financially while a para-church agency is enriched. By doing this Christians unintentionally subvert God's agenda and encourage an alternate organization, one not called or equipped to do what the local church does.

Last, the practice of giving first to the local church encourages the self-denial that produces unity. Scripture commands Christians to submit to their local church elders (Heb. 13:17, 1Pet. 5:5, 1Cor. 16:16, 1Pet. 2:13ff). One attribute of a submissive heart is giving generously to the local church. When we give our money to the local church, we are saying that we support its goals, plans and objectives. Our giving allows the members of the local church to move together as "one man" (Eph. 4:1-16) for the accomplishment of God's larger purposes.

Giving the bulk of our money to an organization other than the local church discourages the unity that flows from submission to the common mission of the local church. Refusal to do this is an expression of financial autonomy. When this happens, the local church lacks the resources to carry out its God-ordained objectives. The stronger our conviction about the centrality of the local church the more eagerly we will give generously to the local church. If one does not trust a local church enough to give generously to its mission, then one must express his concerns to the elders. If they don't listen, or you discover irreconcilable differences, then you may want to find a church whose missions, goals, and theology you can embrace enthusiastically. Then give to your new church with joy and conviction.

Summary

Old Testament saints gave three tithes totaling 23%. We live under the New Covenant, which is the era of grace. The obligations of grace are greater than the obligations of law. If the law mandated 23%, it seems wise to consider ten percent as a starting place for generous sacrificial giving.

EXPLORING GCF'S HISTORY¹

Spring of 2002-Present

1 // Preamble

- a. In one sense, we can trace our historical roots can back to the first Christians. We stand in the great stream of Christianity that spans the centuries. More recently, we stand on the shoulders of the great Protestant Reformers of the 16th century and the English and American Puritans of the 17th and 18th centuries.
- b. God gloriously works through time and space to achieve His redemptive plan, saving sinners and sanctifying saints in the context of a local church. The history of GCF is a story about the faithfulness of God, the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, and the life-changing message of the gospel. It is also a graphic depiction of God's power perfected through human weaknesses. The core values of GCF grew organically out of the particular history of this church and continue to guide us as family of churches in close gospel partnership.

2 // The Seeds of GCF

- a. Grace Christian Fellowship exists to glorify God through gospel-centered worship, evangelism, discipleship, and community. That purpose was evident in GCF's very humble beginnings when five families met in the basement of Mark and Kim William's house in North Spokane. These early meetings were the remnant of a difficult situation in which a gospel-preaching Presbyterian church, planted in 1989, was forced to close its doors after a series of unfortunate circumstances. From these ashes, a small group of saints emerged who wanted to establish a new church in Spokane committed to Reformed theology, elder governance, small group ministry, gospel-centered expository preaching, and a robust dependence on the Holy Spirit. This small band of beleaguered saints needed a pastor, so they approached Bill Farley. Why did they contact Bill? Because he discipled a few of them several years earlier. At this point, Bill was a lay pastor at a different church in a different part of Spokane. Mark Williams approached Bill on behalf of the group in the spring of 2002. During their initial

¹ Special Thanks to Brian Huseland, the official GCF Historian, who put together the rough draft of this lesson.

meetings, it became clear to everyone involved that Bill was just the right man for the job.

3 // The Founding Pastor

- a. William P. Farley moved to Spokane in his mid-twenties to attend GU law school. After arriving in Spokane, he met some people involved in the Jesus people movement. A short time later, Bill was dramatically converted to Jesus Christ. For the next 25 years, he raised five children in the ways of God and served as a lay pastor in two churches. In this role, he preached God's word, disciplined men, led worship, and read theology voraciously. While he served the church as a lay pastor, he worked full time for State Farm Insurance. Around age 50, he was able to retire from State Farm Insurance to write Christian books, study God's word, and seek the Lord's will for the next season of his life. Little did he know that in a short amount of time, on the other side of town, a small band of saints would need a pastor.
- b. Increasingly, as he studied the Bible, the Protestant Reformers, and the Puritans, he was astounded by the majesty of God. He realized that there was nothing that humanity could do to save themselves. They were dead in sin and were unwilling and unable to seek God. Man's only hope was the sovereign and saving grace of God. God must choose us since we cannot and will not choose Him. In addition, the Holy Spirit must regenerate our hearts before we can believe. These doctrines, often referred to as the Doctrines of Grace, humble humanity while glorifying God. The more we grow in humility, the more every other virtue will flourish, since humility is the chief virtue. Having been saved during the Jesus People movement of the 1970s, Bill was convinced that all of the gifts of the Holy Spirit are available for today's church and that all Christians must live in daily dependence on the Holy Spirit.

4 // The Launch

- a. Sensing a call to vocational ministry, Bill and his wife Judy trusted God and accepted the invitation from this small band of families who formed the nucleus of GCF. They started meeting right away in Mark William's home on April 15th, 2002.
- b. In those early days, the Lord graciously added more to our number, and the little church moved to the Fireside Room at Fourth Memorial Church on Sunday afternoons. Pastor Bill did not take a salary for the first few years, enabling the church

to save money for a building and hiring future pastors. Bill preached powerful expository sermons focused on the cross of Christ and the glory of God. These sermons were born out of the conviction that the Bible is authoritative and sufficient for building healthy local churches. During this season, Bill began to form a leadership team with some of the men of the church. The early members also met to choose a name for this growing church: Grace Christian Fellowship.



5 // The First Building

- a. This small band decided to seek a location where GCF could meet on Sunday mornings. After a few months, we moved to the Eat Right Wedding Chapel at 1403 N. Washington Street.
- b. Church services back then were cold—the chapel kept the thermostat very low unless they were hosting wedding events over the weekend. Most people left their coats on during the worship service. On some Sundays, you could see people's breath during the singing portion of the worship service. It was during this phase that men's discipleship meetings began. Training new future leaders has always been a crucial part of our church culture.

6 // The Second Building

- a. During these early years, many curious people came to check out the new church in town. Some stayed and we began to put down roots and grow upward. In the spring of 2004, we moved to Our Savior Lutheran Church on North Washington (near North Central High School). This was a dying mainline liberal Lutheran church that rented the building to us until they sold it to the Bethlehem Slavic Missionary Church.



7 // Our Own Building

- a. We were able to rent from St. Paul's church on Hamilton St. & Illinois Ave. In late 2005, we purchased St. Paul's for \$425K from an older dying congregation. They could not afford to pay their bills. They eventually moved to another facility and merged with another church. During this time, we believed that God was at work in other churches, and Pastor Bill made an effort to build friendships with other pastors. This is one of the reasons that we intentionally pray for other churches during our worship services. For the first time, Grace Christian Fellowship had its own building. As people started to realize that GCF was sticking around, more and more people took the membership class and joined our church.

8 // The First Elder Board

- a. In early 2005, Bill formally transitioned the leadership team into an Elder Board to be more faithful to scriptural guidelines for church governance. This move demonstrated our commitment to complementarity. The elders and Bill firmly believed that although males and females are equal in value and worth, God has assigned them different roles in the home and the church.

9 // The Growing Elder Board

- a. In October of 2005, the elders decided to hire Dave Farley, Bill's son, to help shepherd our growing church. Dave had recently graduated from Covenant Theological Seminary and was pastoring in Washington DC. He and his wife Heidi moved across the country to join GCF. Dave provided help in preaching, evangelism, administration, youth ministry, discipleship, and college ministry. At this point, the elder board included Mark Williams, Jim Spurgetis, Dave Farley, and Bill Farley. Within a few years, the leadership identified two more elders to help shepherd the expanding flock; John Kershinar (a Boeing Engineer) and Dave Nelson (a Financial Planner). Eventually, both men made great personal sacrifices and quit their lucrative jobs to join the GCF staff full time. Dave Nelson took over the youth ministry and the outreach ministry at the Central Church. Eventually, John Kershinar would lead the counseling ministry and youth ministry at the North Church.

10 // A Season of Growth & Fruitfulness

- a. From 2005 to 2010, we remained committed to our passion for discipleship. During this season, the men's and women's discipleship groups flourished as the curriculum matured. We also launched a college ministry called Veritas and hired a handful of interns to help lead the growing church ministry. Several years later, one of those interns (Brett Sweet) came on staff full time as the Central Church preaching pastor.
- b. During this season, we launched adult and children's Sunday School classes. Both ministries started small but grew slowly over time. Sunday School allows the pastors to address topics that don't come up as often in a church that is committed to expository

preaching from the pulpit on Sunday mornings. Finally, we decided to hire a full-time business administrator from within our congregation.

11 / Blessed to be a Blessing to Others

- a. During this season, we launched a ministry to encourage local church pastors called "The Pastor's Lunch." It meets the last Thursday of every month and is designed to encourage Spokane pastors from a variety of denominations. Over 30 area pastors participate in one form or another. We recruited two of our current pastors from this group (Paul Proctor and Jeff Brinkman).
- b. With the help of Indian Trail Church, we helped launch an additional ministry for pastors called The Spurgeon Fellowship Ministry. This ministry is designed to help pastors grow in the art and skill of gospel centrality. God has graciously blessed both ministries.
- c. GCF is a member of the Inland Northwest Co-operative. The INC seeks to further the work of the gospel in the Inland Northwest by planting churches, training future pastors, and cooperating for local outreach. It will strengthen the health of its churches by providing doctrinal accountability, ministerial fellowship, and support for churches in need. Visit www.inlandnorthwestcooperative.org for more info.

12 / The Seeds of the North Church

- a. In October of 2010, we outgrew our building, which forced us to move to two Sunday morning services. After looking at lots of buildings in central Spokane, we leased space from Fourth Memorial Church for eight months, starting in the fall of 2011. This allowed us to go back to one service. We used the Fireside room for Sunday School, which happened to be the first official location of GCF nearly eight years earlier. During this period Fourth Memorial church approached us about the possibility of merging our two congregations. After lots of prayer and fasting, both elder boards agreed that uniting our congregations would be challenging. We left Fourth Memorial on excellent terms.
- b. In 2012, we moved back to our building on Hamilton & Illinois, intending to plant a North Spokane church, something we had always wanted to do. At this point,

GCF was a little less than 350 people in attendance on Sunday mornings (including children). Roughly 150 of the 350 people lived north of Wellesley.



13 // The Launch of the North Church

- a. Before launching the North Church, the elders researched the pros and cons of the multi-site model of planting churches. After much prayer and reflection, we agreed to adopt the multi-site model. Our first worship service was on October 20th, 2013, with 150 people in attendance, including children.
- b. Finding a meeting space in north Spokane proved to be exceptionally difficult. Eventually, God opened up space at Mead High School through the tireless efforts of Dick Cullen, one of our members and the retired Athletic Director of Mead High School. We stayed at Mead for two years. The growth was slow at first, but over time more and more north siders decided to become members of GCF North.
- c. When our lease at Mead High School expired, we moved even further North, renting space from Mt. Spokane Church on Sunday evenings at 6 pm. We quickly learned that this time slot was detrimental to our church. Fortunately, space opened up at the Northwest Christian School theatre in Colbert WA. We stayed at NWC from 2015-2018. During this time we moved from the theatre to the gym.
- d. This season was our "church in a box" phase. Every week we set up a stage, chairs, nursery space, music equipment, fake walls, coffee equipment, a welcome center, and

many other things. After church, we loaded most of our gear into a few large trailers and drove away. We could have never managed without the countless faithful, humble, and trusty servants of GCF North. Around this time, we purchased a 27-acre plot of land next to Highway 2 so that we could someday build our own church building. Although there was great interest in building a church as quickly as possible it didn't seem like the right time, so we waited.

14 // Growth at the Central Church

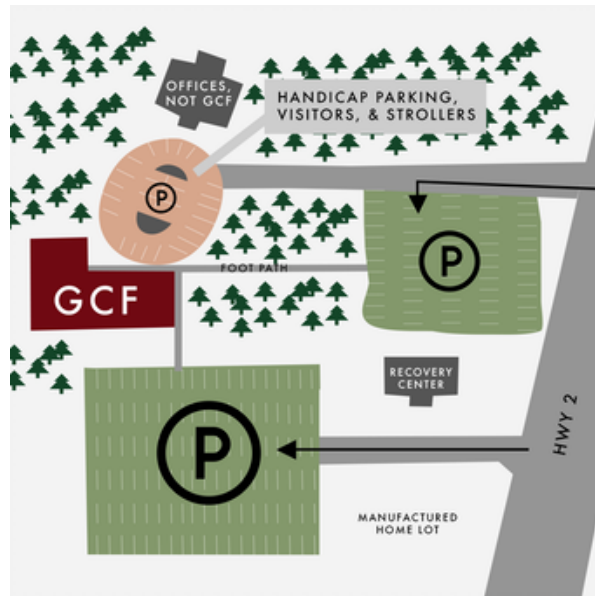
- a. Meanwhile, GCF Central was going through a transition of its own. The void left by North families was quickly filled with new people from the Logan neighborhood, the South Hill, and the Spokane Valley. Just before we launched the North Church, we were able to buy the old tattoo parlor in the parking lot of the Central Church and convert it into church offices. This facility became the hub of operations for both churches. By God's grace, we were able to pay off the land purchase and remodel costs quickly.

15 // Passing the Baton

- a. In 2014, pastor Bill and pastor Dave (Farley) switched roles. Pastor Dave became the lead pastor of GCF, and pastor Bill became the Central Church preaching pastor. Three years later, in 2017, pastor Bill officially retired from GCF. In 2018, Brett Sweet replaced him as the Central Church preaching pastor.
- b. In the fall of 2018, GCF had five full-time pastors. Brett Sweet served as the Central Church preaching pastor, Dave Nelson was responsible for discipleship and outreach at the Central Church, and Jeff Brinkman led the counseling ministry and the Sunday school ministry at the Central Church. Up north, Dave Farley served as the North Church preaching pastor and the lead pastor of GCF. John Kershinar oversaw the North Church youth ministry, college ministry, and the counseling ministry. Around the same time, Drew Schaefer, Josh Soehner, and Dan King joined the elder board as lay pastors, bringing the number of elders to ten.

16 // A New Building for the North Church

- a. In the fall of 2018, the elders quickly capitalized on an opportunity to acquire a new facility for GCF North that could be occupied 24-7. This meant no more set up and tear down. The game developer company, Cyan, had an empty wedding venue available which another church had previously leased. This move was a nod to our past at the Eat Right Wedding Chapel, although thankfully a lot warmer. We signed a five-year lease, and we moved in quickly. It was a huge relief to leave everything set up!
- b. On February 6th, 2022, GCF North had our first service in our new building on Newport Rd. in Mead, WA.



17 // The Launch of the Spokane Valley Church

- a. After much prayer in the Spring of 2019, the leaders of Grace Christian Fellowship believed that the time was right to add another GCF church. Many families from the city of Spokane Valley joined GCF Central, filling the void left by the North Church launch in 2013. They were eager to see GCF's theology and values take root in the Spokane Valley through a church plant.
- b. In the summer of 2019, the pastors unanimously chose Pastor Jeff Brinkman to lead the charge into the Spokane Valley. But this was going to be an enormous task. To help with this task, the elders hired pastor Paul Proctor in the fall of 2019. Paul has connections with GCF families that go back over twenty-five years.
- c. On November 1, 2020, we launched the Valley Church. We held our first service at the Spokane Valley Event Center and met there until our permanent building at 16610 E. Sprague Ave. was completed Easter Sunday 2021.

18 // New Beginnings

- a. In the Spring of 2023, the elders of GCF happily agreed that each church was ready to stand on its own. As a result, the elders of GCF joyfully agreed to become three separate/independent churches by the end of 2023 (GCF North, GCF Central, GCF Valley).
- b. By God's grace each church is healthy, strong, and eager for gospel partnership in the years to come.
- c. Today, we can look back with amazement at the handiwork of God. From the tiny beginning of five families, the Lord has blessed GCF with hundreds of members worshipping at three independent and healthy churches throughout Spokane.
- d. Yet from the inception of GCF, the goal was never numerical growth, fame, influence, or prestige. Our goal has always been to glorify God through gospel-centered worship, discipleship, and evangelism. We need God's grace and power to continue to keep the main thing the main thing. We hope and pray that our great-grandchildren are even more committed to the mission of GCF than we are.
- e. "So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth" (1 Cor. 3:7). To God belongs the praise, the honor, and the glory!

Conclusion

If the history of GCF has raised any questions about our theology and values, please feel free to bring them up during your membership interview. Or connect with a pastor if you're not yet ready to set up an interview.

A STATEMENT FROM THE ELDERS OF GCF CONCERNING CHILDREN, SACRAMENTS, AND THE CHURCH

February 11, 2022

Introduction

By God's grace, there are lots of kids at Grace Christian Fellowship. We (the elders of GCF) are profoundly grateful for this specific evidence of God's abundant grace (Ps. 127:3). We are fully committed to equipping parents to nurture the faith of their little ones. Fortunately, God is not reluctant to work in the hearts of children, even young children. Many parents have observed sensitivity to spiritual things and sincere affection for Jesus in their toddler's lives. Moreover, we believe that God is more than able and often pleased to graciously grant children saving faith.

When a child professes faith in Jesus, several questions arise—when should the child be baptized, take communion, become a church member, and who should make these decisions? Having wrestled through these issues with their own kids, the elders fully understand the personal and sensitive nature of these questions. This paper is the result of many years of careful reflection on these matters. We hope that this paper helps parents think through these crucial questions in a God-honoring way. To that end, we will consider the Bible's teaching on the sacraments, the stages of child development, and the glory of God. Finally, we will conclude by addressing some frequently asked questions.

Biblical Teaching on the Sacraments

What is Baptism?

We begin our discussion of the sacraments with the subject of baptism. What does baptism symbolize? Baptism symbolizes many things—one's public association with the triune God (Matt. 28:18-20), union with Christ (Rom. 6:3-5), cleansing from sin (Ezek. 36:25; Jer. 31:34; 1 Cor. 6:11;² Eph. 5:26; Titus 3:5;³ Acts 22:16, 2:38), regeneration (Col. 2:11-12; Tit. 3:5), entrance into the new covenant community,⁴ reception of the Holy Spirit,⁵ and escape from

¹This statement draws from the theological positions and practices of several exemplary churches, including Third Avenue Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky; Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D.C.; Del Rey Baptist Church in Alexandria, Virginia; North Point Baptist Church in Plano, Texas; and University Baptist Church in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

² Dever, Mark and Jonathan Leeman, *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age* (Nashville, Tn: B&H Academic 2015), 103.

³ George Beasley Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Paternoster Press, Exeter, Devon, U.K., 1994), 163.

⁴ This idea is developed more fully on pages 5-6.

⁵ At least three passages make a connection between receiving the Holy Spirit and baptism. In Mark 1:8, John the Baptist says, "I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." John mentions two things, water baptism and Holy Spirit baptism, but we must not separate these things since we are baptized in the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13) the second God saves us, which rightly corresponds with water baptism. This brings up 1 Cor. 12:13. Paul writes, "For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit." Again, we see a connection between baptism and receiving the Holy Spirit. Commenting on this passage, Schreiner writes, "Once again we should not separate Spirit baptism from water baptism as if Paul were attempting to segregate the one from the other" Finally, in Acts 2:38, we read, "And Peter said to them, 'Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for

judgment (1 Pet. 3:20-21). Since the spiritual realities symbolized in baptism are only true of Christians, only Christians should get baptized.⁶

When Should Believing Children be Baptized?

Among Baptists, there are two views on when to baptize believing children. The first view is convinced that they can settle this issue rather quickly by looking at the biblical commands to baptize believers. According to this view, baptizing children as soon as they believe is a matter of simple obedience to the Bible's clear commands. This perspective seems to make sense, but it has two potential problems.

First, it is not always evident that baptism immediately follows conversion in the New Testament. There are conversions in Acts with no mention of baptism (Acts 2:47; 4:4; 16:5). Furthermore, baptism is never mentioned during Paul's first missionary journey (Acts 13-14). In addition, Paul clearly separated his preaching ministry from the act of baptism (1 Cor. 1:14-17). Finally, although the Epistles often mention conversion, they rarely mention baptism.⁷

Second, every example of baptism in the NT is an adult baptism.⁸ Said another way, there are no biblical examples of children (young or old) getting baptized. Furthermore, the Bible provides no instruction for second, third, or fourth-generation Christian parents on when to baptize their believing children.

We don't believe that Scripture provides a crystal-clear answer for when to baptize believing children. Answering this question can only be resolved by carefully studying several related subjects. The first related subject is the connection between baptism and genuine faith.

What is the connection between baptism and faith?

Who should be baptized? Only those who possess saving faith—which raises the question, what is saving faith? The Bible teaches that there are critical differences between saving faith and non-saving faith (James 2:14-26; Matt. 7:21-23; 13:5-6, 20-21; 1 John 2:19). So how does one identify saving faith? Saving faith manifests itself in at least three ways—it understands basic doctrines, produces genuine repentance, and leads to new life in Christ. Let's look at each aspect of saving faith in detail.

the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” Again, we see a clear connection between water baptism and receiving the Holy Spirit. Since the Scriptures make a connection between receiving the Holy Spirit and getting baptized, so should we.

⁶Some Christians believe that the nonbelieving infants of Christian parents should be baptized. This is called the paedobaptist view (paedo is the Greek word for infant). Although we respect evangelical paedobaptists, we disagree with their perspective. For a gracious and thorough critique of infant baptism please consult “Understanding Baptism” by Bobby Jamieson or “Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ” By Thomas Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright (especially chapters 4 and 7). The work by Schreiner and Wright is much more thorough and academic.

⁷ John S. Hammett, *40 Questions about Baptism and the Lord's Supper* (Grand Rapids, Mi: Kregel, 2015), 169-170.

⁸ One might object to this conclusion by pointing to the conversions and baptisms of the Philippian jailor and “his family” in Acts 16:32-33. Two critical observations are necessary: First, the passage never mentions children. Second, the Philippian jailor and his household are all first-generation believers converted in a pagan context. Acts 16 offers us no specific instruction about baptizing the young children of believing parents.

Saving Faith understands basic doctrines.

Someone who truly believes the gospel must understand some basic facts regarding the gospel (John 10:26-27; 1 Cor. 2:6-7). Here are some questions to consider-

1. Does your child have a basic understanding of the gospel? Can they explain the importance of the deity of Jesus, the atonement, justification, reconciliation, faith, repentance, forgiveness, the wrath of God, and the resurrection?
2. Does your child not only believe that God exists but understand that God is holy and commands us to be holy (Lev. 11:44; 1 Pt. 1:14-16)?
3. Does your child understand they cannot measure up to God's perfect standards, that they are powerless to make themselves right before Him and that they deserve death and hell as the just consequence for their sin (Matt. 13:36-50; Rom. 3:10; Eph. 2:1-4)?
4. Do they consequently understand that they can only be reconciled to God by his grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ's atoning work alone (Rom. 3:21; Eph. 2:8-9)?

Saving Faith produces genuine repentance.

A person is converted when the Spirit of God brings conviction of sin (Jn. 16:8-11) through the law of God (Rom. 2:14-16; 3:19-20, 7:7-9). Here are some questions to ask your children-

1. Does your child have a basic understanding of sin as a failure to conform to God's moral law in both actions and attitudes (1 Jn. 3:4)?
2. Do they understand that their sin is principally an offense against God (Ps. 51:3-4; cf. 1 Cor. 8:12)?
3. Do they understand and experience the difference between godly sorrow that leads to repentance and worldly sorrow that leads to death (2 Cor. 7:10)? In other words, are they grieved from offending God or sad because they "got caught?"
4. Do they ever confess their sin to God and ask for His mercy on their own initiative (1 Jn. 1:5-10)?
5. In what ways, if any, does your child demonstrate commitment to Christ when strongly tempted to disobey (1 Cor. 6:18; 2 Tim. 2:22; Jas. 4:7)?

Saving Faith leads to new life in Christ.

A credible profession of faith involves more than intellectual assent to the facts of the gospel. Real Christians are those who have received new spiritual life in Christ (i.e., they have

been “born again”). This new birth results in love for God and glad obedience to his Word (Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 36:25-26; Jn. 3:3-7; 2 Cor. 5:17-21). Consider the following questions-

1. Does your child delight in reading God’s Word (John 6:45; 1 Peter 2:2)?
2. Does your child find delight in prayer—both on their own and with the church?
3. Can you point to examples of your child fighting sin (Rom. 8:13-14)?
4. Is there evidence of the fruit of the Spirit in their lives (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control—Gal. 5:22-23)?

The Bible is clear; there is a difference between saving faith and non-saving faith. The challenge facing pastors and parents is discerning the real nature of a child’s faith (James 2:14-26). Most children raised in Christian homes say they believe the gospel. But what do they believe and why do they believe it? Do they believe the gospel because their parents believe the gospel? Do they believe the gospel because they want to please others? Do they say they believe the gospel because heaven sounds better than hell? Or do they believe the gospel because God has granted them saving faith? Determining the answers to these questions is challenging. To be clear, it is not hard for God to save young children, but it is often hard for pastors and parents to discern what type of faith resides in young children.

If a child is a genuine believer, they must get baptized. But that is not all; if they are genuine believers, they are also expected to obey all the New Testament commands for believers regarding active participation in a local church, which brings us to the next important question.

What is the connection between baptism and church membership?

In most denominations throughout church history, churches ordinarily coupled baptism with church membership. That probably sounds odd (or even legalistic) to twenty-first-century American Evangelicals, but we believe the logic of our forbearers is sound. Why? When the church baptizes Sally, they are affirming that Sally is a genuine Christian. If she is a genuine Christian, she is expected to obey every New Testament command, including the command to submit to elders (Heb. 13:17), utilize her spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 7:7; Eph. 4:7), submit to church discipline (Matt. 18:15-20), give away her resources (2 Cor. 8), and sacrificially love others. Obeying these commands apart from membership in a local church is nearly impossible.

At this point, some may argue that it is unrealistic for children (young or old) to obey the Bible’s commands to obey elders, submit to church discipline, and serve the church with their gifts. In response, we point out that there are not two categories of Christians in the Bible—Christian adults and Christian children. Rather than describing two categories of Christians, the Bible describes two categories of people (Christians and non-Christians). According to the Bible, if someone is a Christian, they are expected to live like a Christian, regardless of their age. Yet, we recognize that Christian adults and Christian children will not obey the Bible’s commands in the exact same way. To be clear, we do not believe that one is saved by obeying commands. One is saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone (Eph. 2:8-10). But if one’s faith is genuine, one will desire to obey all the Bible’s commands—regardless of their age.

Are there some rare situations where baptism and membership do not go together? Yes, but we believe these situations are rare. Therefore, we say that baptism should *ordinarily* be paired with membership. In most cases, when someone expresses interest in baptism, we assume that they want to obey all the other commands in the New Testament. Many of these commands are difficult to obey apart from formal church membership, leading us to believe that if someone is not ready for formal church membership, they are probably not ready to get baptized.

Are there other reasons that Baptists have paired baptism with church membership? Yes, baptism symbolizes that one has entered the new covenant community (i.e., the church of Jesus Christ). The Biblical covenants often come with a covenant sign (Genesis 9:12-15; 17:9-14; Ex. 31:13-17). For several reasons, scholars believe that the sign of the New Covenant is baptism. First, Jesus' death inaugurates the new covenant (Heb. 9:15), and baptism symbolizes our union with Christ in his death (Rom 6:1-4). Second, baptism specifically illustrates the promises of the new covenant; the forgiveness of sins (Jer. 31:34; Acts 22:16), cleansing (Ezek. 36:25; Acts 22:16), resurrection from the dead (Romans 6:1-5; Ezek. 37: 11-14), and receiving the Holy Spirit (Ezek. 36:27; Mark 1:8; Acts 2:38; 1 Cor. 12:13). Third, the church is called the new covenant community (Heb. 8-10). Since baptism is a picture of the entering the new covenant, it is also a picture of entering the new covenant community (Acts 2:41). For these reasons, it makes sense to pair baptism with formal church membership.

Finally, baptism is ordinarily paired with membership because baptism not only symbolizes one's union with Christ (Rom. 6:1-5), but it also symbolizes one's union with Christ's people. To be united with Christ is to be united with his people. This point is made abundantly clear in 1 Cor. 12:12-13, where Paul writes that we were all "baptized into one body." Paul makes a similar point in Gal. 3:26-28. These verses explain why Acts 2:41 says, "so those who received his word were baptized, and were added that day about three thousand souls." Added to what? Through baptism, they were added to the local church since baptism symbolizes union with Christ *and* his people.

Pairing baptism and membership has been the position of Baptists and Presbyterians throughout church history. Mike Gilbert Smith notes, "Just as faith-producing Spirit baptism is the door to membership of the invisible body of Christ, so public water baptism is the door to the visible church (1 Cor. 12:13; Acts 2:41)." He goes on to write, "Christians across the centuries have recognized this (the connection between baptism and membership). The question of 'whom should we baptize' was identical to the question 'whom should we admit to church membership.' So, when Thomas Shepard argues for infant baptism in seventeenth-century New England, he entitles his treatise, 'The Church Membership of Children.'"⁹ George Beasley-Murray was one of the twentieth century's most prodigious Baptist scholars. He rightly notes, "to be baptized to Christ is to be baptized to his body. And to be accepted by Christ, into his church, but not by the local church into which he is baptized, would be preposterous."¹⁰

⁹ Shepard, T., "The Church Membership of Children" In I. H. Murray, *The Reformation of the Church* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965), 383-409.

¹⁰ Beasley-Murray, G., "A Baptist Interpretation of the place of the child in the Church." in *Foundations* 8 (April 1965) 157-158.

At this point, you may be wondering, who has the authority to decide if a child gets baptized? We believe that the final authority to make this decision rests with the local church led by a plurality of elders, which brings us to the next important question.

Who Determines Who Should be Baptized?

Does the individual believer judge the credibility of their own profession? Must we simply take them at their word? What role do parents play in making declarations about the credibility of their child's professions of faith? What about small group leaders, youth group workers, or camp counselors? Although the input of parents, friends, family members, and small group leaders is vital, the Bible indicates that the final authority for determining who gets baptized resides with local churches, led by a plurality of elders.¹¹ This conviction is rooted in the fact that Jesus gave the keys of the kingdom to local churches, not parents (Matt. 16:17-19, 18:17-18; cf. Jn. 20:23).¹² With the keys of the kingdom, local churches have the authority to "bind" (i.e., lock) the doors of the kingdom and "loose" (i.e., open) the doors of the kingdom. Local churches perform these functions through baptism and church discipline (Matt. 18:15-20). Through baptism, local churches open the doors of the church/kingdom,¹³ and through church discipline, local churches close the doors of the church/kingdom. This implies that whoever has the authority to baptize individuals into the church has authority to discipline individuals out of the church. If parents have the authority to determine who gets baptized into the church, they have the authority to determine who gets disciplined out of the church. Fortunately, few parents claim the authority to practice church discipline, which strongly implies that they lack the same authority to determine who gets baptized.

To summarize, baptism is a means of grace ordained by Christ, given to local churches, to publicly affirm the credibility of a believer's profession of faith, symbolizing the believer's union with Christ and His people, and marking the believer off from the world. It is sometimes said that baptism is the church's symbolic act of giving a new believer the church's "team jersey."¹⁴ It not only reminds the believer of their union with the resurrected and exalted Christ, but it also reminds the believer of their union with their fellow "team members"—the Church (Eph. 4:4-6). In other words, baptism signifies that a believer has not only been saved *from* something but also *into* something (fellowship with Christ and the Church) and *for* something (the glory of God and the good of the world). Thus, when a new believer is baptized into the

¹¹ Other streams of the church, including Presbyterian, Anglican, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox, may vest the final authority of "the keys" in different subsets *within* the church (i.e., elders, bishops, priests, etc.). The belief that such declarative authority belongs to a person or group *outside* of the church's authority, be it the individual believer, their family, or any other non-ecclesiastic Christian organization, is a very recent and very American phenomenon.

¹² Practically speaking, the church speaks authoritatively on behalf of King Jesus (i.e., uses "the keys to the kingdom"—Matt. 16:19) in matters of membership and discipline (Matt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:2, 13; 2 Cor. 2:6), doctrine (Gal. 1:6-9; 2 Tim. 4:3-4), and leadership (Acts 6:1-7, 14:23; Gal. 1:6-9). For a more detailed explanation of the Bible's teaching on congregational authority, read Jonathan Leeman, *Understanding the Congregation's Authority* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2016)

¹³ The church and the kingdom are not identical, but they are similar. The church is the gathering of God's people, and the kingdom is the rule and reign of King Jesus. The church is the community of the kingdom, and the church flies the flag of the coming kingdom, but the church is not the kingdom; the church is the gathering of God's people. For an excellent discussion of this subject, consult the works of George Eldon Ladd.

¹⁴ This image comes from Bobby Jamieson's book, "Going Public: Why Baptism is Required for Church Membership."

membership of a local church, they are ready to participate in communion, which brings us to the next subject.

What is Communion?

Like baptism, the Lord's Supper is rich in meaning.¹⁵ It is a remembrance of the gospel (Luke 22:19), a proclamation of the gospel (1 Cor. 11:26), a picture of our communion with Christ (1 Cor. 10:16), a picture of Christian unity (1 Cor. 10:17), a celebration of the future heavenly feast (Matt. 26:29), and a renewal of the new covenant.¹⁶ Everything conveyed in the Lord's Supper is only valid for Christians. It makes little sense for non-Christians to remember their redemption in Christ, celebrate their ongoing relationship with Christ, receive spiritual nourishment from Christ, celebrate Christian unity, look forward to the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, or renew their covenant with God. Therefore, non-Christians should not participate in communion.

What is the Connection Between Baptism and Communion?

If communion is only for Christians, and all Christians must be baptized, baptism must come before communion. Historically every denomination in church history has agreed with this premise (i.e., Lutheran,¹⁷ Reformed,¹⁸ Baptist¹⁹, and Catholic²⁰). Historian Greg Allison argues that restricting participation in the Lord's Supper to those who have been baptized is "the historical position of the church."²¹ Author and pastor Bobby Jamieson writes, ". . . the church

¹⁵ See the London Baptist Confession article 30:1,7 and the Westminster Confession of Faith chapter 29.

¹⁶ While baptism is a symbol of entering the new covenant, the Lord's Supper symbolizes renewing the new covenant with God. How can one make this claim? First, in the Old Testament, God promised a new covenant with his people that involved washing away sins (Jer. 31:31-34). God fulfilled this promise by sending his own son to suffer and die in the place of sinners. As a result, every time a saint celebrates the Lord's Supper, he is reminded that the blessings of the new covenant were very costly. They are not only reminded of the benefits of the new covenant; they are renewing the new covenant. What do I mean? We enter the new covenant by faith alone. Every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we are challenged once again to put our faith in Jesus Christ alone, the mediator of the new covenant. Second, in the Lord's Supper, we see Jesus Christ breaking his body and shedding his blood in our place. We deserved to have our bodies broken and our blood shed since we could not fulfill the old covenant terms. Not only did Christ fulfill the terms of the old covenant perfectly, but he also died in the place of covenant breakers so that covenant-breakers could be members of the new covenant. Every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we are reminded of the fact that God chose to covenant with covenant breakers while we simultaneously renew our covenant with God through faith alone. He promises to forgive when we promise to believe, leading one author to write, "The Lord's Supper testifies that God keeps his promises." Third, Jesus held out the cup to his disciples and said, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:20). In other words, the shed blood of Christ symbolized in the cup makes it possible for sinners to experience the blessings of the new covenant. Every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we are reminded of this glorious reality. In summary, Jonathan Edwards writes, "God in this ordinance seals his covenant to us." How does he do this? "The actions of breaking the bread and pouring out the wine, and giving them to the people are, as it were, a visible promise that upon our accepting the things signified by them at the hands of Christ we shall enjoy them; and the actions and signs signify the same to the eye as the promise does to the ear."

¹⁷ David Scaer, "Lutheran View" in *Understanding Four Views on the Lord's Supper*, ed. John Armstrong (Grand Rapids, Mi: Zondervan, 2007), 90.

¹⁸ I. John Hesselink, "Reformed View" in *Understanding Four Views on the Lord's Supper*, ed. John Armstrong (Grand Rapids, Mi: Zondervan, 2007), 70.

¹⁹ Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology: A Compendium* (Valley Forge, Pa: Judson Press, 1972), 977-978.

²⁰ Armstrong, John, and Paul E. Engle, *Understanding Four Views on the Lord's Supper* (Grand Rapids, Mi: Zondervan, 2007), 129.

²¹ Greg Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Wheaton, Il: Crossway books, 2012), 400.

throughout history has held with near-perfect unanimity that baptism is a necessary prerequisite to the Lord's Supper and church membership."²²

Why do so many theologians and denominations teach that baptism is the prerequisite for communion? Because they understand that the meaning of the sacraments determines the order of the sacraments. Everything symbolized in baptism points to the start of the Christian life (union with Christ, cleansing from sin, regeneration, reception of the Holy Spirit, and entering the new covenant community). In light of this rich theological symbolism, baptism is often called the sacrament of initiation. On the other hand, communion symbolizes spiritual realities that are only true of believers (remembering the gospel, proclaiming the gospel, receiving spiritual nourishment, anticipating heaven, and renewing covenant with God). In light of these theological realities, communion is often referred to as the sacrament of renewal or nutrition.²³ Bobby Jamieson writes, "Scripture teaches that baptism is the front door of the church, and the Lord's Supper is the family meal."²⁴

Evidence that baptism precedes communion is found in a careful reading of Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 2:38-42; 1 Cor. 10:16-17; 1 Cor. 11:24-25. Paul's words in 1 Cor. 11 are particularly noteworthy since Paul warns the saints from taking communion in an unworthy manner. Ignoring Christ's command to get baptized more than likely qualifies as participating in communion in an unworthy manner.

When parents say, "Our 13-year-old daughter has not been baptized, but we allow her to take communion." We graciously ask them, "is your daughter a Christian?" If they say, "yes," we ask them why their daughter has not been baptized. At this point, we remind the parents that baptism is a command, not a suggestion. By ignoring the command to get baptized, their Christian daughter is sinning. On the other hand, if the parents say, "we are not sure if our daughter is a Christian." We ask them why they are letting their non-Christian daughter participate in the Lord's Supper, a meal reserved for Christians. We conclude that there is no biblical reason to allow someone to take communion who has not been baptized. Much of the difficulty surrounding children, baptism, communion, and membership is rooted in the different stages of childhood development. To this subject, we turn next.

The Stages of Child Development

In recent decades, child psychologists have only confirmed what parents have known since the dawn of time—as children mature, they increase in self-awareness, abstract thinking skills, independent decision making, and the ability to understand the implications of their decisions. A child's intellectual capacity to make independent decisions about his relationship with Christ increases significantly in the early to middle adolescence years. With this said, we do

²² Bobby Jamieson, *Going Public, Why Baptism is Required for Church Membership* (Nashville, Tn: B&H Publishing Group, 2015), 8.

²³ Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 402, footnote 172.

²⁴ Jamieson, 3.

not deny God's power to save young children. We think God does save young children, but it is often hard to discern when this happens.

Over time, our ability to see and identify developmental markers increase as children mature. Early in a child's life, their values, identity, and beliefs are tightly woven together with their parents. Consequently, it is challenging to distinguish a young child's love for Jesus from his love for his parents. Nevertheless, a child's early dependence on parents during the early stages of childhood development is right and good.

Think of a young child's heart like a tightly closed flower bud. The child loves Jesus, and he loves his parents. In many cases, the child loves Jesus because he loves his parents. We can also presume that he loves and obeys his parents because he loves and obeys Jesus. For younger children, these twin loves—love for parents and love for Jesus—are as inseparable as the petals of a blossoming flower. As a child matures, the bud opens on its own. As the adolescent becomes more self-aware, they become more capable of making a personal decision about the truth claims of Christianity. Said another way, as the flower opens, the petals separate, making the child's love for Jesus distinguishable from his love for his parents.

What is the takeaway? Due to the early phases of child development, it is often difficult to distinguish between the petals. In other words, it is difficult to determine whether young children possess saving faith. When children enter their mid to late teens, it is easier to discern if their faith is genuine. In light of this, we encourage parents to wait and watch. When it is clear to the church that a child truly believes the gospel, they are baptized, become members of the church, and start taking communion, all to the glory of God.

The Glory of God

The elders of GCF believe that a clear statement on the sacraments, church membership, and children is of utmost importance for three reasons: the good of our children, the good of our church, and most importantly, the glory of God.

For the Good of Our Children

In recent decades, churches are baptizing younger and younger children. One scholar recently wrote that Baptist churches have “been on a steady march toward infant baptism.”²⁵ This trend is concerning because baptizing young children can be more harmful than sprinkling infants. Why? When our evangelical paedobaptist friends (e.g., conservative Presbyterians and Anglicans) sprinkle infants, they understand that the infants have not been converted. On the other hand, when Baptists baptize young children, they are proclaiming that the child has been converted, when many have not.

As the average age of baptism drops in America, the number of “re-baptisms” rises. A staggering number of people who *thought* they were converted during childhood were

²⁵ Jason Keith Allen, “On Sprinkling Infants, Baptizing Children, and Recovering Regenerate Church Membership” at <http://jasonkallen.com/2015/05/sprinkling-infants-baptizing-children-recovering-regenerate-church-membership/> [published May 4, 2015]. Last accessed July 18, 2017.

“reconverted” and “rebaptized” in their late teens and early twenties,²⁶ implying that their earlier conversions were inauthentic. If baptism does not save, what is the rush to baptize young children? Why not wait until the child is older? When churches baptize young children, they may be giving young children a false assurance of salvation. The churches that hold off on baptism until the teenage years generally do a better job of baptizing true converts. Furthermore, baptism is often more meaningful and memorable for older teens. In summary, waiting to baptize children until their teenage years is for the good of the children.

For the Good of Our Church

A proper understanding of conversion, the sacraments, membership, children, and church discipline is essential for maintaining the health and witness of GCF. Sadly, the purity of Christ’s church is tarnished by false professors, undisciplined baptized “Christians,” and unaccountable baptized “Christians.” Emphasizing regenerate church membership, carefully guarding the sacraments, and disciplining wayward saints are God’s means of protecting the purity of the church. When healthy churches mistakenly baptize false professors, God’s solution is church discipline (Matt. 18:15-20). We must be careful who we baptize and accept into membership for the good of the church.

For the Glory of God

The church is a spiritual organization built on the “foundation of the apostles and the prophets, [with] Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone” (Eph. 2:20). She exists to preach “the unsearchable riches of Christ” and to display “the manifold wisdom of God” to all creation (Eph. 3:8-10). To this end, GCF strives to celebrate God’s gracious work of regeneration, conversion, and sanctification by carefully celebrating the sacraments of baptism and communion to the glory of the triune God (2 Cor. 13:14).

Conclusion

The four points below summarize our understanding of the issues discussed so far.

1. The elders of Grace Christian Fellowship strongly recommend that parents wait until early adolescence (12-14 years old) before encouraging their children to request baptism and church membership. We want to be clear that this is a recommendation, not a mandate. The elders are willing to interview younger children for baptism and membership if they so desire. However, since the goal of a membership interview is to determine, to the best of our ability, the credibility of a child’s profession of faith, we don’t expect those conversations to be nearly as clear or fruitful as they would be at a later age.
2. We encourage parents to actively instruct their children in the facts of the gospel while prayerfully, patiently, and vigilantly seeking to identify the fruit of the gospel

²⁶ Hammet, 168-169.

in their children's lives—namely, the conviction of sin and repentance, and evidence of new life in Christ.

3. When a child professes faith in Christ and asks about baptism, the elders will encourage their parents to read this document. Next, the child will be encouraged to sign up for the next membership class. After successfully completing the membership class, the child will be independently interviewed by two of the elders for membership and baptism.
4. Upon being accepted as a baptized member of Grace Christian Fellowship, the child shall continue to submit to the spiritual leadership of his member-parents while participating in the rights, responsibilities, and discipline inherent in membership at GCF.

Questions and Answers

1. By not immediately baptizing my child and bringing them into the church's membership, are you saying that they are non-Christians?

Certainly not! We believe that God is able and often willing to convert young people. What we fail to see, God sees clearly (Jer. 17:10; Acts 15:8). In delaying their baptism, we are not necessarily saying that they aren't Christians. Rather, we are saying that it seems wise to wait for more discernible evidence of the Spirit's regenerating work before publicly affirming their faith and allowing them to participate in the church's rights, responsibilities, and discipline.

2. By encouraging believing children to wait to get baptized, aren't you running the risk of discouraging them or stunting their spiritual growth?

Not necessarily. We reject the belief that baptism brings about saving faith or infuses righteousness into the recipient. Furthermore, we believe that the Spirit's primary instrument of saving and sanctifying sinners is God's Word (Jn. 17:17; Rom. 10:17; Heb. 4:12-13; 1 Pet. 1:23-25). When baptism is withheld, children can still flourish under the other means of grace, such as Bible reading, prayer, fellowship, and gathering with the church.

We believe that more risks are associated with baptizing younger children than teens. As previously mentioned, when you baptize younger children, you run the risk of giving them false assurance. Some of them grow up thinking they are Christians because they were baptized as kids, even though they live just like the world. Furthermore, when children are baptized before facing opportunities to count the cost of following Jesus, or before fully understanding the weight of their sins, their baptisms are often less meaningful. Finally, when someone walks away from the faith, after being baptized as a child, they are tempted to say, "I tried Christianity, I even got baptized, and it did not work."

3. By asking my believing child to wait to be baptized, are you preventing him from obeying a biblical command?

Possibly, but baptism signifies both an individual profession and a corporate declaration. Just as each disciple must obey Christ's command to get baptized (Acts 2:38), each congregation is responsible to ensure that they only baptize believers (Matt. 16:13-20; 28:19). We strive to be vigilant yet gracious when discerning the credibility of a particular child's profession. The recommended age mentioned above (12-14 years) should be understood as a prudential guideline, not a mandate. We are less concerned with the age for baptism than we are with identifying God's regenerative work in a child's life. If a child demonstrates a credible profession of faith and is eager to participate in the rights, responsibilities, and discipline of the church, the elders will eagerly recommend baptism and formal church membership.

4. Nobody knows my child as I do, and I see evidence of genuine faith. So why isn't my testimony enough?

There is no doubt that parents know their child better than anyone, but membership in the church is never a decision made by the parents apart from an entire congregation, led by the elders. Ultimately, each congregation has been "deputized" by Jesus to declare on earth what is true in heaven, regarding the genuineness of one's faith (Matt. 16:13-20). In other words, the New Testament teaches that congregations, led by elders, have the final authority to determine who gets baptized and allowed to join a local church.

5. To what degree must my son or daughter be willing to assume the responsibilities of church membership, especially concerning church discipline?

All the members of GCF, regardless of their age, must be committed to carrying out the spirit of GCF's membership agreement. With that in mind, the details of the agreement may be applied differently for adults and teens. However, your child must understand that being baptized into the membership of GCF includes submitting himself or herself to the authority (Heb. 13:17) and discipline of our church (Matt. 18:15-20). If your child partakes of communion at our church, he is liable of being ex-commun(ion)-icated from our church if he or she remains unrepentant of disqualifying sin. The sobering responsibility of church discipline motivates us to be vigilant about only baptizing individuals who demonstrate the fruit of regeneration.

Some wonder how a child can be under the authority of his parents and the church at the same time? Here is how—the Bible teaches that all Christians live under several authorities simultaneously. For instance, a wife submits to her husband (Eph. 5:22-24), the civil authorities (Rom. 13), her boss (Eph. 6:5-8), and the elders of the church (Heb. 13:17). In a similar sense, a man submits to the civil authorities, the elders, and his boss. A child convert is no different. He also must submit to a variety of authorities—parents, civil government, bosses, coaches, teachers, principals, and the elders of the local church. All Christians must learn to live with the tension of submitting to a variety of authorities. With this in mind, the elders work hard to shepherd member children alongside of the parents not independently of the parents.

6. How should I talk to my young child when they express faith in Christ and wants to get baptized?

Pastor, scholar, and father Jonathan Leeman describes how he talks to his young daughters about these vital topics.²⁷

Daughter: Daddy, am I a Christian?

Me: If you're repenting of your sins, and putting your trust in Jesus, then yes.

Daughter: I am.

Me: If you are, then praise God! Keep doing that, sweetheart!

Daughter: Can I get baptized?

Me: At some point, honey. Right now, while you're young, let's continue to learn and grow. We'll think about this more when you are older. I want you to stand on your own two feet as a follower of Jesus, and not just believe these things because I do. But I'm so glad you want to follow Jesus with me! This is the most important decision you'll ever make. There's no one better than him.

Leeman goes on to write, "Notice a couple of things. First, I don't formally affirm her as a Christian. Instead, I give her the criteria (repentance and faith), and I make conditional statements (If...then...). Second, I do rejoice with her in what she believes to be the case when I say, "Praise God." But again, I don't go as far as employing my parental authority to say, "You are a Christian." I honestly don't believe God has given me such authority as a parent. Instead, I believe he has given the local church this *affirming* authority (Matt. 16:19; 18:18, 20)."²⁸

7. If I was baptized at an early age, is this statement suggesting that my baptism was illegitimate?

Certainly not! Many members in our church were baptized as believers at an early age. We have no intention of calling the credibility of such baptisms into question. In fact, the intervening years of spiritual growth and faithfulness to God have served to demonstrate further the legitimacy of their baptisms.

We adopted this stance because, for every member who was baptized early and endured in genuine faith, two others were baptized young and apostatized. Some later trusted in Christ. But, looking back, they recall being lulled into spiritual apathy by false assurance, plagued by doubts and confusion about their faith, or having no desire whatsoever for spiritual things. We are hopeful that this paper will bring glory to God by helping our church guard its members from experiencing similar difficulties.

²⁷ This comes from the "9 Marks Mailbag" by Jonathan Leeman (4-10-2015). It can be accessed at ninemarks.org

²⁸ Leeman.