

What Is Church Membership?

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Is the idea of church membership biblical? What kind of commitment does it entail? What are the benefits of being a member? These are the questions that I want to address in this pamphlet.

Shepherds for the Sheep

The Christian faith is not merely a private matter between an individual and God. It also involves being under the shepherding authority of a local church. This needs to be emphasized, because there are many today who see the idea of church membership as an unbiblical formality and instead prefer a non-institutional type of Christianity. We see an example of this in William Young's popular novel *The Shack*, where the main character (a man named Mack) has the following interchange with Young's fictional Jesus: "You're not too fond of religion and institutions?" Mack said, not sure if he was asking a question or making an observation. I don't create institutions – never have, never will... that's an occupation for those who want to play God. So no, I'm not too big on religion, and not very fond of politics or economics either...And why should I be? They are the man-created trinity of terrors that ravages the earth and deceives those I care about."

Contrary to what *The Shack's* fictional Jesus says, the Jesus of the New Testament did create an institutional church, an institution complete with its own officers, structure and rituals. As we read in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, "When [Jesus] ascended on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men...And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ." (Eph. 4:8, 11-12, KJV) As these verses clearly state, the church and its ministry is an institution, though not a man-made one. The church is not just an invisible, spiritual reality, but also a visible entity with an official ministry.

Our Lord appointed the church to serve as the nurturing mother of God's children, and the church performs this function as a visible institution. It is through the ministry of Word and sacrament that Christ comes down to us and causes his saving presence to dwell within us (see Rom. 10:8-17). Only as a

visible institution can the church be faithful to its calling as “a pillar and buttress of truth (1 Tim. 3:15). Only by faithfully teaching the apostolic gospel can the church be “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.” (Eph. 2:20)

While all Christians are spiritually equal before God, the Lord has established an authority structure in his church, a structure that is focused upon the office of elder (the New Testament also refers to those who serve in this office as overseers). Jesus works through the office of elder to nurture and govern his sheep. This is made clear in Acts 20, where the apostle Paul issues the following instructions to the elders of the church in Ephesus: “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.” (Acts 20:28) The communion that Christians enjoy with Christ is mediated by the Spirit through the church’s official ministry. This is why church membership and corporate worship are central to the life of Christian discipleship (see Heb. 10:25; 13:17).

What Does Church Membership Entail?

Those who wish to become members at Grace Presbyterian Church must be able to give a credible profession of faith in Jesus Christ before the church Session (the pastor and the other elders), which includes answering the following questions in the affirmative:

- 1. Do you acknowledge yourselves to be sinners in the sight of God, justly deserving His displeasure, and without hope save in His sovereign mercy?*
- 2. Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and Savior of sinners, and do you receive and rest upon Him alone for salvation as He is offered in the Gospel?*
- 3. Do you now resolve and promise, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, that you will endeavor to live as becomes the followers of Christ?*
- 4. Do you promise to support the Church in its worship and work to the best of your ability?*
- 5. Do you submit yourselves to the government and discipline of the Church, and promise to study its purity and peace?*

Typically, we ask those who are interested in membership to go through a class that introduces them to our church’s beliefs and practices.

How Our Elders Shepherd the Flock

As shepherd-leaders, the church's elders need to know, feed, lead, and protect Christ's sheep. At our church, the elders have developed a shepherding plan in order to carry out this work. We divide the church's members into four groups and assign a different group to each of our four elders every year. The elders then make monthly phone calls to the people on their list, inquiring about their overall welfare and especially their spiritual health. We write down specific prayer requests and commit ourselves to praying regularly for the people in our shepherding group. Through these monthly shepherding calls, we seek to provide encouragement, edification, comfort, help, and accountability.

We take seriously the responsibility that the Lord has given us in calling us to serve as shepherds for his sheep. Christ was willing to shed his own blood to ransom his lost sheep. Each and every one of them is precious in his sight. Therefore, we want to do all that we can to care for the objects of our Savior's love. As we strive to help the members of this church grow in Christian maturity, we ask the members of our congregation to keep us in their prayers and to remember the commitment that they made when they were received into membership: "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." (Heb. 13:17)

The Ministry of the Deacons

In addition to the office of elder, our Lord has also instituted the office of deacon in his church. Deacons minister to the physical needs of the congregation, with a special focus upon caring for those who are sick, lonely, or in distress. They are also responsible for the maintenance of the church building and property, and one of their number typically serves as the church treasurer. To carry out their work, the deacons collect a special offering on the first Sunday of the month and use these funds to provide help to those who are in need. They also visit those with ongoing needs, as well as widows and others who live alone.

How You Can Build Up the Body

While not every Christian is called to serve in the special offices of minister, elder, or deacon, we are all called to support the church's ministry and use our gifts for the common good of the body. (see 1 Cor. 9:14; 12:7; Gal. 6:6-10) Here are a few practical ways you can do this at GPC:

- Attend both Lord's Day worship services with a prayerful spirit
- Participate in the Sunday School classes
- Give at least a tithe (10%) of your income for the support the church's ministry
- Contribute to the Deacons' fund
- Attend the weekly prayer meeting to pray corporately for the church's ministry and the needs of the saints
- Pray regularly for the church's officers
- Offer biblical encouragement to your fellow believers
- Serve and witness to your non-Christian neighbors
- Help others, especially in times of sickness or special need (provide meals, babysitting, cleaning, yardwork, home repairs, car rides, etc.)
- Serve on the rotation for the church nursery, refreshments, or clean-up
- Visit the elderly and those in the hospital
- Invite people over for meals, especially those who live alone
- Participate in the church's spring clean-up day or look for other ways to care for the building and property
- Help prepare and serve lunch when our church hosts Presbytery