

## **A Theology of Church Membership at Grace**

### ***The Local Church***

Jesus Christ created and established his church as the primary source of displaying his glory and advancing the gospel in the world (Matt 16:18; Acts 19:28). Membership in the universal church requires only saving faith in Christ. Ultimately, only God himself knows who are true members of this universal church and their membership is the result of his sovereign grace (Matt 25:31-42; Eph 2:8-9). However, God commands that membership in the universal church be expressed in the context of an identifiable local church. The Christian life as God intends, assumes and demands meaningful local church involvement and commitment. The unique and comprehensive responsibilities, offices, ordinances, and authority of the local church are intended by God to provide the framework of our nurture sanctification, equipping, and ministry (Eph 4:11-13). One of the amazing joys and privileges of the Christian is to be chosen by God to become part of the church, and thereby display the love of Christ in our relationships, so that people are drawn to the Savior (John 13:35; 1 John 4:12). This necessary relationship with the local church has very practical implications, and to be knowingly and intentionally outside of the care and authority of the local church is to be in sin.\* “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” (Heb 10:25).

Joyful obedience to God is to be expressed through obedience to elders of a local church, and the elders are to give an account to God for how they cared for the flock entrusted to their care. “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; Cf. 1 Peter 5:5). Elders are commanded to show godly compassion and humility as they lead their specific local church. They are to serve under the authority and Lordship of Christ who is the chief Shepherd. Certainly, an elder at Grace will not have to answer to God for all the believers in the world, or America, or California, or LA County, or even La Mirada. “So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is under your care, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.” (1 Peter 5:1-4)

Church discipline is one of the primary responsibilities of the church, and the ability to obey Christ’s way of dealing with sin is only possible if believers are clearly part of, and accountable to, an identifiable local church. Matt 18:15, “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 (Cf. 1 Cor 5:1-12).

Loving and caring for others is never limited to those in our church (Luke 10:25-37). But practically our first responsibility is to care for those in our church family. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in love. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. (Rom 12:10-15; Cf. 1 Tim 5:1-21). Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need (1 Tim 5:3).

All of these necessary dynamics of the Christian life require a clear understanding of who the committed members of local church are. Many in our culture today are averse to commitment, accountability, dependence on others, responsibility, and self-sacrifice. There also seems to be a good number of Christians who are skeptical of institutional, formal, concrete expressions of the Christian faith. But our love for Christ must be real, daily, concrete, identifiable, and lived out within the local church. Through most of the history of the church it was fairly uncomplicated to discern who was a true part of a local church. Most Christians became Christians (as adults or children) through the ministry of the local church that they stayed in their whole lives. They were usually baptized, taught the basics of the faith, cared for, preached to, prayed for, married, and buried literally at their one local church. Knowing who is a committed member of a local assembly is much more difficult in contemporary American Christianity, especially in more urban areas. Everyone who may show up on a Sunday morning does not define a church. To take our responsibilities seriously, we must clarify our membership at Grace—those for whom the elders particularly care for and will answer to God for at the Day of Judgment (Heb 13:17).

While the Bible does not prescribe the details of a formal membership process we believe it seems wise and even necessary to have a clear process by which we determine the membership of Grace. This process is so that the leadership of Grace is able to discern the spiritual condition and beliefs of those seeking membership, and also so the potential member becomes well acquainted with the beliefs, commitments, and culture of our church. Then it will become possible for our church and its members to make knowledgeable and wholehearted commitments to one another. We recognize that some who are not official members of Grace do feel committed to Grace, and faithfully fulfill all of the expectations of a member. We also realize that we will likely have official members who don't act like it. Our desire is for everyone in our church family to be members both officially and practically. We want to be welcoming and hospitable to all who come to our church, while at the same time making it clear that membership matters. To this end, certain opportunities and responsibilities are normally limited to members.

Our desire for clear and meaningful church membership at Grace is so that we are able to distinguish between those who are true believers and committed to Grace, so that discipleship can happen as God intends. The gospel creates redeemed individuals, so that they become a redeemed people, who live for God's glory. May we be a people set apart, unified, and reaching out to a lost world in love, until every knee bows before our glorious Savior.

\* We do not believe it is sin if someone intends to be a part of a local church but for some reason are still in the process of finding one or if there is currently no viable church where they live (Eg. the mission field).