

Frequently Asked Questions About Membership - Study Guide by Pastor Phil Layton

1. What does membership mean at GCBC? Committing yourself to this local church under its leaders and asking for accountability (see commitments on p. 4 based on those biblical passages). At GCBC we ask members to express those commitments to the church and the church to them.

2. Does GCBC argue our membership process is the only way or identical to NT churches?

- No. The same could be said of meeting in church buildings at 10:00 a.m. or Sunday School classes, communion monthly, etc. How GCBC applies biblical principles may look different than others (ex: persecuted churches may not use signed member apps or address lists for security risks and may track members in other ways). 'Members' is a biblical word (see #3 below) but not to be confused with clubs in our culture. Some churches don't use the word or others define their members informally by attendance. Most churches in history have had a process to join for those who convert or want to commit to the church in the way the leadership asks for practical and biblical reasons.
- The NT has a few commands about assembling together corporately (Heb 10:24) and regularly observing communion (1 Cor 11) but most of what churches do is applying principles as its leaders determine for their setting. There may not be many principles for other matters, but membership applies many more principles and passages below
- Some call joining a church '*the right hand of fellowship*,' a biblical phrase for how the Jerusalem church leaders got to know Paul and Barnabas and their testimony and apparently publically recognized them in some way as authorized representatives of the church in their service. Some even prefer the term *partnership*, another way to translate the term *fellowship* in Gal 2:9 (see also its use in 2 Cor 6:14 for partnership, even applied to covenant commitments like marriage). *Membership* in our culture can carry ideas of passive consumers, but *partnership* includes the idea of taking part and participating in ministry, which fits the image of Eph 4:12-16, 29 (active members).
- Whatever a church calls it or however its leaders do it, church commitment is healthy.

3. How does the principle of COMMITMENT relate to being a member of a local church?

Romans 12:5 says we as the body of Christ in the church are '*individually members one of another. Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them ... Be devoted to one another in brotherly love*' (v. 5-6, 10 NASB)

- 1 Cor 12:12-27 uses the word *member* 9x to speak of united body parts connected and committed to others in a body they belong to, serving, caring for fellow members, etc.
- Because believers are spiritually members of Christ's body universally they should want to express that reality individually and locally however their church expresses it
- As church leaders determine their process for those who can serve and on what level (forms, formal process or not, faith affirmation, background check, interviews, etc.), believers should want to express their devotion to each other by committing to serve using gifts (attitude of 'I want to commit, submit, serve, so tell me how it's done here')

4. How does the principle of SUBMISSION come in to play?

Hebrews 13:17 ESV: *Obey your leaders and submit to them [NIV 'to their authority'], 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.*

- It's to your 'advantage' (or 'profit' some versions say) to obey and submit to leaders, in the context, men who speak the Word to you (v. 7) who you support in prayer (v. 18).
- A very practical way to help make your leaders job less difficult and more joyful is to submit to their desire for this by joining and coming under elder care/accountability.
- Leaders can't effectively keep watch over every soul that walks in church's doors nor can those who don't ask for it expect it, but our leaders feel a biblical responsibility to watch over the souls who have asked us for that, which is what membership asks for.
- How can you '*obey your leaders*' if you've never identified them as *your leaders*? Just coming to hear them teach may communicate 'I'm willing to listen to this teacher,' but joining as a church member communicates 'these men are *my leaders who I submit to*' (and not submitting to the leaders' desire for you to join can communicate otherwise).
- If you tell the leaders privately, 'you're my leaders, I want to submit to whatever you ask that isn't asking me to sin,' consider: membership is what GCBC leaders ask and would like you to do. If your heart is to submit to obey Heb 13:17, this is just a start.
- Following v. 17 (and Mt 18:16-17, etc.) is hard for shepherds to do if sheep resist this
- Consider also if you never agree to publically express submission in the way leaders ask, it can communicate to them or the rest of the body a presumed lack of submitting or some perceived issue, problem or dissension you have with the church or leaders.
- Rom 12:2 says '*do not be conformed to the pattern of the world.*' One way not to be conformed to our independent anti-authority world is to express an inter-dependence on others under God's authority in a church, to outwardly express spiritual realities:
 - that we're 'members' of a body that must be connected to grow (1 Cor 12, Eph 4)
 - that we're members of a family, in life's most close-knit community (Eph 2:19)
 - that we're as inseparably 'joined together' as the structure of a building (2:21-22)
 - that we're stones in a wall of a house, not loosely joined, glued tight (1 Pet 2:5)
 - that we're branches of a vine that must stay connected to other branches (Jn 15)
 - that we're a flock of sheep to be united and under shepherding (John 10, 1 Pet 5)
 - that we're members of His bride that are joined/cleaving together (Eph 5:29-32)
 - membership makes visible these spiritual realities and expresses love to others

5. What's LOVE got to do with it? Saying a vow doesn't make me part of God's family?

You can also be married without expressing verbally commitments to a bride before a church (just as you can be part of Christ's bride without verbal commitments before a church), but it's encouraging to the bride (or church) if you express your love publically. There's also accountability from the witnesses when vows are expressed before others.

6. Did believers ever voluntarily verbally affirm covenants under leaders in Bible times?

- Verbally expressing covenant commitments is not only fitting for a bride, it was part of how God's people expressed covenant commitments together in Bible times (Ex 24:3, 7)
- Verbal vows to follow scripture together was a part of the people of God from the start and continued also in written covenants when God brought them back to the Bible. Neh 9 records how based on God's grace (v. 31), leaders made and signed a voluntary covenant they put their names on paper with (v. 38) and urged all believers to affirm (10:28-29):
 - covenant commitments included raising children to not join with pagans (10:30)
 - all agreed to honor day of worship (10:31) and not neglect God's house (v. 39b)
 - all vowed to give offerings as 'first-fruits' to support work of the Lord (v. 32-38)

- Joint discipleship to obey all commands (v. 29) continues in the NT (Mt 28:19-20):
 - leaders of God's people are to lead the way in God's house with others sharing common confession of faith (1 Tim 3:5, 15-17, 5:17) which they affirm publically before witnesses (6:12) and devote together to hear God's Word together (4:13)
 - the NT calls us to raise children in Christ, not join with pagans (2 Cor 6:14), to worship regularly on the Lord's day, not neglect His house (Heb 4:9, 10:21-25), to give to the church (1 Cor 16:2, 2 Cor 8-9), etc. See p. 4 for GCBC Covenant.

7. Did people actually 'join' the church in NT times or just gather to hear the teaching?

- Acts 5:11–13 (ESV) *And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard ... among the people ... And they were all together in Solomon's Portico ... None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem [NKJV 'highly regarded']*
 - Solomon's portico was where they regularly taught the multitude (3:11-26, 5:20-26)
 - Note there was some distinction 'among the people' between 'the whole church' and 'the rest' who 'heard' and 'held them in high esteem' but didn't want to 'join' them
 - The leaders knew who 'the full number of the disciples' were to call them to special gatherings (6:2), like nomination and affirmation of future spiritual leaders (6:5-7)
 - Greek word 'join' in Acts 5:13 isn't a casual connection or attendance, it's used for formal associations, contracts, often in writing (Lk 15:15), covenant commitments, marriage in Mt 19:5 and Eph 5:30-32: *we are members of His body. For this reason a man ...shall be joined [word in Acts 5:13] to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church*
- Acts 9:26 says Paul '*attempted to join the disciples*' but the Jerusalem church wasn't sure he was a believer, so first his testimony was shared with the leaders (v. 27). Paul later in Gal 2:9 wrote of this time: '*when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship...*' That seemed to be some public recognition so that they could then represent them in ministry.
- The key issue isn't the paperwork or exact process for Paul, but that pattern has wisdom for the pillars (leaders) of a local church in how they extend fellowship to those who join. At GCBC the leaders of the church also meet first privately with those who want to join in this pattern, getting to know them and their testimony of grace before public welcome.

8. Besides the word 'join,' how else does the NT describe those 'added' to the early church?

Acts 2:41–42 ... *there were added that day about three thousand souls.*⁴² *And they continually devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship ...*

- 'Devoted' is not a Greek word for a loose informal association or mere attendance, it's a word for committing, cleaving to, connecting as glue, closely adhering/attaching to
- The precise process of how people were 'added to the number' to the NT church isn't spelled out, but the devotion to teaching and fellowship is what our leaders encourage
- Initially public commitment in baptism may have been how members were *added*, but over time, to effectively shepherd and not neglect the flock, some structure was soon needed (Acts 6:1-7, 20:28, apparently developing lists for care/support, ex. 1 Tim 5:9)
- If believers join and commit to all kinds of other associations or clubs in life but don't join and commit to the Lord's church, consider the message that's communicating (is this one area of life not to commit, or does the Lord ask for our highest commitment?)
- Read Acts 2:42-47 and keep its commitment in mind in reading commitments on p. 4

9. What do members commit to at GCBC?

Below covenant commitments are what we ask new members to affirm as part of worship, and ask existing members to re-affirm to them and to each other, holding each other accountable. We also ask GCBC elders to publically commit to shepherd these asking for this shepherding care.

Having been led by the Holy Spirit of God to receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, and having been baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, I do now in the presence of God, most solemnly and joyfully enter into covenant with other believers of this congregation, as one body in Christ.

I will endeavor, by the aid of the Holy Spirit,

- To walk together in Christian love, and maintain the unity of the believers in the church (John 13:34-35; Ephesians 4:3-6);
- To strive for the advancement of this congregation in knowledge, holiness, and love (Ephesians 4:11-16; 2 Peter 3:18);
- To sustain its worship, ordinances, discipline and doctrines (Acts 2:42, 1 Timothy 4:13);
- To contribute cheerfully and willingly to the support of its ministry as able (2 Corinthians 9:7, Psalm 100:2);
- To walk circumspectly in the world so as to maintain a strong Christian testimony (Ephesians 5:15-21);
- To watch over other believers in brotherly love, through prayer, and giving aid in times of need (Galatians 6:1-10; Philippians 2:1-7; 1 Peter 3:8-9);
- To bring up those in my care in the teaching of the Lord in my family (Ephesians 6:4; Deuteronomy 6:7; Psalm 78:1-6);
- To maintain a clear conscience by seeking forgiveness, and forgiving others according to the teachings of our Lord Jesus (Luke 17:4; Mark 11:25; Matthew 5:23-24, 18:21-35, Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:12-15);
- To submit to the leadership of this congregation and be subject to its discipline (Matthew 18:15-18; Hebrews 13:17).
- To not forsake the corporate assembling of myself together with a gathered church even if it becomes necessary to leave this congregation (Hebrews 10:25);

If at any time I find myself out of harmony with the leadership and practices of this congregation, and am not able to resolve the issue after proper appeals are made, I will quietly remove myself from membership, and refrain from dissension among the congregation.