

The Practice of Church Membership at GFC

Various passages

April 13, 2014

Introduction:

This morning we come to the last message in our sermon series entitled *Church Membership Matters*. Over the past six weeks, we have learned a great deal about the importance of church membership. We've considered the biblical basis for church membership, we looked at the purpose and requirements of membership, then spent two weeks learning about church discipline, and then last week considered reasons to terminate one's membership as well as how to properly go about leaving a church. Today I want to end this series on church membership by discussing how the practice of church membership looks for us here. What does it mean to be a member at Grace Fellowship? We've looked at church membership in general over the past few weeks, but how does that look specifically at our church? What is it that we expect of our members at Grace Fellowship?

1. Purpose Statement

We have in essence simplified what we expect of our members in our Purpose Statement [show slide]. Hopefully those of you who have been part of Grace Fellowship are familiar with this. Our Purpose Statement is this:

**Grace Fellowship exists to glorify God through
worship, discipleship, service, and mission.**

Our Purpose Statement not only serves as the "big picture" goal of our church but it also delineates what we hope would be true of every member: that they would seek to glorify God through worship, discipleship service, and mission. So to begin today, I want to highlight these four means of glorifying God as a model for membership for us.

Let' begin with the first one: **worship**. We want every member of Grace Fellowship to be active worshippers of God. That begins first with our personal lives. My hope is that each of you have as the goal of your life, in all that you say and do, to worship God. I think of what Paul says in Romans 12:1, *"Therefore I appeal to you brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual act of worship."* So all that we do with our bodies, whether it is the work of our hands, the words of our mouth, or the meditations of our minds, should be given over to God as an act of worship, that he might be pleased with all we think, say, and do. I pray that is the passion of your heart and the goal of everything you do.

But besides the personal aspect of worship, there is also the corporate call to worship, where God's people gather together as a church to pray, to sing his praises, to listen to the preaching of God's Word, and participate then the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper. As a member of Grace Fellowship, we expect that you will regularly gather with your church family for worship, whether it is Sunday mornings or for the occasional Sunday evening communion service. Gathering together as a group to worship God is what Christians do.

But if we fail to do this, the apostle John warns us of what the danger is. In 1 John 2:19, he says this, *“They went out from us, but they were not of us, for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.”* Forsaking the church, refusing to be part of the community of believers that God has established, is evidence of not being a believer. John says if they had really been one of us, if they were truly a Christian, they would have continued in fellowship in the church. They would have been regular participants in the life of the church, gathering with them for preaching and prayer, for the breaking of bread and worship. That instead they *“went out from us”* made it plain that they were not truly one of them, that is, were not truly believers. Christians gather together for worship with other Christians; to make it your habit not to do so when you could is to give evidence that you aren’t what you might claim you are.

So we expect members of Grace Fellowship to be in regular attendance at our worship gatherings. That’s not to say you can’t go on vacation for a few weeks or that there may be times when you’re unable to attend regularly due to illness or other life circumstances that demand your attention for a season. The concern here is when you could attend but you don’t. When you choose to sleep in or hit the golf course or have some other reason for staying home. We expect members here will be eager to be part of our corporate gatherings of worship as a joyful culmination of their week of living their lives in worship in the midst of the world. It is the biblical expectation of Christians and therefore our expectation of members of Grace Fellowship.

The second expectation of members here is that they would be diligent in seeking to glorify God in their lives through **discipleship**. The term discipleship refers to the on-going process of becoming a more devoted follower of Christ. I say “on-going” because this side of heaven we will never reach the place where we are perfect in our devotion to Christ. There will always be for us more to learn, temptations to be resisted, passions for godliness to grow stronger, and so on. Becoming a Christian by repenting of sin and trusting in Christ is only the first step on the life-long road of discipleship.

When I think about discipleship, I see it touching on three areas: our minds, our hearts, and our wills. First, it touches on our minds in that we are to grow in our intellectual understanding of Christ. Paul prays for believers in Ephesians 1:17, asking that God, *“might give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him... that you might know what is the hope to which he has called you...”* In a similar way Paul writes in Col. 1:9-10, *“we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding...”* Foundational to growing as a Christian is having the right understanding of God, and so discipleship must focus on developing a Christian mind.

Second, we must grow not only intellectually in our understanding of God, but we must also grow in our heart – our passions, our emotions, our love and desire – for God. Jesus sums up the Law and the Prophets saying, *“You shall love the Lord your God will all your heart...”* The affections of our heart should grow in love for God as we come to understand more of his character and works done for us in Christ.

This then leads naturally to the third aspect of discipleship which concerns our will. To understand God rightly in your mind and to love his passionately in your heart will lead to joyfully obeying him with your will. Our wills don't act in a vacuum: they are driven by our desires. We can only do that which we desire the most, and so if our hearts desire God, our deeds will follow.

As members of Grace Fellowship who are also disciples of Christ, we want you to grow in your knowledge, love, obedience to Jesus. I'm not interested in stagnant Christians who don't grow. I want to see a church where each member can say they've grown in discipleship over the past year, that they better understand God Word's and how it applies to their lives. I want members who love and cherish Christ more deeply and with a greater passion that they did last year. I long to see our members defeat the sin in their lives and grow in their obedience to God in thought, word, and deed. If you are at the exact same place you were intellectually, emotionally, and in obedience to God's will as you were one or two or five years ago, then there's something terribly wrong. We want to be zealous in growing as disciples, not indifferent to the state of our souls.

To that end, we want our members to be diligent in seeking out ways to deepen their knowledge, love, and obedience to Christ. There are many ways to do that here and we ask that you avail yourself to at least one of them, if not more. We have discipleship classes on Sunday morning that are meant to help you in that regard. There are four different options available to you: attend one of them. If I might make a plug for my class, we're going to be ending our series on Christian Ethics soon and will be moving on to Church History after that. I bet most of you here have never taken a church history class. Here's your chance to learn about your family history, that is, the family of God, of your brothers and sisters in Christ who have gone before you. Take up the challenge to learn something new by attending a discipleship class.

Another way to grow in discipleship is by reading the *Tolle Lege* books. I cannot overstate the importance of the discipleship of my mind that has come as the result of reading good books. This is a key avenue of discipleship here at Grace Fellowship that doesn't demand another meeting or evening out of your week: you can read when it fits in your schedule. The books I'm recommending are great books, theologically rich and intellectually challenging. They will help you grow in the discipleship of your mind if you would only pick them up and read them.

Besides that, there are opportunities to be involved in small groups, in the men's or women's ministry, in getting together in accountability relationships. I meet with five different men each week for Bible study, book discussions, accountability, and prayer. Seek out those avenues of growth. If you don't have something like that currently and would like to, let me know. I can help to arrange that. As members of Grace Fellowship, be proactive in discipleship. Seek out ways to deepen your knowledge, love, and obedience to Christ through the ministries of this church.

The third area of membership we highlight in our Purpose Statement is that of **service**. Our expectation is that every member of Grace Fellowship is involved in some form of service to the church. As the apostle Peter says in 1 Peter 4:10, "*As each has received*

a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's grace." We all have spiritual gifts given to us by grace that we're to be good stewards of by using for the common good of the church. Some of us have high-profile gifts, such as teaching or leadership; other of us have gifts that will place us more behind-the-scenes, such as administration or counseling. Regardless of what our gifts and talents may be, we are to use them for the benefit of the church we belong to.

So every member should be contributing for the good of God's people here at Grace Fellowship by serving in some capacity. Maybe it's serving on the Worship Team with your musical talents. Perhaps it's working with children in one of our various Children's Ministries. It may be serving as an usher, a greeter, a small group host or leader, running the audio/visual equipment on Sunday morning, or serving as an Elder or on the Care Team or Business Team. I could go on and on but I think you get the idea. Every member here who is able to serve should serve in some capacity with the gifts and talents God has blessed them with.

Finally, our Purpose Statement ends by saying that we exist to glorify God through worship, discipleship, service, and **mission**. Our goal is for every member of Grace Fellowship to see themselves as a missionary. You are on mission right here where you live in the Cedar Valley community. Jesus calls not just pastors and not just elders or church leaders but calls everyone to the work of the Great Commission when he says, "Go and make disciples of all nations..."

Now we do a great job of supporting global missions here at our church. Over twenty percent of our entire church budget is devoted to supporting numerous missionaries across the globe. That's fantastic! Plus this church has a rich history of sending out missionaries, both for long-term mission work, such as we did with Jason and Doni Weimer and with Sam and Anna Danforth, and for sending out people for short-term mission trips, such as those who recently went to serve at Urban Hope in Philadelphia. But if that's all we do, then we're missing the work Christ has called us to right where we are. The greatest impact we can have for the lost comes with what we choose to do with mission once we walk out those doors.

To help encourage us to see ourselves as missionaries right here, we have a little initiative we call *Salt & Light*. The goal of this is very simple: we want every member of Grace Fellowship to identify three unbelievers they have regular contact with. It can be someone you go to school with, a fellow employee at work, your neighbor who lives across the street from you, an old friend you've known for many years, whoever it is that you rub shoulders with on a normal basis. We call that first step *identification*. Once you have done, we want you to be intentional about the next three steps, which is to enter into conversations, invite them out for coffee or over to you home, and use those times as opportunities for proclaiming to them the good news of the gospel. So then our evangelism strategy here at Grace Fellowship can be summarized in four words: *identification, conversation, invitation, and proclamation*. Ultimately it's a very relational approach instead of an attractional approach, meaning that instead of having some big event you invite people to and some evangelist or pastor explains the gospel, you go to them and through intentional relationship building you tell them the gospel yourself.

So our goal here is that every member of our church is actively involved in being *Salt & Light* by identifying three people who they have regular contact with who they're actively and intentionally trying to reaching for Christ. To help remind you of that, I've included a *Salt & Light* card in your bulletin. Every member of our church should have one of these with the name of three individuals or couples who they are trying to witness to written down on the back of it. Then keep this card as a bookmark in your Bible or some place else where you'll see it frequently as a reminder to pray for those people and make an intentional effort to connect with them.

So then, those are the four ways we hope that every member would strive to bring glory to God in our church: through the regular gathering with the church body for corporate worship, seeking to grow in their knowledge, love, and obedience to Christ through one of our discipleship opportunities, serving in the church with your gifts and talents, and being intentional about reaching the lost through our *Salt & Light* initiative. But a bit more needs to be said since these four means address much of what you should do, but don't say much about who you are. So to that end, I want to spend just a few minutes going over our membership covenant.

2. Membership covenant

In addition to the *Salt & Light* card, you will find in your bulletin our membership covenant. When I was working on writing the material for our new member's class, I felt it was important to not only to emphasis some of the basic things we expected each of our members to do – such as attend worship service, be involved in discipleship, serve in the church, and be active in reaching the lost – but to articulate what kind of member they are to be. Furthermore, I wanted to communicate that membership was something serious: joining a church is not the same thing as joining Netflix or becoming a member at the local gym. In membership, you are making a covenant with a group of people who are already members of the church. You are promising them that you will do certain things and be a certain kind of person. So then, since I've been here we've been using a membership covenant that every new member needs to sign as part of joining the church.

Each year when we introduce new members I read the covenant, but today I thought it would be good if I actually gave each of you a copy of it. So if you would take it out for a moment, I'd like to read through it so you can see what a member at Grace Fellowship should be like. [Read through the membership covenant]

I hope you would agree that there's really nothing in there terribly unusually or surprising. In essence, the membership covenant is an agreement to live like a Christian, to do those things which God calls us to do in Scripture. Now obviously many of you haven't signed this covenant as you've been a member here long before I got here, but I hope all of you would agree with what is in it. I hope it is your goal to be this kind of member here and to encourage others to be the same. If we strive to live up to this covenant, we will be a healthy, God-honoring church. If we disregard these goals and treat membership as a right we have or are careless towards our responsibility one to another, we will be a weak and unhealthy church. The strength of our church is directly related to how seriously we take our responsibility to commit ourselves to each other by living, loving, serving, and

forgiving one another. So I hope this covenant is a helpful reminder to those who have signed it as part of joining our church and is something every long-term member desires to be true in his or her life.

3. Membership classes

Finally, it would be remiss of me to have spent all this time over the past seven weeks talking about the importance of church membership without giving you an opportunity to pursue church membership here at Grace Fellowship. The way that process works here is that first you let me know of your interest in being a member. Probably the easiest way for you to do that is to take your attendance card and on the back of it check the box that says “Interested in becoming a member.”

Then after I give people a few weeks to sign up, I’ll contact you and set up a time for a preliminary interview. The goal in that interview is to inquire about your life, to ask about your understanding of the gospel, to hear your testimony, in short to do our best to see where you are at spiritually. Based upon that interview, we’ll do one of two things: we’ll invite you to take the next step in the membership process or we will ask you to wait. If we ask you to wait, it’s because we’re uncertain of your understanding of the gospel and would rather first invest more time with you one-on-one to help make sure you understand and believe the gospel. So let me be clear that just because you want to become a member doesn’t automatically mean you will; since membership is a church’s public affirmation of an individual’s faith, we need to first be discerning whether you have truly trusted in Christ for your salvation.

The next step in the membership process is our four-week membership class. I have a new members packet entitled *Membership Matters* that goes through in what Grace Fellowship believes, our history, how our church polity works, and what’s expected of members, just to name a few. The class is the time for us as a church to lay our cards out on the table as it were and make sure you understand what we’re all about. It may be after you go through the class you decide maybe Grace Fellowship isn’t a good fit for you: that’s fine. Sometimes churches have different convictions and approaches to ministry that weren’t apparent just by attending here and so the membership class allows for people to learn the details, ask questions, and determine whether there’s a good match.

Once the class is complete, we have a final elder interview and ask you to sign our church covenant we just read. Then on a Sunday morning we all present the new members to the entire church, welcoming you to our church family.

Conclusion

And so with that invitation to become a member of Grace Fellowship if you aren’t one already, we wrap up this seven week series *Church Membership Matters*. I hope that it has been helpful to you and has strengthened your understanding of the biblical basis for church membership and the importance of membership in the life of the believer. We may look at church membership as a “take it or leave it” option for a Christian, but I hope after all we’ve studied over the past few week you don’t think that way any longer. God has called

us to a community of believers called the church, and in particular to live in submission as a clearly defined member of a local church, where the church affirms to the world that these men and women who are members of the church represent Christ to the world. May Grace Fellowship be faithful witnesses of Christ as we grow in worship, discipleship, service, and mission as members of this church family. Let's pray.

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Grace Fellowship Church of Waterloo, IA by Pastor Rob Borkowitz. Copyright 2014.