

Our Community: The Commitments We Make to Each Other

We have explored the beliefs and values that shape our life as a local church. But God intends for our doctrine and practice to emerge from within a church framework that is consistent with Scripture's teaching. In other words, our beliefs about God (theology) shape the way we think about our local church (ecclesiology). The local church by necessity involves structures, roles, and responsibilities designed to display God's glory and strengthen every member.

The Bible is not ambiguous about the shape and function of the church. A healthy local church gives careful consideration to the Bible's teaching to determine how it is governed, why it gathers, and what the relationships and responsibilities of members are to one another. In this lesson, we will explore the Bible's teaching on the responsibilities of pastoral leadership and membership in the local church.

I. How is the Church Governed?

A. Elder-Governed Church: It is our view that Scripture teaches that elders are to lead, direct and manage the affairs of the church and that such leadership and care are a God-given means of grace to the church. (Rom. 12:8; Acts 20:17-38; 1 Thess. 5:12-13; 1 Tim 3:1-7; 5:17; Titus 1:7-9; Heb. 13:17; 1 Peter 5:1-5) Elders are to be chosen for ministry in the church by the elders of the church and must meet the clear requirements found in Scripture (1 Tim 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). A wise eldership will seek the affirmation of the congregation regarding the fitness of future elders.

B. Vitally Involved Members: While the elders bear the responsibility to lead, generally speaking there is no fundamental distinction among believers in Christ's body. Under the new covenant, there is no mediating class of leaders between God and his people (Jer 31:31-34), but all Christians—elder and congregation alike—have equal access to God through Christ (Gal 3:28), are "priests" of God (1 Pet 2:9), possess the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts (Acts 2:17-18; 1 Cor 6:19; 2 Cor 1:22), receive illumination from the Spirit (1 Cor 2:6-16), and all other spiritual blessings in Christ (Eph 1:3ff.).

The health of the local church depends upon *all* its members, whether they are in leadership or not. The members' faithful participation, willing submission, mutual love, godly example, and ongoing exercise of spiritual gifts and wise counsel provide strength and stability in a local church (Ex 18:24, Pr 12:15, 19:20).

C. Our Broader Partnership: While our church's governance preserves the integrity of the local church, we recognize that a healthy church is not isolated from accountability, nor is it self-sufficient to carry out the Great Commission. We believe that interdependence with like-minded churches is the biblically prescribed means for fulfilling the Great Commission. *"Such cooperation is necessary for the protection of doctrinal fidelity and standards of holiness, the direction of a common mission, and the disposal of common funds"* in our shared mission. Therefore, for many years we have been joined together in formal partnership with the churches of Sovereign Grace. We share:

1. A Global Mission:

Sovereign Grace churches partner together and through a ministry arm, Sovereign Grace Ministries, we aim to care for pastors, strengthen believers, and to help grow strong churches. These include:

- Church planting locally and internationally
- Pastoral training via Sovereign Grace Pastors College
- Short-term missions
- Music materials for the local church
- Conferences

Individual churches, such as Cornerstone Church of Knoxville, participate in church planting efforts by helping to identify and raise-up leaders, contributing resources, and sending teams of people to new locations for the purpose of planting.

2. A Doctrinal Unity: Each Sovereign Grace church subscribes to the Sovereign Grace Ministries Statement of Faith (see Commitments Booklet). The doctrinal emphases we hold are shared by all Sovereign Grace churches. (See Session 2)
3. An Extra-local Accountability:

While we are not congregational, we do *not* believe that the authority of a local eldership exercises over its congregation is absolute, without further appeal or recourse.

Therefore, the elders of this local church are accountable for their life and doctrine, not only to their own local congregations, but also in part to the broader ecclesiastical body of elders in Sovereign Grace.

Our extra-local accountability is primarily expressed in partnership with a regional group of Sovereign Grace churches in our geographic area. Together, we cooperate on mission strategy, mutual care, and accountability. Specifically, a group of elders drawn from the churches in our region approve church plants, handle any necessary judicial functions, and participate with local elders in the ordination process.

Broader partnership and accountability is expressed through the entire body of Sovereign Grace churches. Each church appoints 1-2 elders to serve on a national council of elders. This representative group handles issues of national significance for our churches, such as proposed amendments to the Statement of Faith or Book of Church Order, or nominations to the Sovereign Grace Leadership Team (which functions as a ministry arm of our family of churches, under the accountability of our elders).

II. The Role and Responsibilities of a Pastor

In the early stages of the church, leaders recognized the importance of maintaining Biblical priorities in their labors (see Acts 6:1-4). The Scriptures outline what the job description of a pastor should be.

A. Lead the church.

According to Scripture, elders are called by God and accountable to God to lead the local church. The Bible describes this in various ways:

1 Timothy 5:17: "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching."

1 Peter 5:2: "shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight . . ."

Romans 12:6, 8: "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: . . . the one who leads, with zeal;"

B. Nourish the church.

God has ordained His word as the primary instrument for the strengthening of His church, and He charges pastors with the task of feeding the church with His word. Indeed, the health and future of the church depends upon its leaders faithfully transmitting sound doctrine and Biblical practice to others.

1 Timothy 4:6: "In pointing out these things to the brethren, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine which you have been following." (NASB)

2 Timothy 4:1-2: "I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching."

C. Equip the church.

The pastor is to be an equipper, training the church so that each member may be positioned for maximum fruitfulness in his or her life. One sign of effective pastoral ministry is the extent to which people are equipped to then serve others. In a healthy local church, leaders **equip**—people **minister**!

Ephesians 4:11-12: "And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry . . ."

2 Timothy 2:2: "and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also."

D. Shepherd the church.

As shepherds of God's people, pastors are called to protect the church from the dangers it faces, such as false teaching, the allurements of the world, and the ravaging effects of sin. Pastors protect the church in a variety of ways:

1. Teaching sound doctrine to strengthen the church in its faith and life.

1 Timothy 4:6: "In pointing out these things to the brethren, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine which you have been following."

2. Discerning errors and temptations offered by the culture, to protect the church from erroneous doctrine or practice.

Acts 20:28-31: "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears."

3. Modeling, encouraging, and protecting Biblical standards of godliness. This includes, when necessary, the administering of church discipline in cases of unrepentant believers in a Biblical and redemptive manner.¹

Matthew 18:15-17: "If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. 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."

"A shepherd's oversight of the flock expresses itself broadly in two ways. First, the shepherds provide truthful, positive direction and leadership to the flock. Second, they watch for spiritual dangers such as sin, false teaching, and false teachers, including Satan's assaults against the church." John MacArthur, Jr.

"Pastoral care is the loving concern of Christ for his flock which he shows them by providing under-shepherds whose duty it is to equip the saints to minister care to each other." John Piper

E. Serve the church.

Although pastors are responsible to lead the church, they are to do so as servants. Following the example of Jesus who "came not to be served but to serve" (Mark 10:45), leaders are to posture themselves as servants and expend themselves for the glory of God and the good of others.

Mark 10:43-45: "... whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

¹ See our statement on Church Discipline in the Commitments Booklet

1 Peter 5:2-3: "...not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock."

F. Be an example to the church.

Pastors are, of course, sinners and sheep, just like every other member of the church. However, pastors are called to be an example to the flock—not a sinless example or a perfect example, but a faithful one.

1 Peter 5:1-3: "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 among you, 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."

1 Tim 4:12: "Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity."

III. The Role and Responsibilities of Members.

The New Testament is clear that each Christian is allotted by God to a specific local church and its eldership (*1 Pet. 5:2-3*). This divine assignment is designed to produce a community that brings glory to God and a powerful gospel-witness to the world. The Bible holds out particular responsibilities for Christians which, when fulfilled, strengthen the church's health and witness.

Therefore at Cornerstone Church of Knoxville, there are certain expectations of members, which are simply expressions of a biblical commitment to a particular local church. We expect that any member who is pursuing their relationship with God and believes that God has called them to this church will faithfully fulfill these priorities:

A. Give attention to your relationship with God.

The Bible describes our relationship with God as a communion made possible by the substitutionary sacrifice of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Through God's justifying and adopting grace, we are declared righteous before God as his sons and daughters. Therefore, we have the daily privilege, whether privately or corporately, to commune with our Father and experience the power and comfort of his Spirit through the Word and prayer. As we abide in the love of God, walking in the grace of the gospel and obedience to his Word, our faith is strengthened and we're promised a life of fruitfulness.

"But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life." (Jude 20-21)

"I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:5)

“I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.” (3 John 4).

B. Cultivate love for the members of your local church.

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34-35)

Jesus could have said, they will know we are Christians by how we love *the world*. But he didn't. Instead he drew, in effect, a circle around the disciples and said, “By the love you show one another, the world will know that you belong to me.” As a local church demonstrates Christ-like love amongst its members, a compelling evangelistic witness emerges. Love that celebrates another's joy and grieves another's suffering, and is marked by holiness, faithfulness, forgiveness and encouragement “adorns the gospel”--shining brightly in a world committed to self-love.

C. Faithfully Participate in the Sunday Meetings.

The life of the church isn't limited to a meeting, but there's no more significant aspect of our life together than our gatherings on Sundays. It is in this weekly context that the church body comes together to encourage each other as we:

- Hear the Word read and preached.
- Declare our dependence and trust in God through prayer.
- Sing the truths of God's Word in response to his grace.
- Participate in the sacraments.
- Edify one another through the gifts of the Spirit.
- Contribute to the ministry of the church.

This is the pattern we see throughout the New Testament.

“And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” (Acts 2:42)

“Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” (Hebrews 10:23-25)

D. Support the church financially.

Stewardship involves the faithful use of resources that belong to another. All that we have comes from God and an authentic relationship with Christ *will find expression* in the faithful use of our resources for His purposes and the needs of others.

1. *The substance of stewardship.* Throughout salvation history, God has called His people to support His work through giving.

- In the Old Testament, God's people were to give a tithe, or the first tenth, of their income to God. This practice predated the giving of the Law (Gen. 14:20; Gen. 28:22), and was later formalized in the Law of Moses for the maintenance of the temple and provision for the priests and Levites who served there (Lev. 27:30-32; Deut. 14:22-24).
- The Old Testament practice of tithing embodies many principles carried forth into the New Testament: consistent giving, giving to support the worship and mission of God's people, giving to support those called to minister to God's people, and giving to care for the oppressed.
- In the New Testament, what it means to obey God's law is broadened and intensified due to the transforming work of the Spirit in light of Christ's work on the cross (for example, hatred is likened to murder—Matt. 5:21-22; lust is likened to adultery—Matt. 5:27-28). In the same way, our consistent giving is not merely to be thought of as "paying our dues," but should flow from the giving of our entire selves to God. It is a reminder of God's ownership of us.

2. *The work of stewardship.* Giving to support the work of the church remains an expectation of believers.

- Supporting individuals:

"There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need." (Acts 4:34-35)

- Giving to support the church's leaders so they can devote their time and energies to serving the church:

"Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel." (1 Cor 9:13-14. See also 1 Tim 5:17-18; Gal 6:6; Ex 23:19; 1 Cor 16:2)

- Giving to support the extension of the gospel:

"And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again." (Phil 4:15-16)

- The practice of tithing embodies important biblical guidelines and provides a helpful starting point for regular giving to the church. Believers are commanded to financially support the local church where they receive care and training. We desire the members of the church to rejoice in the privilege of sharing in God's work here at Cornerstone Church of Knoxville.

3. *The heart of stewardship.* What we actually do with our money reveals where our heart truly is (Matt. 6:21). In addition to commands to give, Scripture also addresses our motives and attitudes towards giving:

- Giving is to be generous, not stingy. (2 Cor 9:6)
- Giving is to be enthusiastic, not grudging. (2 Cor 9:7)
- Giving is to be deliberate, not haphazard. (2 Cor 9:7; Acts 11:29)
- Giving is to be discreet, not showy. (Matt 6:1-4)
- Giving is to be with faith, not anxiety. (Mal 3:10)

E. Follow the church's pastoral leadership.

To our individualistic culture, the Bible's commands concerning leaders might seem antiquated or, perhaps, authoritarian. Neither is the case. And, as with all the Bible's commands, proper understanding and faith-filled obedience will result in blessing for ourselves and for the church as a whole. What should our attitude be characterized by?

1. A faith-filled submission.

Hebrews 13:17: "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you."

Fundamentally, submission is an attitude: *a disposition to affirm and support the leadership of the church, and to increase its effectiveness through joyful and faith-filled participation.* Submission does not mean passivity or blind obedience. Rather, submission is an expression of faith towards God—that He has appointed leaders for us and He will use them for our good. It recognizes the critical role that leadership plays in bringing about God's purposes in the church and in the lives of believers.

2. A ministry of prayer for your pastors and church.

Pastors view their ministry as a profound privilege but are very aware of their need for God's grace. Your pastors are "jars of clay" who are familiar with weakness and temptation, and yet are called to provide wise leadership, sound teaching and pastoral care that can only come from God. We join with Paul, the apostle, and appeal that you pray for all the saints of CCK and specifically for the pastors.

"To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel..." (Eph. 6:18-19)

3. A God-honoring appreciation.

1 Thessalonians 5:12-13: "But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work."

The Biblical concept of honor exhorts us to recognize God's provision through another person, to cultivate gratitude for this provision, and rightfully to appreciate and acknowledge those who have served and benefited us. In so doing, we are actually giving glory to God for His goodness to us through other people.

An unfortunate confusion exists between exalting leaders and honoring leaders in the body of Christ. Exalting leaders is idolatry and is totally unacceptable. Honoring leaders, however, is Biblical and should be the regular attitude and practice of every Christian.

F. Pursue God-honoring relationships.

God's Word charges us to "be imitators of God as beloved children." (Eph. 5.1) So we want to reflect his holiness in our lives, personally and corporately, in our speech and conduct.

"Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you." (Eph. 4.29-32)

"But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not become partners with them; for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light." (Eph 5:3-8)

G. Receiving and Pursuing Members.

While we believe the elders bear final responsibility for matters related to receiving members and placing members outside of the church (excommunication), we believe each member of a church should carry a sense of responsibility for affirming those who are added and pursuing those who are straying in unrepentant sin.

1. Affirming New Members:

As new members are added, the pastors will present them to the church during a Sunday morning meeting and/or at a Members Family night, so that the whole church can meet them and welcome them into the church.

2. Pursuing Members who stray:

God's holy love is expressed as the church faithfully pursues unrepentant church members. Scripture makes it clear that our pursuit and correction of those who stray is always to be

marked by love for the individual and a commitment to God's glory. If the straying individual refuses to repent of their sin, the church is responsible to walk out the redemptive process of discipline. (See our statement on Church Discipline in the Commitments Booklet).

H. Participate in the church's contexts of care and discipleship.

The structures of fellowship within our church are both formal and informal. They are designed to help facilitate care and discipling relationships between members. Primarily, this takes place in our small groups, called Care Groups. This also takes place during men's and women's meetings, conferences, teaching seminars, and other events hosted by the church.

IV. The Significance of our church Membership Agreement.

A. Why Have a Membership Agreement?

1. Just as a statement of faith summarizes what we believe the Bible teaches, a church's Membership Agreement (sometimes referred to as a Covenant) gives expression to how we commit to live together.
2. In a world that embraces individualism and expresses suspicion about authority and commitment and holiness, the grace of God shines brightly through Christians who gladly bind themselves to God and other believers in the context of the local church.

B. How will a Membership Agreement function at Cornerstone Church?

This document will function as a commitment between each of us as members. It is a statement that we agree to be held accountable by this particular body of believers, this local representation of Christ's church. Likewise, we agree to hold others in the church accountable. To hold accountable simply means to "take responsibility for." The love we have for one another shows the world we are disciples of Jesus Christ. This agreement reminds us, pushes us, calls us to *live* out by grace that which we *believe* by grace. We want to both *know* (our statement of faith) and *do* (membership agreement).