



Ministry and Membership

"...I am writing these things to you so that... you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth." 1 Timothy 3:14-15

"Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel..." Philippians 1:27

This document is birthed out of our love for Christ's church, especially those who gather with us locally as Grace Fellowship. The primary desire is to explain and interpret, to the best of our abilities, what constitutes a faithful church and how that church should function according to Scripture. This document is to serve as instruction as you consider membership in three primary ways:

- To establish teaching and doctrinal parameters for the Grace Fellowship body.
- To clarify the biblical obligations and expectations for all members of our body.
- To serve as a tool for reflection and growth in Christ.

Mission: "Grace Fellowship exists to make and teach disciples by the power of the Holy Spirit; who worship the one true God and proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to the neighborhood and the nations."

Vision: To be people who T.E.L.L.: "Teach Truth, Exalt Christ, Love the Lord and Lead in the Spirit."

*"Sing to the LORD, bless his name; **tell** of his salvation from day to day." Psalm 96:2*

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I. Essential Convictions

There are essential convictions that make us inherently Christian, mark true faith in Christ, and opposition to any of these essential doctrines separates us from orthodox Christianity and, therefore, separates true fellowship in Christ.

- We believe the 66 books of the Bible to be the inspired, infallible, authoritative, and sufficient Word of God for all matters of faith and practice. We seek to teach, live, and govern ourselves by God's Word, exercising reverent discipline in interpretation and application (Ps. 19:7-11, 119:9-16, 89, 105; Is. 55:11; Rom. 11:33; 2 Tim. 3:16-17; Heb. 4:12-13; 2 Pt. 1:16-21).

**Everything that is to follow is dependent on this most crucial conviction.*

- We believe in one God, the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. He is omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent, immutable, just, abounding in wisdom, mercy, and love, exists in all perfections, and is sovereign over all things (Dt. 6:4; Job 38-41; Is 45:5-7, 18-25, 46:9-10, 55:8-9; Jn. 17:3; 1 Cor. 8:4-6; 1 Tim. 2:5).

He is eternally existent in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Father is God. The Son is God. The Holy Spirit is God. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are three distinct Persons within the Godhead, each with the unique attributes of a person but with unity of essence and purpose (Gn. 1:26; Ps. 45:6-7; Ps. 110:1; Is. 48:16; Mt. 3:16-17; Mt. 28:17-20; Jn. 16:13-15, 17:1-5; 1 Cor. 12:4-6; 2 Cor. 13:14).

- We believe in the complete humanity and complete deity of our Lord Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God (Mt. 1:20-23; Lk. 2:52; Jn. 1:1-4, 14; Phil. 2:5-11; Col. 1:15-20; Heb. 1:1-3).
- We believe in the virgin birth of Jesus Christ (Mt. 1:20-23), in His sinless life (Heb. 4:15, 1 Pet. 2:22), in His miracles, in His substitutionary and atoning death through His shed blood (2 Cor. 5:21), in His bodily resurrection (Mt. 28:1-20; Mk. 16:1-8; Lk. 24:1-53; Jn. 20-21; 1 Cor. 15:12-34), in His ascension to the right hand of the Father, and in His personal return in power and glory (Jn. 14:3; Acts 1:11, 10:34-43; 1 Th. 4:16; Heb. 9:28; 1 Jn. 3:2; Rev. 1:7).
- We believe that by His death, Jesus Christ paid the penalty as the perfect and only possible substitute for the sins of whoever repents and believes in Him (Mt. 1:21; Jn. 1:29; 10:14-18; Rom. 5:6-11; 1 Cor. 15:1-4; 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 1:4; Heb. 9:24-28; 1 Pet. 3:18).
- I am, along with all humanity (Christ excluded), by nature and action a sinner (Gen. 3:14-19, 6:5; Ps. 51:5; Jer. 17:9; Rom. 3:9-18, 23, 5:8-21; 7:18; Ep. 2:1-3). The deserved penalty for sin is death, both physical and spiritual (Gen. 2:15-17, 3:19; Rom. 5:12; 6:23; Jam. 1:14-15).
- Only by trusting in the person and work of Jesus Christ alone can I be forgiven of my sins, reconciled to God, and receive eternal life (Jn. 3:16-18, 14:6; Acts 4:10-12; Rom. 3:21-26; 1 Tim. 2:5-6).
- Jesus Christ is coming again as He promised (Mt. 24:44; Rev. 22:6-21). This is the prophesied Day of the Lord (Is. 13:6-16; Ob. 15-18; 2 Pet. 3:1-13). There will be a physical resurrection of the dead. The living and dead will be judged. Those who trust in Jesus Christ alone will be raised to eternal reward. Those who have not trusted in Jesus Christ will be raised to eternal punishment (Mt. 25:31-41; Jn. 5:28-29; Acts 24:14-15; 1 Th. 4:16-18). And when He comes, He will make all things new, a new heaven and earth for His people to dwell with Him forever (Is. 65:17-25, Rev. 21-22:5).

II. Affirmations and Beliefs

Our Affirmations and Beliefs are strongly held convictions based on biblical evidence, not to be changed by cultural pressure, but we believe they do not inhibit salvation or Christian fellowship as members of the body of Christ. While the doctrines expressed in the “Essential Convictions” are those that are recognized to be universal and primary within the Church, there are a number of secondary beliefs about which the elders of Grace Fellowship are convinced. We agree with the Church throughout the ages: in essentials, unity; in non-essentials, diversity; and in all things, charity. Complete agreement is not required for the sake of membership, but it should be known that the elders of Grace Fellowship will preach, teach, and counsel in accordance with these theological convictions. We can have healthy dialogue here in order to strive toward unity. Any disagreements in these areas must be discussed and explained biblically prior to membership. Please understand it is the responsibility of members to have read the “Essential Convictions” and “Affirmations and Beliefs” of Grace Fellowship in their entirety and address any questions, comments, or concerns with an elder. I understand that Grace Fellowship has certain theological convictions to which it is strongly committed, among them:

A. Affirmations from Church History. *Including but not limited to:*

1. The Foundational Creeds of the early Church:

- The Apostles Creed, The Nicene Creed, Chalcedonian, Athanasian

2. The Five Solas (*Latin for “Alone”) of the Protestant Reformation.

This is not in opposition to, but in agreement with, our confession of Scripture as our only infallible rule for faith and practice. We believe these concise declarations affirm core biblical doctrines regarding sinful man and holy God. These clear statements have united and refocused the true Church of Christ throughout history. In addition, we believe that humility and wisdom commend the careful consideration of what our fathers in the faith taught and practiced. We are not the sole possessors of truth; therefore, we prayerfully consider and appreciate where those who fear the Lord have stood firm before us.

When any requirements are added to the gospel for salvation, the church must be reformed, and those elements must be removed so as to not inhibit salvation in Christ, by grace, through faith, according to the Scriptures, for the glory of God.

- *Sola Scriptura:* Scripture Alone. We believe God’s Word and will are unchanging for His people, and it is found in Scripture alone. We do not shift convictions and beliefs when culture shifts. God’s Word interprets culture, culture does not determine our interpretation of God’s Word.
- *Solus Christus:* Christ Alone. Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, man’s only hope for salvation, and by His work alone are people saved. He alone is the mediator between God and man and the only sacrifice required for salvation.
- *Sola Gratia:* Grace Alone. Salvation is a gift from God, according to His mercy and grace alone, no one is owed salvation, and God freely gives His grace to those He calls.
- *Sola Fide:* Faith Alone. Salvation is not earned by merit or effort, yet bestowed on those who believe in Jesus Christ, the only requirement being their faith alone.
- *Soli Deo Gloria:* God’s Glory Alone. The entire process of salvation and Christ’s work of redemption is to bring God glory, reconciling sinful people so they can bring Him glory.

3. The Second London Baptist Confession of 1689

- See **Addendum A** for our explanation and clarification.

B. Beliefs. *In these things, we believe the Bible is clear, and as in all things, we follow its direction.*

- **God's Glory:** We believe that the ultimate purpose of mankind is to glorify God forever by worshipping Him, enjoying Him, and recognizing His sovereign ownership and provision of all things. We do not belong to ourselves, but everything, including our very lives, belongs to God for His purposes (Is. 43:1-7; Rom. 11:36; 1 Cor. 10:31, 1 Pet. 4:10-13, Rev. 4:11).
- **Image-Bearers:** We believe emphatically that all people are made in the image of God, given value because we reflect His nature regardless of ethnicity or class. He created them man and woman in His image. Therefore, all life has value and should be protected without concern for prejudice or convenience (Gen. 1:26-27; Ps. 139:13-16).
- **Complementarianism:** We recognize the ways God has made men and women spiritually the same, yet biologically different, and we celebrate those as a compliment to one another. We follow the Bible's direction on how we view the roles of men and women in the home and the church, not the culture's direction. We believe that in the church, as in the home, men and women both have a say in how the family is led, but God has called and created men to lead in these areas as a matter of nature, based in the creation order. So, as men lead, they lovingly, sacrificially serve their wives, family, and church family. Wives help, pray for, and support the family mission by submitting to and respecting their husbands, completing the depiction of Christ and His bride (Gen. 2:18-24; 1 Cor. 11:1-12; Ep. 5:22-33; 1 Tim. 2:8-15; Tit. 2:1-6; 1 Pet. 3:1-7).
- **Marriage:** We believe the perfect picture of human union is that of biblical marriage, created by God as a picture of Christ and the church. Marriage was instituted by God and is a covenant governed by God between one man and one woman. Any variation from this is not a recognized marriage (Gen. 2:22-24; Mt. 19:3-12; 1 Cor. 7:10-11; Eph. 5:22-33; Heb. 13:4). We also recognize not everyone is called to marriage. A single-life devoted to God brings Him great joy; we support those who remain this way (1 Cor. 7:6-9, 32-35).
- **Sexuality:** Sex is a gift from God, given so that His creatures can fulfill the command to "be fruitful and multiply." In the bounds of biblical, covenant marriage, sex is to be encouraged and enjoyed. Sexual practices outside of this relationship are against the Bible's clear and consistent teaching and have no place in the body of Christ. We will encourage abstaining from such behavior, guarding thoughts and desires through biblical counsel, prayer, and discipleship (Mt. 5:27-30; Rom. 1:24-32; 1 Cor. 6:15-20, 7:1-16).
- **Communion:** We believe that communion or the Lord's Supper is a necessary part of the Christian life, and when we gather, we partake of it in remembrance of the body and blood of Jesus Christ and look forward to eating with Him in His kingdom. The bread and the cup are not the physical body and blood of Christ but spiritual food by which the real presence of Christ ministers to His bride at His table (Luke 22:14-23, 1 Cor. 11:23-26).
- **Baptism:** We believe that every disciple of Jesus Christ is required to be baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Baptism is an outward sign of an inward, spiritual reality. A public declaration of a spiritual dying with Christ to sin and the current enjoyment of being raised with Him to a new life of righteousness (Rom. 6:1-11, Gal. 3:27). It is symbolic only, baptism does not forgive sins, guarantee salvation nor is it a requirement for salvation. We follow the New Testament pattern of baptism by immersion, symbolizing a complete death and resurrection, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which follows repentance and faith. While every follower of Christ should desire to be baptized, at Grace Fellowship they will be required to undergo examination to discern the fruit of the Spirit as evidence of the spiritual new birth (Jn. 3:3-8) and discipleship prior to baptism (Acts 10:47-48) (Mt. 28:16-20; Acts 2:38-41, 8:36-39; 16:31-33; 1 Cor. 6:11, 12:13; Tit. 3:4-7; 1 Pet. 3:21-22).

III. Philosophy of Ministry

At Grace Fellowship, we will focus on the formation and care of people over processes. Gospel ministry only happens in accordance with the Father's plan of redeeming people through the finished work of the Son by the power of the Spirit. God is a God of order. Structures and expectations are for the sake of the protection of His people, not to take precedence over them. In all things, we will be led by the witness of the whole counsel of God. We seek to speak clearly where Scripture speaks clearly and tread lightly where it doesn't.

A. The Church: When we speak of the Church, we believe that the Church universal is the body of Christ, the shared fellowship and unity with all believers throughout history. Those bought with His blood and who are saved by grace, through faith, to become children of God. The sanctified bride of Christ who gathers on earth to worship, learn, and grow in Jesus Christ our Savior until He comes again.

Nature of the Church: We believe the church is a divine organism rather than a human institution, God's people, called by His name for His purpose. Christ has all authority and dominion; He is the Church's only Head. Christ speaks to His bride by His Word and leads by His Holy Spirit. And although we are the visible expression of the invisible church, the real work is spiritual; we seek spiritual growth and fight spiritual battles. As a local church family, we operate in spiritual unity and harmony with one another, all the saints around the world and throughout history. In Christ, we are one body, redeemed and adopted to a royal priesthood, the bride of Christ, betrothed forever to one Husband, who will preserve us by His righteous hand (Is. 54:4-8; Gal. 3:13-14; Eph. 1:22-23, 2:19-22; 1 Cor. 1:2).

Purpose of the Church: Our God is holy, wholly other, set apart, and He has called His people to be set apart from the world. We are set apart to reflect the glory of God in opposition to the system of the world, which seeks the sinful glory of man. In this, the Church is to exemplify the worship of the one true God, be ambassadors of the kingdom of God, and ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ. While we await His return, we are to proclaim His excellencies, provide intercession as priests, and be an example of shining light in the midst of darkness. We are to grow into the image of Christ in our own lives and labor together in leading and discipling those whom God the Father has called to Himself, through Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit (Mt. 28:18-20; 2 Cor. 5:20-21; Col. 1:9-14, 3:1-17; 1 Pet. 1:14-16, 2:4-12).

B. Worship: Everything done in the life of the church is an act of worship to God because we ascribe the worth, honor, and glory He is due by cheerful hearts, reasoned thoughts, and willing hands. This includes reading, singing, preaching, serving, and caring for one another in Christian fellowship. We were created and called to give God glory at our best our lives are an offering to our God, to whom we owe our very breath and our very lives due to His mercy and grace (Ps. 22:25-31, 96; Jn. 4:23-24; Rom. 11:33-12:1; Phil 3:3; Rev. 19:1-10).

Family Worship: Our God has revealed Himself in familial terms, Father and Son, for His glory (Jn. 17), to sanctify more sons (Heb. 2:10-3:5). The primary function of the family from a biblical perspective is to reflect the relationship of Christ and His Church, with children to be raised in the fear and admonition of the Lord. Following Jesus' example, we encourage the little children to come to Him. We do this by teaching them about Jesus in our homes and modeling our devotion to Him in public worship. Our goal is to raise all of the children in our congregation into maturity in Christ. We do this by including them in the prayers and singing of the body as soon as they are able. During the sermon, there will be age-specific teaching materials for the younger children, with the goal of growing in knowledge and maturity so that they can participate in the entire service at a young age. With this, we encourage parents to follow up with their children after service, continuing family worship throughout the week with teaching, singing, and praying, partnering parents and teachers in discipleship (Gen. 18:19; Duet. 6:1-9; Pro. 22:6; Ep. 6:1-4; 1 Th. 2:3-12; 2 Tim. 3:14-17).

C. Teaching: We serve a God who spoke the world into existence, a God who communicates within the Godhead and to mankind, the pinnacle of His creation. God communicates to us generally through the witness of creation, which declares His majesty and beauty. In addition, He speaks specifically to us by His inspired Word. Since this is how we know who God is and what He has done for us, we follow the Bible closely and teach it consistently as the basis for everything we do. We believe the most true and obedient way to teach the Bible is to let it speak for itself. We do that by preaching and teaching in an expository manner, verse by verse, systematically through sections and books of the Bible. We let the inspired authors dictate what and how we present God's Word; the main theme of the text becomes

the main theme of our teaching. In turn, we let Scripture interpret Scripture; we seek to declare the whole counsel of God and teach particular passages in appropriate context. It is imperative that we not only explain but apply Scripture to our lives. Faithful teaching and preaching are an essential part of every faithful gathering of the body of Christ. The primacy of preaching the word of God especially has been present from the very beginning of the church (Acts 6:2). Since Jesus Christ is the incarnate Word Himself and the fulfillment of all of the promises and revelations of God, we proclaim Christ and Him crucified in everything we do (Neh. 8:1-8; Ps. 19; Ps. 119; Acts 20:17-30; 1 Cor. 2:1-5, 10:6-13; 1 Tim. 4:1-16; 2 Tim. 3:16-4:5).

D. Music: The music of the Church is an aspect of teaching and worship, not the extent of it. At Grace Fellowship, our primary goal in music is to sing the praises of our God for who He is, what He has done, and what He promises to do. In this, we follow the pattern of the Psalms. Therefore, our highest concern is that our music exalts our Father in heaven, in the name of the Son, Jesus Christ, by the ministering power of the Spirit. So, we desire theologically accurate and appropriate songs that complement the teaching ministry. These songs will include: the psalms, the greatest traditional hymns of history balanced with the best of modern song and hymn-writers who share that conviction. Since our songs are to be joyous, we select songs that are also musically pleasing, stirring our affections toward the Lord. While it is very important that the congregation sings together and enjoys the time of praise, we recognize that our singing is ultimately worship and not about our particular preferences above God's glory (Ps. 95:1-7; Ps. 145-150; Eph. 5:19-20; Col. 3:16).

E. Stewardship: We recognize that everything we have, including our time, talents, and treasures, are gifts from the Lord. Because everything comes from the Lord, we are not attached to temporary things, and we do not find our value and security in them. We are stewards (or managers) of God's resources given to us because He lovingly provides for His children but also grows us as we invest earthly resources for heavenly gain. So, in this, we give and serve cheerfully, as an act of worship, not begrudgingly. As a body, biblically, we have all things in common and contribute to the regular and special needs of the saints, providing for those who labor for the gospel, the needs of the saints, and benevolence to our community. The local household of faith is our primary recipient of tithes, offerings, and serving, so we do so prayerfully, consistently, without compulsion, as we are able and as is needed. We follow the example of Jesus, who did not come to be served but to serve. As a royal priesthood, our entire lives are ministries, so we also encourage serving alongside one another outside of our church body to minister to our neighbors and the nations as a witness to the love of Christ that we have received. We will also regularly contribute to those outside of our local church who labor to that end (Gen. 2:15; 1 Chr. 29:10-17; Ps. 24:1; Mt. 25:14-30; 2 Cor. 8:1-15, 9:6-16; Gal. 6:6-10; 1 Th. 5:12-22).

IV. Leadership and Membership

A. Leadership: All believers are made in the image of God, saved by the same grace, and given equal value and status before the Lord. However, Scripture shows that the function of every believer in the church is not identical. Some are set apart to lead in a specific way under Christ. Leaders are not a special class of believers but particular believers set apart for an honored purpose. There has been a pattern of appointing qualified leaders of God's people since He gathered His congregation in the Sinai wilderness and instructed Moses to establish leaders to help instruct and judge the people. Exodus 18 explains this process: it was not good that Moses carry all the responsibilities himself, but that he should appoint qualified men to be leaders of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens (18:17-23). The Lord reiterated this to Moses in Numbers 11:16-17, instructing him to appoint 70 men who are leaders of the people as elders and officers to share in Moses' burden of caring for the people. This pattern is confirmed when commands were given from God, He spoke to Moses, the prophet, who gathered the leaders and then addressed the congregation at large (Ex. 34:31-32). The two roles that we believe are still in place and will be in place until Christ returns, most commonly called "offices," are that of elder and deacon. They are the only two addressed in 1 Timothy, Paul's letter about the church (more below).

Christ is Lord and the only head of the Church. We seek to follow the pattern of order and governance He established with His apostles, which they implemented as an example for us (Eph. 2:19-23). Ephesians 4:11-16 gives us one of the best overviews of Christ's desire for His church. The offices in the church are given by Christ at specific times to teach and oversee the church, bringing His people into maturity. These are explained specifically in 4:11-13 as the "apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers." The apostles or "sent ones" are those who were sent out and commissioned

by the risen Christ Himself (1 Cor. 9:1, 15:7-8) to do marvelous works (2 Cor. 12-14) with authority (1 Th. 2:6) as confirmation of the gospel. We believe the office of apostle was for a specific time. The office of prophet, as well, served to speak to God's people looking forward to the Messiah, who Himself was the consummate Prophet, who now speaks to His people through His Word and Spirit (2 Tim. 3:16-17, Heb. 1:1-2, Jn. 14:26). While these offices are no longer in place, in the same spirit, all believers are gospel ambassadors sent by Christ to speak truth to His people and warnings to unbelievers. In a similar fashion, the evangelist, by definition, "one who proclaims the good news," has relevance for all believers, although some have particular giftings in evangelism. This leaves the shepherd-teacher or pastor-teacher; these terms are linked and used interchangeably under the heading of elder throughout the New Testament. The process of appointing qualified elders in every church continued in the early church (Acts 14:23, Tit. 1:5).

1. Elders: The biblical terms of elder, shepherd (or pastor), and overseer (or bishop) are aspects of the same office, given to men charged with leading in the church (Acts 20:28; 1 Tim. 3:17, 5:17; Tit. 1:5-9, 1 Pet. 5:1-5). The office of elder is two-fold as that of shepherd (care and guidance) and overseer (administration and governance). 1 Peter 5:1-5 brings the role of elder into clarity. This address from Peter to the elders (1-4) exhorts the elders to shepherd the flock and exercise oversight over them in a worthy manner. And for the congregation (5) to be subject to the elder's authority, encouraging all to exercise mutual submission. Common vernacular refers to this role as "pastor," mentioning the shepherding function of an elder, but this cannot be separated from the governing role of overseer.

- Elders are not separate from or more important than the church body but are members of the congregation. Acts 15 shows us that the apostles and the elders had specific local authority, but when directions were sent out, they were done in agreement with the gathered church (22-23).
- The elders should come from the body and be raised up from within, especially with an eye toward those with the gifts of teaching and shepherding (1 Tim. 5:12-13, Tit. 1:5).
- Whenever elders are mentioned in Scripture, they are always plural, emphasizing the important nature of shared leadership. The word used in Scripture for the gathering of the elders is a "council" (Lk 22:66, Acts 22:5, 1 Tim. 4:14), a word that means an assembly convened for consultation, deliberation, or advice and deciding matters of doctrine or discipline.
- Elders are to labor for and among the body and be respected in love for their work (1 Th. 5:12-13). When they labor in preaching and teaching and rule well, they are worthy of double honor, financial support, and cautiously approached with any charges (1 Tim. 5:17-19, Heb. 13:7, 17).
- The addition of elders will not be according to any external changes but according to spiritual character. Elders must have a clear calling by God to lead His people, must be approved by the existing elders, and confirmed by the members of the congregation.

2. Deacons: Paul gives us the connection between the elders and deacons (or "servants") in the first verse of his epistle to the Philippians, the two offices work in conjunction and agreement within the church. The first distinction between the roles of elders and deacons appears in Acts 6:1-7. The apostles were being taken away from preaching and prayer to preside over the benevolence of the church. So, they appointed seven faithful men of good repute to attend to the material needs of the church so the elders could devote themselves to prayer and ministry of the word. This pleased the whole congregation, and the health and number of the congregation grew. In 1 Timothy 3:8-13, the character qualifications of the deacons are parallel to those of the elders. However, greater expectation is placed on the role of overseer, in that elders must be above reproach, hospitable, able to teach and manage and care for God's church.

Working in cooperation, the officers of the church serve the body for the glory of God. Traditionally, the elders attend to the teaching and oversight, while the deacons assist the elders in the service and benevolence aspects of the church under authority given by the elders. Deacons should be ready to assist the elders of the church in any service that would support and promote the ministry of the Word. Deacons serve practically among the congregation by attending to the physical and financial needs of the people and facilities. There is no exact biblical protocol here, only that all the members, especially the officers, attend to the spiritual and physical needs and edification of the body.

B. Membership: All saints are equal before the throne of grace, and all members of the church body are to be unified, co-laborers in Christ. One of Jesus' main concerns for His body is that they be one in Him as He and the Father are one, so that the world would believe in Him (Jn. 17:20-26). The many members are to be one unified, loving body under one Lord, one God, and baptized in one Spirit. There are no competing directives or expectations for different groups; spiritual unity is expressed over outward differences (Gal. 3:27-29; Eph. 4:1-7; 1 Pet. 1:22-23, 3:8). When the church speaks of its organization and membership, we do not speak as the world does, imitating corporations and secular structures, but we look to God's Word and use His language and expectations. Agreeing with Scripture, our greatest concern for the members of the church is spiritual maturity and fidelity.

There are many texts that indirectly teach and instruct on membership, but the two seminal passages are Romans 12 (particularly 1-13) and 1 Corinthians 12:12-31. We will use a brief exposition of these texts to explain the biblical view of and for church membership:

Romans 12: The gathering of believers is to be one of personal and public worship of the one true God (v. 1). They continually renew their minds according to God's Word in order to discern what is good and acceptable in His sight (2). God has given us all a different measure of faith, not to boast in ourselves but His grace toward us (3). We are one body in Christ, members of one another, and even though we have different gifts, we are to use them in the body. Each member functions differently, in unity, for the benefit of the entire body (4-8). We are to excitedly love and honor one another (9-11). Be a people of rejoicing, endurance, and prayer (12). Caring for and contributing to the needs of the saints, being hospitable (13). We are to bless others, rejoice and weep together, live in harmony, humbly and peaceably (14-18). This is what it looks like to live as members of the body of Christ.

1 Corinthians 12: Paul compares the body of Christ to our own physical bodies; although we have one body, our body has many members that must function in order for us to operate at full potential (v.12). The body of Christ is to be as unified as physical members of our own body because we were all baptized in the same Spirit (13). The members of the body of Christ are not independent, disconnected pieces but interconnected, living members who all help the body function, no matter how small or large the contribution. The body needs the plurality of members and gifts in order to function, and there is no such thing as a single member apart from the body. We all need each other and have no right to exclude or criticize the specific gifts of another (14-23). In our individuality, there is to be no division; we are all vessels of honor, given complimentary functions by God, so that we care for, honor, suffer, and rejoice together (24-27).

Importance of Membership: Taking these and other passages in mind, the following is why we urge everyone who is born again by the Spirit, in Christ Jesus, and considers Grace Fellowship their church home to join with us in membership.

- Because the Bible says so. This should be enough, but there is a sad trend in today's culture to be merely a consumer, and not a functioning, committed member of a local fellowship.
- For our good and God's glory. Jesus said they will know we are His disciples by our obedience and love for one another (Mt. 12:9-50; Jn. 13:35). Our unity benefits the body and everyone we meet. When we are linked together in ministry through love, our witness glorifies God because we reflect Him to the world (1 Pet. 2:12). The Father, Son, and Spirit are our example of mutual love and submission.
- Recognition of one another. As brothers and sisters in the local body, we are able to commit to one another. We are able to recognize each other as members of the body, whom we can rely on, come to, and who can hold us accountable as the body, the household of God (Eph. 2:19-22).
- Recognition by leadership. The elders of the church should take great concern to shepherd the flock of God fearfully, loving and feeding them as under-shepherds (Jn. 21:15-17; 1 Pet. 5:1-5). Unless the elders know which sheep belong to the fold, they will not know who they are responsible for (Heb. 13:17) in order to lead and care for them intentionally. This encourages intimacy and accountability among the members and leaders.
- To grow and be built up in Christ. When we work properly together as many members of a whole body, we grow in love, into our head, Christ (Eph. 4:15-16).

C. Responsibility of Elders: As shepherds and overseers of a local church, elders are entrusted with protecting, leading, equipping, and caring for the corporate church body and her individual members. The following is an extensive but not exhaustive overview of the requirements for elders in the Bible. The elders agree:

- To care for the church and seek her growth in grace, truth, and love (Mt. 28:16-20; Eph. 4:15-16; Col. 1:28-29; Jam. 5:14; 1 Pet. 5:1-4).
- To provide teaching and counsel from the whole of Scripture (Acts 20:27-28; 1 Tim. 4:16; 2 Tim. 4:1-5; Titus 2:1).
- To equip the members of the church for the work of ministry (Eph. 4:11-16).
- To be on guard against false teachers and teachings (Mt. 7:15; Acts 20:28-31; 1 Tim. 1:3-7; 1 Jn 4:1).
- To prayerfully seek God's will for the body and steward the resources to the best of their abilities based on the study of Scripture and following of the Spirit (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:1-4).
- To lovingly exercise discipline when necessary, for the glory of God, the good of the one disciplined, and the health of the church as a whole (Mt. 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 5; Gal. 6:1; Jam. 5:19-20).
- To appoint elders and deacons according to the criteria assigned to them in the Scriptures (1 Tim. 3:1-13; Tit. 1:5-9; 1 Pet. 5:1-4).
- To set an example and join members in fulfilling the obligations of church membership stated below (Phil. 3:17; 1 Tim. 4:12; Tit. 2:7-8; 1 Pet. 5:3).

D. Responsibility of Members: The primary requirement for a member in the church is that they are truly a born-again follower of Christ. As those who have experienced the grace of a life changed by the gospel of Jesus Christ, we have the opportunity to reflect the character of Christ through the pursuit of certain attitudes and actions and the rejection of others; this is living and walking in the Spirit (Rom. 8:1-11, Gal. 5:16-17). The requirements in this document are in no way intended as an addition to the biblical obligations of a believer. Rather, this document functions primarily as an accessible explanation of what the Scriptures teach about the obedience that faith produces. The members agree:

i. Submission

- To submit to God the Father, the way Christ did, and submit to Christ's Lordship over our lives, unlike the world who will not submit to Him (Ps. 81:11-16, Rom. 8:6-8, Eph. 5:24, Jas. 4:7).
- To submit to the authority of the Scriptures as the final arbiter on all issues (Ps. 119; 2 Tim. 3:14-17; 2 Peter 1:19-21).
- To submit to one another in brotherly love, with a humble spirit (Eph. 5:21, 1 Pet. 1:22, 2:13-3:7).
- To submit to the elders/leaders and diligently strive for unity and peace within the church (1 Cor. 16:15-16, Eph. 4:1-3; Heb. 13:17; 1 Pet. 5:5).
- To submit to the discipline of God through His Holy Spirit by:
 - following the biblical procedures for church discipline where sin is evident in another, the hope of such discipline being repentance and restoration
 - receiving righteous and loving discipline when approached biblically by fellow believers (Ps. 141:5; Mt. 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 5:9-13; Heb. 12:5-11).

ii. Personal Discipline **areas we are always growing in and striving toward*

- To pursue the Lord Jesus Christ through regular Bible reading, prayer, service, fellowship, and practice of spiritual disciplines (Lk 18:1; Acts 17:11; 1 Cor. 9:24-27; Eph. 5:1-21; 1 Th. 5:12-22).
- To walk in newness of life, pursuing holiness as an act of worship to Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 1:13-16, 4:1-3). Believers should strive to put certain attitudes and actions to death while stirring and stimulating love and good deeds, by God's grace through the power of the Holy Spirit.
- To live in a manner of being disciplined (growing, learning) and discipling others, and to promote a culture of growth in Christ within the body (Mt. 28:18-20, Phil. 2:1-16, 2 Pet. 3:17-18).
- To avoid the passions of the flesh and formal sinful ways, abstaining from characteristics warned against in Scripture (Rom. 1:29-32, 13:13; 1 Cor. 6:9-11; Gal. 5:19-21; Jam. 3:13-18; 1 Pet. 1:13-16, Rev. 22:14-15).
- To practice sexual purity and fidelity within heterosexual and monogamous marriage. Regardless of marital status, to pursue purity and abstain from sexually immoral practices (Rom. 13:11-14; 1 Cor. 6:15-20, 10:8; Eph. 5:3; 1 Ths. 4:1-8; Heb. 13:4).
- To seek repentance and ask forgiveness when in sin. When in sin: repent and confess to God and fellow believers, seeking to put sin to death (Mt. 5:24; Rom. 8:13; Col. 3:5; Jam. 5:16; 1 Jn 1:6-10).
- To soberly approach the responsibility of Christian freedom, especially actions or influences that could present a stumbling block to a brother or sister (Mt. 18:5-7; Rom. 14; 1 Cor. 6:12, 8).

iii. Public Fellowship

- To follow the biblical command and example of participating in the ordinances prescribed to Christ's Church: by being baptized after conversion and regularly remembering and celebrating the Person and Work of Christ through the Lord's Supper (Mt. 3:13-17, Acts 2:38-41, 1 Cor. 11:23-26).
- To regularly participate in the life of the local church by attending weekly services, engaging in fellowship, and serving those within and outside of this church (Acts 2:42-47; Heb. 10:23-25; Tit. 3:14).
- To steward the resources God has given, including time, talents, and treasures. Finances and spiritual gifts are from the Lord, and members will regularly invest them in building up the local body. This includes tithes, offerings, service, outreach, and participation in the household of faith that is sacrificial, cheerful, and voluntary (Mt. 25:14-30; Rom. 12:1-2; 2 Cor. 8-9; 1 Pet. 4:10-11).

iv. Personal Commitment

- To commit to this gathering of the saints, to love and encourage them, spurring them on to greater faith in Christ and good works.
- To only break fellowship with my church body by necessity, unwavering biblical convictions, or to further the kingdom of God in another capacity.
- That if a member does decide to leave the church, they will notify the elders and make sure any responsibilities are cared for and continued.
- That if a member does leave the church, they agree to seek another body of believers where they will grow and serve according to biblical guidance.

v. Church Discipline

When continual and unrepentant sins are occurring within a member, the church has an obligation to address this with their brother or sister with the goal of repentance and reconciliation. Any sins explicitly mentioned above or that fall within those behaviors or desires must be addressed, including but not limited to sexual immorality, slander, theft, false teaching, divisiveness, etc...

Following the pattern laid down by Jesus in Matthew 18:15-20, if there are concerns among members, your first obligation is to address that member with whom you have a concern, with humility and love, seeking reconciliation. If they do not listen, gather two others to address their sin, if they still do not listen, then bring them before the elders and the congregation. If the behavior continues without repentance, they must be asked to leave the church before the behavior is allowed to corrupt the body. The final step in church discipline is excommunication, literally being taken out of fellowship. According to 1 Corinthians 5:1-5, the rebellious one must be turned over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, in order to save the spirit (v. 5). Ignoring and enabling sin is not loving. It is harmful to themselves and others. It is a loving act to save someone from danger and destruction, and it is loving to the church as a whole when evil behavior is removed before it can spread. The ultimate goal of church discipline is reconciliation and restoration to the body.

V. Governance and Structure

Since Scripture is not explicitly clear on many matters of how the local church is to be structured and governed, we tread lightly and lean toward simplicity. We have made every effort to conform the spirit, structure, and procedures of church ministry and governance as closely as possible to biblical guidelines, with a constant concern to promote the glory of God and the advancement of the faith. The ministry of the church is the work of the members as an act of worship toward God, nurture toward each other, and witness toward the world. Internal structures for church governance are not the main ministry of the church but are necessary for organizing, equipping, and mobilizing the saints for the work of ministry (Eph 4:11-16). This section will reiterate and summarize much of what is listed above.

A. Governance:

- We see elder-ruled congregations with active, meaningful membership as the clear pattern in Scripture. Not all elders will be or need to be vocational ministers. However, all will be expected to perform the duties of shepherd and overseer, hence pastoral plurality. Since the terms elder and pastor are synonymous in the New Testament, the terms will be used interchangeably.
- The vocational pastor will function in a lead role in teaching, administration, and responsibility as senior pastor, operating with equal authority among the elders. All elders will be responsible for the oversight and shepherding of the congregation, primarily focusing in their respective gifting areas wherever possible. In the spirit of love and unity in plurality, the elders will act in mutual submission, requiring complete agreement before a major change in priorities, decisions, or direction.
- The elders hold the congregational responsibility and authority for oversight and shepherding, which includes: preaching, teaching, vision, ruling, counseling, pastoral care, and what furthers the ministry of the Word. These areas are not limited to the elders and may be entrusted to other faithful and gifted members as well, but given under their charge for the purpose of building up and equipping all the saints until Christ returns. This does not relieve the other members from taking an active interest and concern in these areas.
- The deacons will serve in areas that support the ministry of the Word. They will labor alongside the elders in mutual submission to assist and support the oversight and shepherding. The delegation of duties will be determined by the needs of the members primarily, and then its facilities according to the gifts and time available to the deacons. Elders and deacons will meet regularly to delegate duties and address the current priorities in the body.
- Any decisions that affect the entire congregation, involve major changes, require large sums of money, incurring debt, adding additional roles, elders, deacons, etc... will be brought before the members for consideration and confirmation. Our desire is not simply majority but unity. We desire to have spiritually mature members that can put the needs of the body above their own preferences.

B. Structure:

- This does not exclude the rest of the congregation from input into decisions and direction, there is a mutual submission among all believers. The elders will genuinely welcome thoughts, prayers, and suggestions, there is always room for loving discussion. All suggestions will be considered and weighed against Scripture. In matters of disagreement, the elders will exercise discernment according to their charge to rule well over those they will give an account for.
- The members hold a special responsibility to the body and to one another above regular attenders and visitors. The members are expected to covenant with one another and their leaders, being invested in the decisions and direction of Grace Fellowship. Members will regularly come together to discuss matters of the church, where we will seek unity in maturity. Input concerning appointments, financial or directional decisions will be restricted to the members. Attenders can observe and ask questions, but will have limited, discretionary involvement before membership.
- All members will be given direct oversight and accountability by the elders for regular meeting, discipleship, and counsel in matters of faith and practice.
- The members hold the biblical responsibility of accountability for the elders. If there is a biblical charge against one of the elders brought by two or three witnesses, then it must be brought to that elder and the other elders. If the elders will not listen, then it is the duty of the members to gather as a body to lovingly confront the elder, seeking loving repentance and reconciliation.

**The decisions and direction of the church will continue to be governed by biblical convictions over personal preferences. This cannot be overstated. Everyone has a particular way they would like to see things done, yet pleasing everyone is not possible. When concerns are raised, it must first be asked whether it is a biblical conviction or personal preference, it must further the primacy of the gospel of Christ and coincide with the doctrine, vision, and resources of Grace Fellowship. While input is encouraged, not all can be implemented. Time, availability, and resources also determine what will get implemented.*

C. Next Steps:

- After reading and agreeing, each prospective member will meet with an elder personally. They will: articulate their testimony, faith, and understanding of the gospel; disclose church history; assess giftings, needs, and areas of growth, and determine places to serve. After the interview, prospective members will be presented to the existing members 30 days prior to the membership meeting, and barring any charges disqualifying them, they will covenant at the next meeting.
- While there are only two explicit offices listed in Scripture, there are countless opportunities to serve in many different capacities for men and women. Each member will be expected to serve in at least one area in the church and will be connected with a deacon or ministry leader. Equipping the saints to use their talents in ministry is the primary goal of the elders. So please carefully consider your input and involvement.

D. Appointment of Elders and Deacons

- We will prayerfully seek and consider adding elders and deacons, erring on the side of caution in order not to lay hands too quickly. Potential elders and deacons will be selected from the members, solicited by member recommendations, and vetted by the current elders according to biblical precedent and qualifications. Candidates must be a member of the congregation for at least 6 months, be invested in the well-being of the body, and be recognized for their leadership attributes.

- Since the qualifications for elder and deacon are primarily concerned with spiritual fidelity and maturity, all candidates will go through a process of testing. The elder process will be more extensive and invasive for the sake of the elder, his family, and the congregation. The testing and examination will consider the characteristics listed in 1 Tim. 3, Tit. 1, and 1 Pet. 5, with each man under consideration for a defined period, overseen by the existing elders.
- Once the candidates have been confirmed by the elders, they will be brought before the members for public examination and approval. The members will be given the opportunity to ask questions, give confirmation, or bring charges publicly and privately. If there are no unresolved objections, the members will unanimously agree to install the candidates as elders and commission deacons of Grace Fellowship. If there are any biblical (i.e., not trivial or personal) objections, the candidate will not be installed until the elders are able to resolve them with the candidate and the members bringing the charge. If it cannot be resolved, consideration will be postponed. We cannot, in good conscience, commission leaders who are unable to lead the body or who contribute to division.

VI. Heritage and Covenant

A. Heritage: This church was originally founded in 1890 as an independent, Congregational church shortly after Sanford's founding. They have had several names and two locations in the church's history. Grace Fellowship was adopted in 1997. We agreed to keep Grace Fellowship but remove "congregational" from the name and association. We filed a dba as "Grace Fellowship Sanford" in 2020.

Congregationalism: During the English Reformation in the 16th-17th centuries, the faithful believers who wanted the church to remain pure and faithful to Scripture, often called Puritans, were split on how to properly reform the distortions of the Roman Catholic Church and the state Church of England. While some wanted to reform the church from within, the 'Separatists' separated themselves in order to worship God freely, according to God's Word and personal conviction, free from any higher state or church authority. This is the tradition of the free church, where each local congregation is responsible for its own affairs, hence Congregationalism. The local body, under Christ, is the highest human authority for faith and practice, led by biblical convictions rather than denominational mandates or traditions. Congregationalism is the early predecessor to modern non-denominationalism. Not independent of fellowship and unity with other believers in other congregations, but independent of external dogmatic dictates and assumed higher authorities other than Christ as head, and Scripture as His authority. Each local congregation is free to act and govern according to Scripture, from firmly held convictions, guided of the Holy Spirit. The local body addresses its' particular issues, and each member has a right and duty to take interest in the doctrine, order, and mission of the local church. *While we affirm the spirit of this tradition, we cannot take responsibility for any congregations other than our own, and cannot stand with most Congregational churches, therefore, we no longer bear the name.*

B. Church Covenant: "Acknowledging Jesus Christ to be our Savior and Lord, God as our Father, the Holy Spirit as our Guide, the Holy Scriptures as our rule of faith and practice, and recognizing the privilege and duty of uniting ourselves for Christian fellowship, we do now in the sight of God solemnly covenant and agree with each other to associate ourselves together in this church of the Lord Jesus Christ for the worship of God and service to the household of faith and its endeavors. Ever mindful of our fellow members, fellow heirs with Christ, we promise to walk with them in faithfulness, patience, grace, and love. And we promise, insofar as we are able, we will participate in the services of this church, observe its sacraments, share in its work and obligations, support its benevolence, promote its peace and purity to the glory of God and good of our brothers and sisters in Christ."

Grace Fellowship Sanford, Membership Declaration

I acknowledge that I read and understand the Mission, Vision, Beliefs, and Distinctives of Grace Fellowship Sanford, and I desire to become a member.

If I have disagreements with the Essential Convictions, Beliefs, Philosophy of Ministry or Structure, I will prayerfully seek the Lord first, seeking the truth through God's Word. I will then present my case patiently and lovingly for discussion before the elders.

I understand the importance of submission to the fellow members, leadership, and discipline of the church, and will be diligent to preserve unity and peace within the body.

I promise to support this Church of Jesus Christ, His bride, in its worship and work to the best of my ability.

Addendum A

Grace Fellowship Sanford is an independent church that was founded in 1890 in the Congregational tradition. However, we no longer formally associate with Congregational churches, rejecting those who have slid into liberalism and universalism, among other heresies. To distinguish ourselves as a congregation for those inquiring, it is as important to know who we are and who we are not. We are:

- **Biblical: We Teach the Bible**
 - Our rule for faith and practice comes from and is placed under the authority of God's Word.
- **Evangelical: We Proclaim the Gospel**
 - The good news of Jesus Christ, His death for sinners, and their need for Him is primary.
- **Reformed: We Glorify God**
 - The Solas, doctrines of grace, and confessionalism are biblically faithful and glorifying to God.

While we are not officially a Baptist church, either historically or presently, we find the Second London Baptist Confession of 1689 (SLBC) to be an excellent body of divinity that we can subscribe and adhere to. We find it necessary to distinguish ourselves as a congregation, and stand in the tradition and agreement with the majority of the Westminster Standards and the Savoy Declaration, clarifying minor distinctions. In charity, we hold more in common than in disagreement with our reformed brothers.

While we stand with the 17th century particular Baptists in doctrine, we must also recognize they are products of the circumstances, issues, and concerns of their day. The 1689 confession is not exhaustive but representative in giving faithful and biblical responses to theological and practical concerns of the 17th century that remain helpful today because they are rooted in the truth of God's Word. As elders, we excitedly adopt the SLBC with minor clarifications. In the spirit of unity, our members can hold to differing views within orthodoxy and remain in fellowship.

- The confession can be found here in its original language: the1689confession.com

We subscribe to the Confession in its spirit, its biblical foundation, and its theological conclusions. As elders, we can adopt the confession with minor clarifications in these three areas:

I. 22. Of Religious Worship and the Sabbath Day.

We heartily agree with the confession that "God is to be worshipped everywhere in spirit and in truth" privately and publicly, with the further implication that these practices of worship also happen every day, which are "not carelessly nor willfully to be neglected or forsaken" (22.6).

We also agree that "he hath particularly appointed one day in seven for a sabbath to be kept holy unto him" (22.7) since this is a creation ordinance and deemed good and beneficial to mankind. And that each believer should set aside a day of rest and refreshment in the Lord (Ex. 23:12); ideally, this is the first day of the week, affectionately called "the Lord's Day" (22.7).

22.8. Para. 8 also requires some clarification regarding the standards and expectations for the Lord's Day.

- First, while we strongly encourage believers to abstain from working on Sunday, we live in a very different climate from ancient Israel or even 17th-century Europe. In an industrial society that operates seven days a week, the worker does not always have the opportunity to enjoy a Sunday rest. We will certainly counsel one day in seven as a day of rest if Sunday is not possible and encourage vocation where a set apart Lord's Day with the body of Christ can be achieved.
- Next, paragraph 8 says the sabbath is only kept "when": "a due preparing of their hearts and ordering their common affairs aforehand," which is agreeable, but also, that a holy rest is observed, "all day, from their own works, words and thoughts, about their worldly employments and recreations," yet in addition, must also be "taken up *the whole time* in the public and private exercises of his worship and in the duties of necessity and mercy" (22.8).
- While these sentiments are admirable and worthy of aspiration, they seem to place an undue burden on the congregation that their own proof texts and Scripture as a whole does not place. Scripture prohibits "work" on the sabbath, but if we are prohibited from our own "words and thoughts" as well, the confession makes liars and sabbath-breakers out of us all. Does this not tend dangerously close to the zeal of the Pharisees? What is more, where does God's holy command say His people must take up "the whole time" in "public and private exercises" and "duties"? Isaiah 58:13-14 states the people must turn back "from doing

your pleasure on my holy day” because the day is to be a “delight in the LORD.” Should we be taken up with the things that are mentioned in paragraphs 1-5 on the Lord’s Day? Absolutely! But are these the only acceptable practices on that day?

- We must ask ourselves, is not God glorified in other means (Col. 3:17)? Is this not a day of rest and refreshment (Ex. 23:12, 31:17) and delight in the Lord? God most certainly deserves our worship in spirit and in truth, and we should desire to make the day honorable (Is. 58:13), but is not “sabbath made for man, not man for the sabbath” (Mk. 2:28)? Jesus did not treat the day with drudgery and duty, but freedom and joy.
- The changing of the sabbath from the last day to the first (22.7) signifies Christ’s resurrection and our joyous resurrection in Him. Doesn’t the resurrection of our Lord lead us to celebration and rejoicing with the saints? Is not Christ glorified by fellowship and the breaking of bread as well as the teaching and the prayers (Acts 2:42)? “This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it” (Ps. 118:24), not just this day, but every day!
- While we appreciate the spirit of the paragraph by the writers of the confession, we can encourage freedom and grace to all those who observe the day in various ways to the glory of God (Rom. 14:5-10).

II. 26. Of the Church.

26.4. This clarification involves para. 4 and is much simpler to address. The Lord Jesus Christ is the Head of the church, and any claim by Rome or any other authority for headship is a clear violation of this doctrine. We agree that the way the Roman Catholic church exalts the Pope is unbiblical, sinful, and outright blasphemous. To that end, we must clarify that any gospel that exalts man is by nature anti-Christ, and we are promised many of them (1 Jn. 2:18, 4:3). However frustrating and egregious the Pope was in their day, it is clear that he was not “that anti-Christ, that man of sin and son of perdition” referring to “the lawless one” in 2 Th. 2:1-12 who leads the rebellion that ushers in the coming of the Lord. The Popes are many things, but they have yet to proclaim “himself to be God” (2 Th. 2:4)

26:9. Finally, our last point depends on a particular word used in para. 9, to clarify what the confessional writers meant in terms of practice. This word “suffrage” is used in reference to the appointment of elders who must “be chosen thereunto by the common suffrage of the church itself.” The word is applied to the election of deacons as well in the same paragraph, “chosen by like suffrage.”

- According to *Oxford Languages*, the modern definition (late 18th cen.) of suffrage has come to mean: “*the right to vote in political elections,*” with their archaic “*a vote given in assent to a proposal or in favor of the election of a particular person*” as well as “*a series of intercessory prayers or petitions.*” However, what precisely the writers of the confession mean in practice we do not know, but going back a little further might be helpful; according to the **Table Alphabeticall** (Preacher’s Dictionary, 1617), suffrage meant: “consent” or “voice” or “help.”¹
- To encourage common “consent,” “voice,” or “help” seems inconsistent with what we see in Scripture. We certainly invoke intercessory prayer for the appointment of elders and encourage each member to have a voice and give consent to their selection. However, Grace Fellowship will not hold democratic votes and does not see a biblical precedent for it. This is admittedly difficult since the Bible says decisively little about testing and appointing elders in a local church while commanding it be done (Tit. 1:5-9).
- Additionally, the proof texts do not support voting for the selection of elders. In Acts 6:1-7, the seven are chosen by the recognition of their conduct and confirmed by the apostles; in Acts 14:23, the elders were appointed in every church, with prayer and fasting; Mt. 18 and 1 Cor. 5:1-13 are not dealing with officer appointment specifically, but church discipline in agreement of judgment within the church.

This may seem like splitting of theological hairs, but it does make a stark difference in polity, between setting apart elders by petition or inclusion of the members instead of democratic voting; between an elder-led/ruled form of church government and a strictly congregational form of government. The former we can affirm, and the latter we cannot. In short, if suffrage means common intercession and agreement by the entire body, then we absolutely affirm this, but if it means a majority vote within the entire body, then we cannot.

¹ Cawdry, Robert. *A Table Alphabeticall, contayning and teaching the true writing and vnderstanding of hard vsuall English words, borrowed from the Hebrew, Greeke, Latine, or French &c.* Newly corrected and much enlarged. The 3. Edition. London: 1617. [Table Alphabeticall](#)