



GRACE

HERITAGE CHURCH

Auburn, Alabama

Member Handbook

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Membership Vows

Membership vows are affirmed by all members as they join.

1. Do you acknowledge yourselves to be sinners in the sight of God, justly deserving His displeasure, and without hope except in His sovereign mercy?
2. Do you repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and Savior of sinners, and do you receive and rest upon Him alone for salvation as He is offered in the Gospel?
3. Will you endeavor, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, to live according to your identity as a follower of Christ?
4. Do you engage to walk together with God's people in Christian love through the power of the Holy Spirit?
5. Will you support the church in its worship, work, and witness?
6. Do you submit yourselves to the government and discipline of the church, and will you endeavor to maintain its purity and peace?

Congregational Vow

Do you as a congregation receive this brother/sister into our fellowship and engage to serve, encourage, watch over, and pray for him/her as fellow members of the body of Christ?

CONSTITUTION & BY-LAWS OF GRACE HERITAGE CHURCH Auburn, Alabama

PREAMBLE

The purpose of this Constitution and Bylaws is to commit publicly to the principles and processes by which we, the members of Grace Heritage Church, will order our life together as a local expression of the body of Christ. These principles and processes express our understanding of how the Scriptures, the light of nature, and Christian wisdom are to be applied to the government of our local church in our specific context. They are set out in writing in advance to aid us in mutual understanding and action and to preserve the orderly government and functioning of the church.

ARTICLE I: NAME

The name of this church is Grace Heritage Church.

ARTICLE II: PURPOSE

The purpose of this church is to glorify the God of the Scriptures by maintaining and promoting His worship both individually and corporately, by preaching and teaching God's Word, by evangelizing the lost, by edifying His saints, and by celebrating purely and faithfully the ordinances of the New Covenant.

ARTICLE III: STANDARD OF FAITH

We acknowledge the Word of God written to be the supreme authority and standard in all matters of faith, morals, and order. We believe God's Word contains a coherent body of teachings—the *faith*—and therefore can and should be interpreted and summarized to benefit God's people and to express our views to the world. We regard the London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689 as a faithful and clear, though not inspired, summary of the teaching of the Word of God. Thus, we adopt this historic, time-tested Confession as our subordinate doctrinal standard. It

is to serve as a standard for our preaching and teaching, an assistance in controversy, a confirmation in faith, and a means of building up in righteousness.

ARTICLE IV: MEMBERSHIP

A. Requirements

Our goal is to be as welcoming as Christ is in receiving his sheep while at the same time maintaining a clear conscience in following the principles of church order that we find revealed in Scripture. Therefore, the church will require the following for church membership:

1. A credible profession of both repentance toward God and orthodox, evangelical, and personal faith in our Lord Jesus Christ (Jer. 31:33, 34; Acts 2:41, 9:26, 27; 2 John 1:9).
2. Baptism by immersion as a public identification with Christ in accordance with the command of Christ (Matt. 28:19, 20) and the practice of the New Testament church (Acts 2:41).
3. A general understanding of the Confession of Faith and a willingness to submit to and live at peace with a preaching and teaching ministry guided by the biblical convictions expressed in it.
4. An understanding of and commitment to undertake the biblical responsibilities of church membership as expressed in this constitution and the church covenant.
5. A willingness to promote the unity and well being of the church by understanding and submitting to its form of church government.
6. No unresolved biblical corrective discipline from a church where membership was previously held.

B. Admission to Membership

1. Anyone desiring membership may express this desire to an elder. The applicant shall ordinarily meet with two or more elders in order for them to hear his or her testimony of repentance and faith (Acts 20:20,21). There shall be a meeting or meetings for anyone interested in membership that explains the specifics of membership at Grace Heritage Church. This allows a potential member to explore the doctrinal position, the leadership and church government, the vision and purpose, and other aspects of the church without obligation by either party. A prospective member is not required to agree with every doctrinal position held by the elders but must understand that the ministry, preaching, and teaching will be

shaped by those positions as expressed in the Confession of Faith and be willing to submit to that ministry.

2. Upon a positive assessment from the elders, the applicant shall be brought before the congregation. An elder shall testify before God and the congregation that the applicant, according to the limited view of the elders, meets the biblical requirements for membership (Acts 9:26, 27). The elder shall then give appropriate opportunity for the applicant to testify before the church to the grace of God in his life, either through testimony or answers to questions from the elder. The church will then affirm reception of the applicant by a majority vote at any business or worship meeting of the church, at which time membership in other churches shall be relinquished.

C. Termination of Membership

In accepting membership each member acknowledges and agrees that:

1. Termination of membership shall be recognized by the church following the death or voluntary resignation of any church member or by transfer to another evangelical church. Termination of membership in good standing shall not be granted to any member while under discipline, facing discipline, or with unresolved issues with the church. Membership may be terminated as an act of church discipline at the recommendation of the elders and with the vote of the members at any church business meeting.
2. The elders may, at their discretion, disclose to the members of this church, to other churches, and to others outside of Christian churches the circumstances under which a person's membership was terminated. They may do this for the sake of the purity, peace, integrity, and testimony of the church as well as the protection of society.

D. Associate Membership

1. Members of other churches who come to live in our area for a limited time (e.g., students, military personnel, persons on special work assignments) may be received into or removed from the membership of the church on the same basis and in the same manner as persons who have permanent residence in our geographical area. Such persons need not be released from the membership of their home church but will be regarded as associate members while in our midst.
2. The church may consider for associate membership applicants who

as a matter of conscience have a point of difference in their public profession, such as those who as a matter of conscience have not been baptized according to the pattern required by this church based on our understanding of Scripture. If the applicants are able and willing to meet the other requirements of membership, the elders may recommend such applicants for associate membership. Applicants for associate membership must agree to receive an explanation of the biblical basis of our church practice. Should an issue of conscience remain after this explanation, applicants should be able to affirm their position from a biblical basis. After an applicant is accepted for associate membership on this basis, the elders will continue to encourage and shepherd the individual in this area of concern.

3. Those accepted for associate membership will enjoy all the privileges and fulfill all the responsibilities of regular membership, except that they will not be eligible to vote on amending or revising the constitution.

E. Church Covenant

By the grace of God, we acknowledge ourselves to be sinners in the sight of God, justly deserving His displeasure, and without hope except in His sovereign mercy. We have been led to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and Savior of sinners, and to receive and rest upon Him alone for salvation as He is offered in the Gospel. We have publicly confessed Christ by baptism in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and we acknowledge together that our God is infinitely worthy of all our joyful worship and obedience. Now, therefore, in the presence of God and by His grace, we solemnly and joyfully affirm our covenant with one another as one local body in Christ.

We will endeavor, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, to live according to our identity as followers of Christ, in the world, in our homes, and in the church.

We will seek to train those under our care in the discipline and instruction of the Lord, and by a pure and loving example to seek the salvation of our family and acquaintances.

We engage to walk together in Christian love through the power of the Holy Spirit by serving, encouraging, watching over, and praying for one another.

We will personally and financially support the worship, teaching, and work of the church, and the spread of the Gospel to all nations. We will not forsake assembling together as the people of God.

We will submit ourselves to the government and discipline of the church and will endeavor to maintain its purity and peace.

We will, when we move from this place, as soon as possible, unite with some other church where we can carry out the spirit of this covenant and the principles of God's Word.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.

F. Church Discipline

1. The church of Jesus Christ is not a body of sinless people, but it is a body of repenting people who are progressively growing into Christ-likeness. Ordinarily, the preaching and teaching of the Word, prayer, fellowship, the Lord's Supper, and other nurturing means of grace—collectively referred to as formative discipline—are sufficient to keep God's people repenting in a timely manner and growing in their faith. However, at times this growth process is interrupted by obstinate sin. Our loving heavenly Father has ordained means of corrective church discipline through the Word to rescue His children who resist repentance or engage in willful, public sin. The purpose of such discipline is to reclaim offenders from spiritual peril, to maintain the purity and testimony of the church, and to deter others from sin.
2. Corrective discipline should ordinarily begin with a private rebuke from a fellow believer who is aware of an unrepented offense (Matt. 18:15), although this stage may be irrelevant for more public sins. Only in the case of continued unwillingness to repent is further action required. In such a case, two or three believers must lovingly confront the erring brother or sister (Matt. 18:16). If he or she still refuses to repent, the elders should be contacted so that they can

determine whether public discipline is necessary, the specific discipline to be applied, and how to apply it. The elders shall oversee any discipline that necessitates public disclosure of an unrepentant brother or sister.

3. Public corrective discipline will be applied after the elders have presented the case to the voting members and upon a properly conducted vote of the church. Discipline shall be removed by a properly conducted vote of the church.
4. Public corrective discipline may take any of the following forms: verbal censure (Matt. 18:17; Rom. 16:17-19; 1 Thes. 5:14; 2 Thes. 3:6-15; Tit. 3:10); verbal censure with the removal of some membership privileges (2 Thes. 3:14-15); or excommunication—the removal of a person from the communion of the saints or church membership (Matt. 18:17; Rom. 16:17-19; 1 Cor. 5:9-13; Tit. 3:10). Excommunication will be applied only when a member demonstrates continued unrepentance after an appropriate effort is made by the elders and the church to lead the member to repent. Members will be considered in good standing as long as they are allowed to partake of the Lord's Supper.
5. Although all corrective discipline is unpleasant, church members will commit to love one another enough and to love the honor of Christ's church enough to take the steps required by Scripture to reclaim the erring brother or sister and maintain the purity of the church.

ARTICLE V: GOVERNMENT

A. General Statement

Jesus Christ alone is the Head of His Church (Col.1:18). He has ordained that individual churches be governed directly by Himself through members and officers exercising responsible choices together according to the biblical pattern. Christ has ordained that local churches are to be administered by those holding the offices of elder and deacon (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1-13).

B. Voting by Members

1. Church members will vote on the receiving of new members, prospective officers, issues of church discipline, the sending out of laborers, church budgets, incurring of debt, and any issue that in the judgment of the elders affects the whole body (Acts 6:3, 15:22; 2

Cor. 2:6). All members in good standing may and are expected to vote knowledgeably and responsibly as maturity and understanding allow. Unless specifically delineated in another part of this constitution, those members who are present at a meeting for which proper notice has been given shall constitute a quorum, and a majority of those voting will constitute an affirmative decision.

2. Church members will vote to approve an annual budget at a church business meeting no more than three months nor less than one month prior to the start of the fiscal year. Amendments may be made to the budget by a vote of members at any properly called and held meeting of the church.

C. General Requirements for Officers

1. Only male members of the church are eligible for church office.
2. Any individual set apart to church office must sincerely receive and adopt the Articles of Faith of this church as set out in Article III as a faithful expression of the doctrines taught in the Holy Scripture and affirm this Constitution as a faithful implementation of biblical principles of church order (1 Tim. 3:9; Tit. 1:9). If he should at any time move from this position, he is under spiritual and moral obligation to notify the elders immediately.
3. All officer candidates must have an established track record of commitment, service, and financial support to the local church and a good understanding of the culture and philosophy of Grace Heritage Church.

D. Elders

1. Those who have been called of God to rule and teach in the church are called elders, pastors, or overseers (bishops). These are three interchangeable names designating one and the same office in a New Testament church (Acts 20:17, 28; Eph. 4:11, 12; Tit. 1:5, 7). The ordinary pattern is for churches to have multiple elders (a plurality) as God provides (Jam. 5:14; 1 Pet. 5:5).
2. Anyone desiring the office of an elder must evidence to God's people the personal, domestic, and ministerial qualifications that are set forth in the Scriptures (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Tit. 1:5-9).
3. Because the authority of the elders of the church is human authority exercised in the house of God, it has both high prerogatives and important limitations:
 - a. It is divinely delegated authority. Thus, elders are answerable

- to God for the exercise of this authority, and God's people are required to submit when it is biblically exercised (Acts 20:28; Heb. 13:17; 1 Pet. 5:1-2).
- b. When elders exercise this authority, they must seek to gain the consciences of God's people through the ministry of the Word (Eph. 4:11c; 1 Tim. 3:2c; 2 Tim. 4:1-2; Heb. 13:17).
 - c. The authority of the elders does not include the right to make certain decisions unilaterally. In major decisions of church life, the local church as a whole has a voice (Acts 6:2-6; 9:26; 1 Cor. 5:4-5, 13; 2 Cor. 2:6). Yet the elders must provide definitive leadership to the church in making such decisions.
 - d. The authority of the elders is limited to the sphere of the local church and may not invade other biblically defined spheres of human authorities (husbands, fathers, civil rulers, and employers) (Matt. 22:21; Luke 12:13-14; Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:3a; Rom. 13:1-7; Eph. 5:22-6:9; 1 Cor. 7:25-28, 35-40).
 - e. The authority of elders is conditioned by the fact that they are themselves members of the local church. Thus, they have all the same privileges and responsibilities of other church members and are individually under the oversight of their fellow elders and are accountable to the church as a whole (Matt. 18:17, 23:9, 26:31; 2 Cor. 11:19-20; Gal. 2:11; 3 John 1, 9, 10).
 - f. The authority of every elder (or pastor) is the same. Thus, every elder has equal rule in the church. Though gifts possessed and functions performed will vary from elder to elder, this diversity must not undermine real parity among the elders (Acts 20:28 (cp. 20:17); Gal 2:11; 1 Pet. 5:1-2; 1 Tim. 5:17).
4. The elders shall take particular responsibility to examine and instruct prospective members, examine and recommend all prospective candidates for offices and positions, oversee the work of the deacons and appointed church agents and committees, conduct worship services, administer the ordinances of baptism and communion, equip the membership for the work of the ministry, encourage sound doctrine and practice, admonish and correct error, oversee the process of church discipline, coordinate and promote the ministries of the church, and mobilize the church for world missions. The elders are further to ensure that all who minister the Word to the congregation, including outside speakers, share the church's fundamental convictions.
 5. An essential duty of the elders is to oversee the flock of God

- personally. Fulfillment of this duty shall include regularly and systematically communicating with each member of the church.
6. Elders will be maintained in material necessities and freed from the cares of another vocation according to their gifts and desires, the needs and capability of the church, and the direction of Christ her Head (1 Tim.5:17ff). (See also Section G.)
 7. The elders may establish ministry positions or committees to assist them in fulfilling their responsibilities. The elders may also propose funding for new paid staff positions. The scope and approval of job descriptions for any staff position shall reside in the hands of those with hiring authority for that position. Funding for paid positions shall be approved by the membership as part of the budget approval process. The elders shall have primary responsibility for the employment, supervision, and evaluation of staff members. This responsibility may, on a case-by-case basis, be delegated to another staff member.
 8. Though a plurality of elders is the New Testament norm for every church, the New Testament does not specify the number of elders each church should have, nor does it dictate the length of an elder's term of office. One truly called to this office is usually called to it for life. He is a gift of Christ to the church, and the gifts of God are irrevocable (Rom. 11:29). Only when an elder fails to meet the necessary scriptural qualifications for his office does he disqualify himself from being an elder.

E. Deacons

1. Deacons are responsible primarily to administer the benevolent concerns of the church as well as its business affairs (Acts 6:1-4). They must fulfill the duties of their office in cooperation with, and in subjection to, the elders.
2. The number of deacons shall not be fixed. The church shall set apart according to its need men who evidence the scriptural qualifications for that office (Acts 6:1-7; 1 Tim. 3:8-13).

F. Selection of Officers

1. The appointment of elders and deacons is the prerogative of the Lord Jesus Christ alone. However, He has ordained that each local church exercise the responsibility of recognizing those whom He has qualified and called to be elders and deacons in that particular

- church.
2. The recognition of those whom the Lord has appointed to bear office in this church is executed in three steps: nomination, election, and setting apart.
 - a. Nominations to either office may be made by the elders or any member at any time. The elders will consider any nominees and publish the names of approved candidates at least four weeks before a meeting to vote. Any member with reason to believe that a candidate is unqualified for an office should express such concern to the elders as early as possible.
 - b. An election shall be held at any church meeting providing an announcement is made on four consecutive Lord's Days previous to the day of the election. Candidates receiving the vote of 2/3 of the members present and voting will be considered elected.
 - c. Formal setting apart will follow the election to office. A portion of a regular worship service will be set aside during which the officer shall be set apart for the office by the laying on of the hands of the eldership to signify their approval of an officer-elect.

G. Vocational Call of Elders

1. Though all elders are equal as to the authority of their office, not all elders possess qualifications warranting full financial support (a vocational call) in the office. The Bible teaches that special ability in ruling the church and, more especially, in public teaching and preaching are gifts worthy of full financial support (Gal. 6:6; 1 Tim. 5:17; 1 Cor. 9:1-14). Therefore, before the church calls a man to vocational status, the church must recognize that he possesses special ministerial gifts and excels in employing them for the benefit of the church in ways appropriate to his opportunities. This recognition may be accomplished in part by interviews with the elders and fellow church members of the church in which the man presently serves if the church is considering calling a man from a different church. Special caution should be exercised in extending a vocational call to an elder for the following reasons:
 - a. full support necessitates his removal from a secular vocation that might better serve the interests of Christ's Kingdom and the man's family;
 - b. a major portion of the church's financial stewardship is involved, for which its Head will hold it accountable; and

- c. a vocational elder has a greater influence upon the church, for good or ill.

The provisions of this section apply to any proportion of financial support required by an increase of ministry that would hinder an elder's full-time employment in a secular vocation.

2. The recognition of those whom the Lord has appointed to vocational status will follow the same basic process of calling an elder. In addition, however, the church must be given adequate opportunity to assess the candidate's special ministerial gifts that form the basis of the call. A separate setting apart to vocational status is not required or warranted.

H. Review of Officer Qualifications and Removal from Office

1. Officers shall hold office only as long as they meet the biblical qualifications for their office or vocational call in the esteem of the church and are able to serve. Therefore, all elders and deacons shall be reviewed annually by the elders. In addition, vocational elders shall undergo a review of vocational status on the same schedule. A recommendation to remove from office or vocational call will be made to the congregation upon a majority vote of elders (or remaining elders in the case of an elder). A review of an officer may also be called at any time by a majority of the elders (or a majority of the other elders in the case of an elder). Furthermore, if two or more members accuse the officer of doctrinal or moral failure, a review will be called.
2. A vote to remove from office or vocational call may be called by a majority of the elders subsequent to a review or by the members with the signatures of 1/4 of the total voting membership of the church. A vote to remove from office or vocational call shall be by signed ballot to allow the elders an opportunity to investigate perceived deficiencies if any should be found. Withdrawal of recognition to office or a vocational call shall be by a majority of those present and voting in a regularly called business meeting of the church.
3. An officer whose recognition or vocational calling is withdrawn will be immediately removed from office. However, because of the public position of a vocational officer and his financial dependence on the church, an extra measure of caution will be exercised before terminating his call. If the members vote to withdraw recognition to office or a vocational call, the elders will determine whether the deficiency is capable of being remedied in the short term. If not, the

vote of the church shall stand. Otherwise, financial support will be continued for six months while efforts are made to remedy the deficiency. During this time, the individual will be allowed to exercise his gifts in ways deemed appropriate by the elders. At the end of six months, another vote to remove from office or vocational call will be held. If a majority votes to withdraw recognition to office, recognition to church office and the vocational call will be considered withdrawn. If a majority votes to withdraw the vocational call, the vocational call will be considered withdrawn. Upon termination of an officer's vocational call, salary and other benefits shall continue for thirty (30) days.

4. Removal from office or termination of the vocational call by this means will not be considered disciplinary action.

J. Lack of a Plurality of Elders

1. This constitution assumes, and normal biblical church order requires, that a plurality of elders oversee this local church. If a plurality of elders does not exist and this lack cannot be supplied in a timely way with qualified men, the church (or the remaining elder if one exists) shall seek the temporary oversight of multiple elders of a trusted church who meet the requirements for eldership according to this constitution (Acts 14:23; 1 Pet. 5:5). The oversight relationship will apply to the church as a whole if no elders remain in the church but only to the remaining elder if one exists. The church shall confirm the oversight relationship with the vote of 2/3 of the members present and voting. The relationship shall be confirmed (or, failing a 2/3 majority, withdrawn) in the same way at the annual meeting of the church in succeeding years. When a plurality of resident elders is raised up, the oversight arrangement here described shall immediately cease.
2. In the absence of a plurality of elders, the church will form a leadership committee consisting of at least three godly men if possible. The purpose of the committee will be to assist the church and the overseeing elders with local leadership decisions when a plurality of elders does not exist and to provide leadership assistance and local accountability to the remaining elder if one exists (Prov. 15:22). Any existing deacons will be considered nominees if they consent; other nominations will be received from the church. The nominees will be examined by the existing elder or by the elders of the overseeing church, and then approved nominees will be placed on a ballot. Candidates receiving the vote of 2/3 of

the members present and voting will become the leadership committee. The committee members shall be confirmed (or, failing a 2/3 majority, removed) in the same way at the annual meeting of the church in succeeding years. When a plurality of resident elders is raised up, the leadership committee shall immediately be dissolved.

3. If no elders exist, the leadership committee will serve in a local decision-making capacity under the oversight of the elders of the overseeing church to assist the overseeing elders in any decisions required of elders by this constitution. If an elder exists, the leadership committee will serve alongside the elder in any decision-making required of elders by this constitution, respecting the God-ordained authority and gifts of the elder. If an unresolvable disagreement about a leadership decision arises between the elder and the leadership committee, appeal will be made to the elders of the overseeing church. Their decision will be final.

ARTICLE VI: ORDINANCES

There are two ordinances of special significance that our Lord has commanded us to observe, namely, Baptism and the Lord's Supper. (These are sometimes referred to as "sacraments.") Neither of them has saving merit, nor is any grace imparted to the recipient mechanically through the physical elements of the water of Baptism or the bread and the cup of the Supper. These ordinances are not means of "special grace," but they are special "means of grace" and powerful aids to the faith of believers who participate in them rightly.

A. Baptism

Only believers or confessed disciples are proper candidates for baptism. Baptism will be conducted accordingly, by immersion, "in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19), to those who desire to identify with Christ publicly. The local church alone has authority to baptize. The church will baptize those coming into membership who have not previously been baptized according to our understanding of the pattern set forth in Scripture.

B. Lord's Supper

This ordinance was given for local churches to obey (Matt. 28:20; 1 Cor. 11:23-26). The local church alone has authority to administer the Lord's

Supper. The church will partake of the Lord's Supper as often as the elders determine necessary. Only those who have been baptized and are in right relationship with their local church will be invited to participate in the Supper.

ARTICLE VI: CHURCH MEETINGS

An annual business meeting of the church shall be held in October or November of each year. The elders shall give a report that contains an account of the church membership and a financial report for the previous year. These reports shall be approved by a vote of the church. The proposed budget for the coming year shall also be presented and approved in a church vote.

Occasional church business meetings may be called by the elders or when one-fourth (1/4) of the members in good standing make a written, signed request for such a meeting along with the stated reason. This request must be presented to the elders, who shall in turn make the proper announcement of the meeting. Every meeting at which business is to be transacted shall be announced at regular services for at least two (2) successive Lord's Days prior to the meeting day unless this constitution requires further notice for specific business. Other business meetings at which there is no business transacted by vote may be called at the discretion of the elders without previous notice.

Provided all constitutional provisions for notification have been met, a quorum shall be understood to be met by those members present. All votes shall be tallied based on the number of votes cast by members present.

ARTICLE VII. CORPORATE OFFICERS

The elders will appoint willing men to act as President, Vice-President, and Secretary of the corporation as prescribed by the State of Alabama for a term of one year. Elders may serve in this capacity. Their duties are two-fold:

- to fulfill requirements stipulated by the State of Alabama so that we may receive tax benefits.
- to work with the church officers as needed in legal and financial matters.

ARTICLE VIII. AMENDMENTS

The Articles of Faith and this paragraph may be amended by the vote of 4/5 of the members present and voting at any church meeting provided that the proposed amendments are distributed in written form to the membership at least four (4) weeks prior to such a meeting and the proposal announced for four (4) consecutive Lord's Days prior to the meeting day.

The other parts of this Constitution may be amended by the vote of 3/4 of the members present and voting at any church meeting provided that the proposed amendments are distributed in written form to the membership at least four (4) weeks prior to such a meeting and the proposal announced for four (4) consecutive Lord's Days prior to the meeting day.

ARTICLE XII. LIMITATIONS

This document is not to be treated as exhaustive or infallible. Issues not covered in the constitution will be handled by the elders as the occasion demands.

Abstract of Principles

The Abstract of Principles serves as an informal summary of our doctrine. It was written to be an abstract or summary of the London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689, our statement of faith. The Abstract is the doctrinal statement of both The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

I. The Scriptures

The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments were given by inspiration of God, and are the only sufficient, certain and authoritative rule of all saving knowledge, faith and obedience.

II. God

There is but one God, the Maker, Preserver and Ruler of all things, having in and of Himself, all perfections, and being infinite in them all; and to Him all creatures owe the highest love, reverence and obedience.

III. The Trinity

God is revealed to us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit each with distinct personal attributes, but without division of nature, essence or being.

IV. Providence

God from eternity, decrees or permits all things that come to pass, and perpetually upholds, directs and governs all creatures and all events; yet so as not in any wise to be the author or approver of sin nor to destroy the free will and responsibility of intelligent creatures.

V. Election

Election is God's eternal choice of some persons unto everlasting life—not because of foreseen merit in them, but of His mere mercy in Christ—in consequence of which choice they are called, justified and glorified.

VI. The Fall of Man

God originally created Man in His own image, and free from sin; but, through the temptation of Satan, he transgressed the command of God, and fell from his original holiness and righteousness; whereby his posterity inherit a nature corrupt and wholly opposed to God and His law, are under condemnation, and as soon as they are capable of

moral action, become actual transgressors.

VII. The Mediator

Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, is the divinely appointed mediator between God and man. Having taken upon Himself human nature, yet without sin, He perfectly fulfilled the law; suffered and died upon the cross for the salvation of sinners. He was buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended to His Father, at whose right hand He ever liveth to make intercession for His people. He is the only Mediator, the Prophet, Priest and King of the Church, and Sovereign of the Universe.

VIII. Regeneration

Regeneration is a change of heart, wrought by the Holy Spirit, who quickeneth the dead in trespasses and sins enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the Word of God, and renewing their whole nature, so that they love and practice holiness. It is a work of God's free and special grace alone.

IX. Repentance

Repentance is an evangelical grace, wherein a person being by the Holy Spirit, made sensible of the manifold evil of his sin, humbleth himself for it, with godly sorrow, detestation of it, and self-abhorrence, with a purpose and endeavor to walk before God so as to please Him in all things.

X. Faith

Saving faith is the belief, on God's authority, of whatsoever is revealed in His Word concerning Christ; accepting and resting upon Him alone for justification and eternal life. It is wrought in the heart by the Holy Spirit, and is accompanied by all other saving graces, and leads to a life of holiness.

XI. Justification

Justification is God's gracious and full acquittal of sinners, who believe in Christ, from all sin, through the satisfaction that Christ has made; not for anything wrought in them or done by them; but on account of the obedience and satisfaction of Christ, they receiving and resting on Him and His righteousness by faith.

XII. Sanctification

Those who have been regenerated are also sanctified by God's word

and Spirit dwelling in them. This sanctification is progressive through the supply of Divine strength, which all saints seek to obtain, pressing after a heavenly life in cordial obedience to all Christ's commands.

XIII. Perseverance of the Saints

Those whom God hath accepted in the Beloved, and sanctified by His Spirit, will never totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere to the end; and though they may fall through neglect and temptation, into sin, whereby they grieve the Spirit, impair their graces and comforts, bring reproach on the Church, and temporal judgments on themselves, yet they shall be renewed again unto repentance, and be kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation.

XIV. The Church

The Lord Jesus is the head of the Church, which is composed of all His true disciples, and in Him is invested supremely all power for its government. According to His commandment, Christians are to associate themselves into particular societies or churches; and to each of these churches He hath given needful authority for administering that order, discipline and worship which He hath appointed. The regular officers of a Church are Bishops or Elders, and Deacons.

XV. Baptism

Baptism is an ordinance of the Lord Jesus, obligatory upon every believer, wherein he is immersed in water in the name of the Father, and the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, as a sign of his fellowship with the death and resurrection of Christ, of remission of sins, and of giving himself up to God, to live and walk in newness of life. It is prerequisite to church fellowship, and to participation in the Lord's Supper.

XVI. The Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper is an ordinance of Jesus Christ, to be administered with the elements of bread and wine, and to be observed by His churches till the end of the world. It is in no sense a sacrifice, but is designed to commemorate His death, to confirm the faith and other graces of Christians, and to be a bond, pledge and renewal of their communion with Him, and of their church fellowship.

XVII. The Lord's Day

The Lord's Day is a Christian institution for regular observance, and

should be employed in exercises of worship and spiritual devotion, both public and private, resting from worldly employments and amusements, works of necessity and mercy only excepted.

XVIII. Liberty of Conscience

God alone is Lord of the conscience; and He hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are in anything contrary to His word, or not contained in it. Civil magistrates being ordained of God, subjection in all lawful things commanded by them ought to be yielded by us in the Lord, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake.

XIX. The Resurrection

The bodies of men after death return to dust, but their spirits return immediately to God—the righteous to rest with Him; the wicked, to be reserved under darkness to the judgment. At the last day, the bodies of all the dead, both just and unjust, will be raised.

XX. The Judgment

God hath appointed a day, wherein He will judge the world by Jesus Christ, when every one shall receive according to his deeds; the wicked shall go into everlasting punishment; the righteous, into everlasting life.

Why Join a Church?

Grace Heritage Church Position Statement

Should a Christian join a local church? After all, many opportunities for teaching are available on TV and radio, through books, and on the Internet. Associating with other Christians is also possible through Bible studies, fellowship groups, and Christian friendships. Is membership in a local church merely a tradition, or is it a pattern that Christ himself calls his people to follow? We believe the Scriptures teach that every Christian should seek to be vitally and publicly committed to a biblically faithful local church.

The normal Christian life is a life lived in fellowship with other Christians.

The Bible uses at least four metaphors to describe Christ's people in the context of the local church—a flock (Acts 20:28), a temple (Ephesians 2:21), a body (1 Corinthians 12:27), and a household (1 Timothy 3:15). All of them speak of connectedness and togetherness. All of these pictures underscore the fact that the normal Christian life cannot be conceived apart from fellowship with other Christians.

According to Ephesians 4:11-16, Christ has given gifted men to his people to build them up in the context of the local church. This passage describes a dynamic of spiritual growth in which people acting in the role of individual body parts build up one another as a body. All of God's people have been given spiritual gifts and are called to play their part in building up one another (v. 16, Romans 12:6-8). This dynamic is Christ's ordained method for maturing his people.

Christ has ordained not only a system of growth but a system of accountability as well. Christians are called to confess their sins to one another (James 5:16) and to confront one another when sin takes root (Matthew 18:15-17). Likewise, shepherds are appointed to watch over and protect the sheep (1 Peter 5:1-4). Christ uses committed fellowship in the body to prevent his people from being ensnared by sin.

Joining with other believers allows us to obey Christ in reaching others with the gospel more effectively. We can encourage one another and complement one another with varying spiritual gifts to reach out. We give a clearer testimony as a unified body than we would otherwise as isolated individuals.

If we refuse to live a life of committed fellowship with other Christians, then we have placed ourselves outside of God's household. In effect, we have chosen to live on the streets and forage for scraps in the gutter when we could be feasting in a banquet hall.

The New Testament pattern of membership requires a mutually understood commitment.

Call it "formal" or "official" membership or something else if you will. The Bible assumes that the commitment to a local church was not a mere private resolution. Rather, it was an attachment known to the other members as well as to the God-ordained leadership in the church. The evidence for this practice is clear.

The metaphors mentioned previously underscore this point. No one is a casual member of a household or a flock or a temple or a body. Each of these has organization and structure. There is no doubt whether a part is in or out. Members of a family know with certainty who the other members of the family are. The head of the household knows whom he is to oversee (1 Timothy 3:5). Likewise, shepherds (i.e., elders, overseers or pastors) must know whom they are commanded to watch over (Acts 20:28).

Acts 5:13 speaks very clearly of the concept of joining the church. The Greek word translated "join" means to glue or cement together or to join or fasten firmly together. Clearly, this term meant more than an informal relationship; it involved a serious public commitment. We know from 1 Corinthians 14:16, 23 that unbelievers regularly attended their gatherings. Yet a clear distinction is made between the church and those who merely attended. Furthermore, Paul instructed the church at Corinth about what to do when the "whole church" was gathered together. How would they know when the whole church was gathered unless the members were committed to one another in a public, formal way?

God has entrusted the church with the duty and authority to discipline its members. According to 1 Corinthians 5:11-13, God will judge "those who are outside", but the church must judge "those who are inside". This contrast implies a sharp distinction between these two groups. Confusion is created for believers and unbelievers alike when the distinction between those inside and those outside is blurred. Those who are "inside" but persist in acting like an unbeliever must be "put away" or placed outside the fellowship so that the distinction between the church

and world remains clear before a watching world. On the other hand, those who are genuine believers ought not to remain outside but should come inside the recognized fellowship so that the distinction between the church and the world is maintained. Since unbelievers (those on the "outside") were free to attend the meetings of Christians, putting someone "outside" could not have meant barring them from meetings. Instead, to "put away" must have meant removing them from the membership of the church and refusing to treat them as fellow believers. The church cannot put outside someone who is not inside—someone who has not been formally received into the membership.

Since the church was entrusted with decisions concerning church discipline, how is one to know who makes the decisions if there is no clearly defined membership? According to 2 Corinthians 2:6, discipline decisions were to be made by majority vote of the church. Therefore, the membership of the church had to be clearly defined.

Being a part of a formally defined body greatly increases our assurance of grace. Godly shepherds exercise the "keys of the kingdom" (Matthew 16:19) on our behalf, testifying that our profession of faith is credible. A body of believers also welcomes us formally as one of their own—saints by calling (1 Corinthians 1:2) and citizens of heaven (Philippians 3:20). Our visible joining gives testimony that we are not ashamed to identify with Christ and his people (Mark 8:38). What a blessing from God!

The Bible gives guidance concerning the church we should join.

The scriptures are clear that every believer should embrace the privilege of seeking out a biblically faithful local church to join. The following biblical criteria should be considered when choosing a church:

1. Look for a church that is committed to preaching and teaching the whole counsel of God (all of the Bible, humbly received as God's Word) faithfully, systematically, and accurately, and to applying it to everyday life (Acts 2:42, 20:27; Romans 16:25).
2. Look for a church that worships joyfully and reverently and observes baptism and the Lord's Supper scripturally (Psalm 2:11, Acts 2:41-42).
3. Look for a church that manifests consistent love and service to one another in the body (John 13:34-35).
4. Look for a church that understands the bad news—our standing and our condition before God outside of Christ; and the good news—

Christ's death on behalf of sinners and his continuing work to make us like himself (Titus 2:14). Look for a church that applies these truths constantly to the body of believers and shares them freely with those who do not yet know Christ.

5. Look for a church that takes membership seriously and practices discipline (Matthew 18:18-20).
6. Look for a church that is committed to growing members to maturity (Ephesians 4:16).
7. Look for a church that respects the biblical pattern of spiritually qualified elders and deacons in church leadership (Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Timothy 3:1-15).

In addition to these general principles, a believer should seek to line up his formal membership with the local church he attends most regularly. Do not make the mistake of failing to join a church in a timely manner because "I will only be in this area for a few years" or "I have not found a church yet that I'm totally comfortable with". Remember that there is no perfect church. We should be discerning but not hypercritical. Hebrews 13:17 says, "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." The leaders to whom we submit should be those who can watch over us—that is, those who are nearby and have regular contact with us. Hebrews 13:7 says, "Remember those who led you, who spoke the Word of God to you." Our leaders—those we have formally submitted to—should be those who are our regular teachers.

Church membership involves many responsibilities. Yet to be a part of Christ's body, to be a sheep in his flock, a stone in his temple, and a child in his household is one of the greatest privileges imaginable. Let us rejoice in God's goodness to us and join ourselves to a biblically faithful local church.

Grace Heritage Children's Bible Study Vision and Structure

Our vision for the children of Grace Heritage Church (GHC), each a precious gift from our most gracious Lord, is that they would learn to love and glorify Jesus more and more daily as they grow into becoming mature and committed disciples of Christ. We commit our GHC children's instructional ministry to this purpose above all others.

Our specific desire in developing a teaching ministry for our children is to:

1. Integrate the teaching of God's Word and its application to our children and our adults in such a way that parents are equipped to reinforce these principles and applications in the home and all of us are encouraged to live them out daily in our homes and communities.
2. Meet the unique needs of each child by accounting for different personalities, levels of maturity, ability to grasp and comprehend God's truths, and roles in the family. (Such high goals require continued diligence on the part of both teachers and parent(s). Open communication between parents and teachers is essential.)
3. Offer concrete opportunities to apply this spiritual instruction in the church and in the home to see Christ at work in the lives of our children.
4. Staff its children's teaching ministry with committed men and women whose heart's desire and spiritual gifts fit them to participate in the Christian ministry and instruction of children with dedication and effectiveness.

We believe the Holy Spirit will help us achieve these goals through an adaptable teaching structure on the Lord's Day, sometimes keeping adults and older children (1st grade and above) together and sometimes separating them for age-specific topics and instruction. When adults and children are together, we will choose topics and activities that promote meaningful interaction between children and their parents (and other adults). We will also teach our members to assist new families to engage their children in our integrated learning activities. Our goal is to make the study of God's Word engaging and challenging for all ages. No one, especially our children, should be bored, ignored, or unchallenged in his walk of faith by our Bible study time. We strongly believe that Bible study in which the whole family participates together can be a very

effective means for teaching and applying God's truths in the lives of individuals and families.

However, we acknowledge that not all topics lend themselves to this type of integrated instruction. For these situations, separate instruction will be provided for the children in appropriate age-graded group settings. The time frame for these age-specific studies will vary with the topic being taught. We will consider integrating our children with the adults whenever the subject material permits. Children are always welcome to remain with parents in Bible study at the parents' discretion regardless of the format.

God has entrusted parents with the ultimate responsibility of teaching and nurturing their children in the Lord. GHC will endeavor to encourage and support the efforts of our parents and provide material, instruction, and guidance whenever possible to make this overwhelming task doable with the help and guidance of God's Spirit.

PREPARING FOR THE LORD'S SUPPER

Help me, O God, to be rightly prepared to receive the Supper. Take away any unbelief and overcome any doubts that I may have. Lord Jesus, give me a believing heart that the words "for you" truly are for me. Amen.

Whenever we come to the Lord's Supper, we should remind ourselves of why we come and what we expect to find here.

WHAT IS THE LORD'S SUPPER?

Our church confession states:

The Lord's supper was instituted by the Lord on the same night in which He was betrayed. It is to be observed in His churches to the world's end, for a perpetual remembrance of Him and to show forth the sacrifice of Himself in His death. It was instituted also to confirm saints in the belief that all the benefits stemming from Christ's sacrifice belong to them. Furthermore, it is meant to promote their spiritual nourishment and growth in Christ, and to strengthen the ties that bind them to all the duties they owe to Him. The Lord's supper is also a bond and pledge of the fellowship which believers have with Christ and with one another. (2nd LBCF 30.1)

Those who, as worthy participants, outwardly eat and drink the visible bread and wine in this ordinance, at the same time receive and feed upon Christ crucified, and receive all the benefits accruing from His death. This they do really and indeed, not as if feeding upon the actual flesh and blood of a person's body, but inwardly and by faith. In the supper the body and blood of Christ are present to the faith of believers, not in any actual physical way, but in a way of spiritual apprehension, just as the bread and wine themselves are present to their outward physical senses. (2nd LBCF 30.8)

In short:

- The Supper is a remembrance of Him. [Luke 22:19]
- The Supper is our communion with Him. [1 Cor 10:16]
- The Supper is our fellowship with the body of Christ and especially the local body. [1 Cor 11:18,20]
- The Supper is a commemoration of His death. [1 Cor 11:26]

SHOULD I TAKE THE LORD'S SUPPER?

Christ's invitation to the Supper is for me if I am presently repenting of my sin and trusting Christ for salvation, I am baptized and have publicly confessed Christ, I demonstrate by my life a practical unity with a local church, and I have exercised my responsibility to heal broken relationships with other members of

the body. All who partake apart from Christ's invitation do so under the judgment of the Lord.

WHY SHOULD I COME TO THE LORD'S TABLE?

Christ commands me to come. With this command He gives me this promise:

- As surely as I see with my eyes the bread broken and the cup given, so I know for certain that Christ became a real human being and poured out His blood on the cross.
- As surely as I take the bread and cup in my hand and taste them with my mouth, so I know for certain that Christ nourishes and refreshes my soul with His crucified body and blood. [Mt.26.26-28; 1 Cor 11.23-25]

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR ME TO EAT AND DRINK THE LORD'S SUPPER?

It means that I accept with a believing heart the entire suffering and death of Christ for me. It means that by believing I am forgiven all my sins and now have eternal life.

This is not magic. Eating the bread and drinking the cup does not wash away my sins. Only Christ can remove my sins, and that happens when I put my faith in Him.

WHAT BENEFITS THEN DO I RECEIVE BY COMING TO THE LORD'S SUPPER?

My sins are exposed for what they really are before a Holy God. My heart is inflamed with love for Christ. I am reminded of all that He suffered for me. My faith in Christ is strengthened. I not only hear with my ears what He has done for me, but I can also see, smell, taste, and touch the tokens of His suffering and death on my behalf. My hope that one day I will live with Christ is made more certain. Although His resurrection body is in heaven at the right hand of the Father and I am still here on earth, the Lord's Supper reinforces His promise that He will one day raise my mortal body and take me home to heaven to be with Him.

WHAT IF I KNOW THAT I'M NOT PERFECT?

I may come when I know myself to be a sinner and am displeased with myself because of my sin, yet come trusting in Jesus Christ alone for the forgiveness of my sin. I may come when I know myself to be weak and in need of Christ to strengthen my faith and when I desire Him to enable me to live a better life.

WHY DOES JESUS USE BREAD AND DRINK?

Jesus is teaching me that, just as bread and drink nourish my temporal life here, so His crucified body and poured-out blood truly nourish my spiritual life.

Jesus uses this visible sign and pledge to assure me that all that He has done for me in His perfect obedience, suffering, and death is certainly mine. I take the bread and the cup in my own hand and with my own mouth and am assured that what Jesus gives to sinners is given to me personally.

WHAT SHOULD I THINK AS THE ELEMENTS ARE DISTRIBUTED?

As I take the bread, I remember to thank God

that Christ took up a human body
that He was tempted just as I am
that He was willing to suffer for me
that He lived a hard life in a poor family
that He was willing to be misunderstood

As I take the cup, I remember to thank God

that Jesus poured out His blood for me
that He saves me from the guilt of my sin
that He sets me free from the power of sin
that I now have the righteousness of Christ
that I will live and reign with Christ forever

A PRAYER BEFORE COMMUNION

My Lord Jesus Christ, I have fallen; I long to be strong. For this purpose You have instituted this meal, to help us rekindle and strengthen our faith. Therefore, you have called me to receive it. Lord, it is Your word that invites me. You know my weakness and failings completely. You Yourself have said: Come unto Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. I now come to be helped. Amen.

PRAYERS AFTER COMMUNION

We thank You, Lord God, that You have refreshed us with this precious gift. We ask for Your mercy, that You would use this meal to nurture in us strong faith toward You and genuine love among us all, through Jesus Christ Your Son. Amen.

Almighty and Ever-loving God, we thank You that You have fed us at Your Table with this spiritual food and have assured us of Your goodness toward us. We

thank You that we are members of the Body of Your Son. Assist us with Your grace, so that we may continue in this holy fellowship, and live more fully to Your glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

O God, keep my mind and heart focused on the main thing in the Supper. It is not eating and drinking that brings such great benefits, but the words,

*given and shed for you
for the forgiveness of sins.*

Enable me to continue to believe these words so that I may have confidence that forgiveness of sins is mine. Amen.

RESOURCES FOR PREPARATION FOR THE LORD'S SUPPER

SCRIPTURES FOR MEDITATION

The Penitential Psalms:

Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143

Isaiah 53, 55, 59

Gospel of John 13-17

Romans 3, 6, 8, 12

HYMNS FOR MEDITATION (<http://www.opc.org/books/TH/>):

"Stricken, smitten, and afflicted"

"No, not despairingly"

"We have not known thee as we ought."

"My Jesus, I love thee"

"Jesus, thou Joy of loving hearts"

FOR INSTRUCTION ON THE LORD'S SUPPER, READ:

Second London Baptist Confession of Faith (1689), Chapter 30

<http://wwwFOUNDERS.org/library/bcf/bcf-30.html>

Keach's Catechism, Questions 107-108

<http://www.reformedreader.org/ccc/keachcat.htm>

The Heidelberg Catechism, Questions 78-82

<http://www.reformed.org/documents/heidelberg.html>

John Calvin's Institutes, Book IV, Chapters 14, 17

<http://www.ccel.org/c/calvin/institutes/xml/institutes.iv.iv.xv.xml>

<http://www.ccel.org/c/calvin/institutes/xml/institutes.iv.iv.xviii.xml>

*Adapted from an article by Pastor John Olson at
<http://www.church-creek.org/preparetosup.html>*

PREPARING FOR BAPTISM

Help me, O God, to be rightly prepared to be baptized, to witness the baptism of others, and to reflect biblically on my baptismal experience. Grant me assurance and grace to live the new life that I have publicly embraced and expressed in baptism. Lord Jesus, assure me that the pledge of a good conscience is mine as I consider my baptism rightly received by faith in Christ. Amen.

Both when we are baptized and when we are led to think back upon our baptism, we should remind ourselves why we are baptized and how it can help us afterward.

WHAT IS BAPTISM?

Our church confession states:

BAPTISM is an ordinance of the New Testament instituted by Jesus Christ. It is intended to be, to the person baptized, a sign of his fellowship with Christ in His death and resurrection, and of his being engrafted into Christ, and of the remission of sins. It also indicates that the baptized person has given himself up to God, through Jesus Christ, so that he may live and conduct himself in newness of life.

The only persons who can rightly submit themselves to this ordinance are those who actually profess repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, being willing to yield obedience to Him.

The outward element to be used in this ordinance is water, in which the believer is to be baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Immersion, that is to say, the dipping of the believer in water, is essential for the due administration of this ordinance. (2nd LBCF 29)

In short:

- Baptism signifies
 - our union with Christ, especially in his death and resurrection. [Rom. 6:3-5]
 - the washing away of our sins. [Acts 22:16, 1 Pet. 3:21]
 - the death of our old, sin-controlled self and new life granted by Christ alone. [Rom. 6:5-6]
 - the gift of the Holy Spirit. [Acts 2:38]
- Baptism pledges our repentance from sin. [Acts 2:38]
- Baptism expresses our faith. [Col. 2:12]
- Baptism publicly identifies us with Christ and His church. [1 Cor. 12:13]

- Baptism engages and pledges us to live out the new life given to us in Christ. [Rom. 6:1-11]
- Christ powerfully meets us in baptism as his appointed means to confirm and strengthen our graces for the Christian life. [Acts 22:16, Rom. 6:1-11, 1 Pet. 3:21]

SHOULD I BE BAPTIZED?

Christ's call to baptism is for me if I have not been immersed as a public expression of faith in Christ and repentance for sin and if I now desire to give myself up to Christ by faith as the only Savior of sinners, to repent of my sins, and to engage to walk according to the new life that Christ alone gives.

WHY SHOULD I THINK UPON MY ALREADY-ACCOMPLISHED BAPTISM WHEN I WITNESS ANOTHER BAPTISM?

The writers of Scripture repeatedly refer to baptism to stir us up by way of reminder to the blessings and duties that are signified by baptism. I am in need of being stirred up by way of reminder. Therefore, I should think upon my baptism as follows:

- As surely as I see with my eyes that someone goes into and comes up out of the water, so I know for certain that Christ died a real death, was buried, and was raised to life for the salvation of sinners.
- As surely as I remember my own baptism and the felt reality of going into and coming out of the water, so I know for certain that in Christ I was crucified in my old nature and have been raised with a new nature.
- As surely as I remember my own baptism entered by faith, I have the pledge of a good conscience from God.
- As surely as I remember my own baptism, I am forever engaged before God, the church, and the world to live according to the new life promised by the gospel.

Because baptism is once for all and signifies a once-for-all salvation, the testimony of my baptism stands firm to this day and means the very same things now that it meant the day I was baptized.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR ME TO BE BAPTIZED?

It means that I accept with a believing heart the death and burial and resurrection of Christ for me. It signifies and affirms that by believing I am washed of all my sins and am granted eternal life. It means that I have come out in the open with an observable, life-long commitment to follow Jesus Christ wherever He may lead.

This is not magic. Baptism does not wash away my sins or grant me new life. Only Christ can remove my sins, and that happens when I put my faith in Him. Baptism and faith are simply the outside and the inside of the same thing. But Christ has given me baptism, and I will not neglect His gift.

WHAT BENEFITS THEN DO I RECEIVE BY BEING BAPTIZED?

I confess that death and resurrection—both Christ’s and mine—are necessary to save me. My secret and subjective faith is given visible and concrete expression, and a clear beginning is made to the Christian life. I am publicly received into a family of believers who are gifted to help me live for Christ. I am assured and strengthened by the sovereign work of Christ in this ceremony that He has ordained for my good.

WHY DOES JESUS APPOINT THE USE OF WATER?

Jesus is teaching me that, just as water washes my body, so His work of death and resurrection truly cleanses my soul. Because of my weakness he stoops to “dress” the invisible work of grace in something I can feel and see and experience with the senses.

Jesus uses this visible sign and pledge to assure me that all that He has done for me in His perfect obedience, suffering, and death is certainly mine. I experience the water on my own body and am assured that what Jesus gives to sinners is given to me personally.

WHAT SHOULD I THINK AS THE BAPTISM IS PERFORMED?

As I go (or someone else goes) into the water, I consider

that Christ took up a human body and Himself was baptized
that I cannot even baptize myself much less save myself
that water only washes bodies but Christ washes consciences
that only in Him do I have hope of passing through the waters of judgment.

As I rise (or someone else rises) out of the water, I consider

that Jesus raised Himself from the dead of His own power
that He has washed me from the guilt of my sin
that He has broken the power of sin in my life
that I have been inseparably united to Christ
that I have the indwelling Holy Spirit to bring Christ’s powerful presence to me.

A PRAYER BEFORE MY BAPTISM

My Lord Jesus Christ, I am a sinner; I long to be purified; I long to be done with my sin. Christ is my only hope. I embrace You and all that You offer me in the gospel. Strengthen my faith, and grant me the grace to live for You. Help me from this day forward to manifest the new life that only You give. With Your help, I pledge before the watching world to be Yours forever. Meet with me in these waters and assure me. Pour out Your Spirit upon me that I may walk with Christ in joyful obedience and persevere in faith to the end. Amen.

PRAYERS AFTER A BAPTISM

We thank You, Lord God, that You have blessed us with this powerful, precious gift. We ask for Your gracious help, that You would strengthen and confirm the faith You have granted and we have expressed in our baptism. Help us to renew ourselves to a full-scale demonstration of the new life you have accomplished for us in Christ and applied to us by the Holy Spirit. Nurture a true unity among us because of the common baptism we share. Amen.

Almighty and Ever-loving God, we thank You that You have washed our consciences with Your washing and have assured us of Your grace toward us. We thank You that we are united to Christ and members of the Body with one another. Assist us with Your grace, so that we may continue in this holy fellowship, and live more fully to Your glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

O God, keep my mind and heart focused on the main thing in baptism. It is not the removal of dirt from the body that brings such great benefits, but the working of Christ by faith and his pledge to be with us in grace and power even to the end of the age.

Enable me to continue to believe these truths so that I may have confidence that forgiveness of sins is mine and that Christ will bring me safely to glory. Amen.

RESOURCES TO PREPARE FOR BAPTISM

SCRIPTURES FOR MEDITATION

Psalm 40
Acts 2
Romans 6
Colossians 2

HYMNS FOR MEDITATION (www.cyberhymnal.org):

“Christ Arose”

“Jesus, I My Cross Have Taken”

“My Faith Looks Up To Thee”

“O Thou Who in Jordan”

“Come, Holy Spirit, Dove Divine”

“Jesus, and Shall It Ever Be”

FOR INSTRUCTION ON BAPTISM, READ:

Second London Baptist Confession of Faith (1689), Chapter 30

<http://wwwFOUNDERS.org/library/bcf/bcf-30.html>

Keach’s Catechism, Questions 95, 98-104

<http://www.reformedreader.org/cc/keachcat.htm>

The Heidelberg Catechism, Questions 65-73

<http://www.reformed.org/documents/heidelberg.html>

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