

RIVERVIEW CHURCH

Relational Commitments

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Introduction

The following Relational Commitments and Member Covenant are designed to help the people who attend our church relate to one another in a way that honors God and promotes Christlike relationships. These Commitments cover important relational issues, such as peacemaking and reconciliation, marriage and divorce, protecting children from abuse, biblical counseling, confidentiality, and mutual accountability. Of course we strive to make sure each person is firmly rooted in our commitment to the gospel and the Word of God.

Therefore, as you read our Relational Commitments, we encourage you to study the Bible passages that are cited next to particular provisions. We want you to be confident that these Commitments are thoroughly biblical. If your study does not answer all of your questions and concerns, please do not hesitate to approach our leaders, who will be happy to talk with you about these principles.

We encourage you to expressly embrace these Commitments and, if you are not already a member, formally join our church by going through our membership process which includes affirming the Member Covenant provided at the end of this document.

If you are not yet ready to become a member, you and your family are certainly welcome to attend our worship services, find fellowship in a small group, and seek assistance from our leaders. Please understand that if you continue relating to us in any of these ways, we will assume that you have consented to these Commitments, even if you have not yet formally joined the church. (See the story *A Tale of Two Families* on the next page for why these Commitments apply to both members and attendees.)

As followers of Christ, we will do all we can to encourage you to grow in faith and godliness and to live a disciplined life that honors our Lord Jesus Christ and enhances the witness of His church.

The Elders of Riverview Church

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A Tale of Two Families

Two boys, John and Luke, lost their mother at a young age. When they were in their teens, their father was reported to have died when his plane crashed into the ocean. The boys had no other relatives, so two neighboring families took them in.

The Friendly family did all they could to make John feel welcome in their home. They gave him his own bedroom, provided his meals, and encouraged him to join in family activities. Not wanting him to feel any pressure, they did not explain to him how their family functions, the things they were committed to, or family expectations. Instead they hoped that he would notice what they valued, how their other children behaved, and that he would decide on his own to think and act the same way.

Not knowing exactly what was expected of him, John frequently disappointed the family by violating unspoken expectations. Feeling judged and unconnected to the family, he became increasingly independent. He came and went at any hour, played loud music, and spent long hours in his room with many different girls. When Mr. Friendly finally tried to talk with him about his behavior, John said, "I'm not your son, so you have no right to tell me how to live my life. I like having a bedroom and meals whenever I decide to be here, but I'll still do whatever seems right to me."

Tensions continued to build, and finally Mr. Friendly felt forced to ask John to leave. Fortunately for John, there was another Friendly family in town, and they were happy to take him in. But there the cycle started all over again.

John's brother had an entirely different experience. Luke was taken in by the Loving family. They wanted him to feel welcome, so they gave him a room, provided meals, and encouraged him to join in family activities. But they also wanted to avoid misunderstandings and conflict. So shortly after Luke arrived, Mr. Loving explained the family rules to Luke, so he would know how to get along with the rest of the family. He said, "Even though you are not my son, I will be glad to look out for you the best I can. But as long as you are in my home, I also will expect you to behave as my other children do."

Like any normal teenager, Luke sometimes broke the rules. When he did, Mr. Loving sat down with him, pointed out what he'd done wrong, and held him accountable to the same standards he had established for his other children. Luke sometimes resented this discipline, but he eventually realized it was always done in love, and it kept him out of a lot of trouble.

After a few months, Mr. Loving approached Luke and said, "Since you are living here like part of the family, we would like to make it official. If you feel this is where you'd like to stay, we'd like to adopt you and make you our son."

Luke gladly accepted and formally committed himself to the family. In doing so, he changed from being an orphan who merely resided in the home to being a son who willingly accepted and enjoyed all of the same responsibilities and privileges of his new brothers and sisters.

Which family do you suppose provided the best environment for a boy to be raised and thrive? The Friendly family, who were kind enough to give John a place to hang out, but could not bring themselves to give him any boundaries? Or the Loving family, who welcomed Luke, held him accountable to the same rules as the rest of the family, and invited him to be a son?

The answer is obvious. And there is a real Father who one day will evaluate the way we care for the people who come into our church family. Therefore, we are glad to welcome people and give them a place to worship, grow, and serve. But being "friendly" is not good enough. We want to be loving *as God defines loving* (Heb. 10:24; 12:5-6). Therefore, we will encourage and expect everyone who attends our church to live out the biblical principles that are summarized in these Relational Commitments.

When people have lived like part of our family for a while, we will encourage them to “make it official.” Living like a spiritual orphan, with its illusion of independence and self-determination, may seem appealing to some. But it cannot compare to the security, privileges, and sense of belonging that come from joining a biblical church and living as truly committed brothers and sisters in the family of God.

Commitment to the Gospel

The first of our Relational Commitments is the most important. It is the foundation on which all others stand and the glue that holds them all together. It is our commitment to the gospel.

The apostle Paul said to the church in Corinth,

Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. (1 Cor. 15:1-4)

Paul’s priority was always the gospel because he knew that unless we get the gospel right (i.e. hold firmly to the word he preached), then we believe in vain. Nothing more or less than the gospel saves. It is “the power of God unto salvation for all who believe” (Rom. 1:16).

There are many reasons why people may commit to a local church body, but there is only one reason that possesses any lasting value. Only the gospel redeems people back to one God, from one central problem, by one Savior, through one faith.

What Is the Gospel?

Paul’s presentation of the gospel in 1 Cor. 15:1-4 is not academic or lengthy, but rather rudimentary. Yet, all the key components are there. Nothing is lacking if we know what we should be looking for. What is the gospel then? Well, Paul’s essential structure is this:

Human beings have one problem, “our sins.” We’re stuck in them. However, salvation from our sins comes in that “Christ died for our sins . . . was buried . . . and was raised”; and all this “according to the Scriptures.” This implies that God is both the judge of the sinner and the author of the good news. God is the central figure of the gospel! Yet, our participation in the benefits of the gospel is conditioned upon our “holding firmly” to this message and this message alone. Though Paul doesn’t use the word “faith” here in this context, it is exactly what he is talking about. The gospel becomes ours through faith.

In summary, the gospel begins with God, addresses man’s need, according to Christ’s death and resurrection, through the gift of faith. Therefore, we could summarize Paul’s thought with four words: God, Man, Christ, Response.

Paul wasn’t the only apostle to emphasize these crucial truths. In Peter’s sermon recorded in Acts 3:18-19, we see them again:

But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Christ would suffer. Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord.

Or consider the message Peter preached to Cornelius and his family in Acts 10:39-43,

We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They

killed him by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

God. Man. Christ. Response. It's all there and it's beautiful! Therefore, our commitment to the gospel provides the basis for all our other relational commitments. Through the gospel we have peace with God (Rom. 5:1), we can experience the peace of God in our lives (Rom. 8:1; Gal. 5:22), and are equipped with what we need to live in peace with others (Rom. 12:18; 2 Cor. 13:11).

Commitment to Peacemaking and Reconciliation

Our church is committed to glorifying God by building a “culture of peace” that reflects God’s peace and the power of the gospel of Christ in our lives. As we stand in the light of the Cross, we realize that bitterness, unforgiveness, and broken relationships are not appropriate for the people whom God has reconciled to himself through the sacrifice of his only Son (John 13:34–35; Eph. 4:29–32; Col. 3:12–14).

Therefore, we look to the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit for guidance on how we can respond to conflict in a way that will honor God, promote justice, reconcile relationships, and preserve our witness for Christ. As God gives us his wisdom and grace, we are committed to actively teaching and encouraging one another to live out the following biblical principles of peacemaking and reconciliation:

Personal Peacemaking

- Whenever we are faced with conflict, our primary goal will be to glorify God with our thoughts, words, and actions (1 Cor. 10:31).
- We will try to get the “logs” out of our own eyes before focusing on what others may have done wrong (Matt. 7:3–5).
- We will seek to overlook minor offenses (Prov. 19:11).
- We will refrain from all gossip, backbiting, and slander (Eph. 4:29). If we have a problem with others, we will talk *to* them, not *about* them.
- We will make “charitable judgments” toward one another by believing the best about each other until we have facts that prove otherwise (1 Cor. 13:7).
- If an offense is too serious to overlook, or if we think someone may have something against us, we will go promptly to seek reconciliation (Matt. 5:23–24; 18:15).
- When we offer a word of correction to others, we will do so graciously and gently, with the goal of serving and restoring them rather than beating them down (Prov. 12:18; Eph. 4:29; Gal. 6:1).
- When someone tries to correct us, we will ask God to help us resist prideful defensiveness and to welcome correction with humility (Ps. 141:5; Prov. 15:32).
- When others repent, we will ask God to give us grace to forgive them as he has forgiven us (Eph. 4:32).
- When we discuss or negotiate substantive issues, we will look out for others’ interests as well as our own (Phil. 2:3–4).

Assisted Peacemaking

- When two of us cannot resolve a conflict privately, we will seek the mediation of wise people in our church and listen humbly to their counsel (Matt. 18:16; Phil. 4:2-3). If our dispute is with a church leader, we will look to other leaders for assistance.
- When informal mediation does not resolve a dispute, we will seek formal assistance from our church leaders or people they appoint, and we will submit to their counsel and correction (Matt. 18:17-20).
- When we have a business or legal dispute with another Christian, we will make every reasonable effort to resolve the conflict within the body of Christ through biblical mediation or arbitration, rather than going to civil court (1 Cor. 6:1-8). If the other party attends another church, our leaders will offer to cooperate with the leaders of that church to resolve the matter.
- If a person coming to our church has an unresolved conflict with someone in his former church, we will require and assist him to make every reasonable effort to be reconciled to the other person before joining our church (Matt. 5:23-24; Rom. 12:18).
- When a conflict involves matters of doctrine or church discipline, we will submit to the procedures set forth in our *Commitment to Accountability and Church Discipline*.
- If we have a legal dispute with or within our church and cannot resolve it internally through the steps given above, we will obey God's command not to go into the civil court (1 Cor. 6:1-8). Instead, we will submit the matter to mediation.
- Above all, we pray that our ministry of peacemaking will bring praise to our Lord Jesus Christ and lead others to know his infinite love and peace.

Commitment to Preserving Marriages

We find it helpful, in light of our ever-changing culture, to express our commitment to the biblical definition of marriage as *the lifelong, exclusive relationship between one man and one woman* (Gen. 1:27-28; 2:20-25; Matt. 19:4-6). God designed marriage to reflect the beauty and permanence of Christ's loving relationship with his bride, the church (Eph. 5:22-33; Rev. 19:7). This relationship can only be accurately reflected by the traditional biblical definition of marriage. God also designed marriage to provide mutual companionship through life's joys and difficulties, to create stability for raising and nurturing children, and to give strength and cohesiveness to society in general.

With this commitment to the biblical definition of marriage firmly in place, we are also committed to preserving marriages and preventing divorce. In our society, marriages fail under a wide range of circumstances. Many people have gone through a divorce before entering a relationship with Christ, and others have experienced divorce through no desire or decision of their own. Still others may have divorced because of their own wrongful choices, but have since experienced the repentance and forgiveness offered through our Lord Jesus. We want all of you to know that you are welcome in our church.

Because our church recognizes both the divine origin of marriage and the devastating effects of divorce, we are deeply committed to preserving marriages and preventing divorce. Toward this end, we will devote a portion of our teaching ministry to strengthening marriages and families. We require and provide thorough premarital counseling to ensure that couples enter into marriage advisedly and are well prepared for its many challenges.

We also encourage couples to nurture their marriages by participating in small groups in which people can grow together in their love for God and for one another (Heb. 10:24–25). As relationships deepen within these groups, we expect husbands to spur each other on in loving and leading their wives, and wives to encourage one another in respecting and submitting to their husbands (Eph. 5:33).

Our leaders are committed to providing counsel and support to couples who face marital difficulties. We will discourage couples from using divorce as a way to run away from issues that instead can be resolved through Spirit-guided counseling, repentance, forgiveness, and ongoing discipleship.

We recognize, however, that there are times when God permits a believer to seek a divorce without sinning against God or a spouse. We believe divorce is permissible when the other spouse has been sexually involved with a person outside the marriage (Matt. 5:31–32), or when an unbelieving spouse abandons a marriage (1 Cor. 7:12–16).

Even though divorce is *permissible* in these situations, it is not *required*. God patiently bears with our sins, repeatedly calls us to repentance, and freely forgives us when we turn back to him (Ps. 103:8–12; Isa. 55:7). Even when divorce is biblically permissible, the wronged spouse can imitate God's love by offering a straying spouse these same evidences of grace (Eph. 5:1–2). This may involve patiently bearing neglect or lovingly confronting serious sin (Col. 3:12–14; Gal. 6:1). In some situations, love may require asking the church to initiate formal discipline to rescue a spouse and a marriage from the devastating effects of unrepentant sin (Matt. 18:12–20).

Just as church leaders are involved in the beginning of a marriage, they should be involved when it ends. Therefore, when someone is considering divorce, he or she is expected to bring the situation to our leaders and cooperate with them as they determine whether grounds exist, promote repentance and reconciliation, and exhaust redemptive discipline, if appropriate.

Separated spouses who have filed for divorce should consider themselves married until the day a civil court issues a divorce decree. Therefore, until that time they should refrain from dating or any other activity that is inconsistent with being married.

We are always interested in helping divorced people restore their previous marriage if that is possible and appropriate. We will support a decision to pursue a second marriage to a different person only when we have determined that it is biblically valid and that every reasonable effort has been made to seek and grant forgiveness of the sins that contributed to a previous divorce.

We rejoice that divorce never diminishes God's free offer of love, grace, and forgiveness. He cherishes and loves every person who has been unwillingly divorced, as does our church. God graciously extends this same love to those who have wrongly left their marriages. That love moves him (and us) to call them to repentance, to encourage and aid reconciliation when possible, and to gladly restore those who have done all they can to rebuild broken relationships.

Commitment to Protecting Our Children

The Bible tells us that children are a blessing from God, and he gives parents the responsibility to train their children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Ps. 127:3–5; Eph. 6:1–4). Jesus Christ has also entrusted his church with the responsibility of helping parents shepherding their children toward maturity. Therefore, the church should be a safe and blessed place for children, where they can grow, play, form friendships, and learn to experience and share the love of Christ.

Since sin affects every person and organization in the world, however, it is possible that children could be harmed even during church activities. We cannot guarantee that such things will never happen within our fellowship, but we are committed to taking every reasonable precaution to protect our children from foreseeable harm. This commitment includes, but is not limited to, the following steps:

- We do not allow anyone to work regularly with our youth (children or teenagers) unless he or she has regularly attended our church for at least six months.
- We do not allow anyone to teach our youth unless he or she is a formal church member or in the process of becoming a member.
- We require all of our youth workers to complete a training and screening process.
- We require that, whenever practicable, youth workers serve in teams of two or more and be visible to other workers.

If a child is harmed in our church, we will take immediate steps to inform the parents, to accept responsibility for our role in the situation, and to hold offending youth workers fully responsible for their actions. We will also evaluate our practices and procedures, considering changes that might reduce the likelihood of such harm to children in the future.

Commitment to Biblical Counseling

All Christians struggle with sin and the effect it has on our lives and our relationships. Whenever believers are unable to overcome sinful attitudes or behaviors through personal efforts, God calls them to seek assistance from other believers, and when needed from church leaders, who have the responsibility of providing pastoral counseling and oversight (Rom. 15:14; Gal. 6:1-2; 2 Tim. 4:1-2; Heb. 13:17; James 5:16). Therefore, this church encourages and enjoins its people to seek counsel from and confess sins to each other and to our leaders.

We believe that the Bible provides sufficient guidance and instruction for faith and life (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Therefore, our counseling is based on scriptural principles rather than those of secular psychology or psychiatry. Unless they specifically state otherwise, none of those who counsel in this church are trained or licensed as psychotherapists or mental health professionals, nor should they be expected to follow the methods of such specialists.

God calls our leaders to set an example for us “in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity” (1 Tim. 4:12). Therefore, we expect them to treat counselees with every respect and courtesy, and to avoid even the appearance of impropriety or impurity during counseling (Eph. 5:3). We also expect counselees to promptly report to the leadership team any conduct that fails to meet this standard.

There are occasions when our leaders do not have sufficient time to meet with every person who asks for counseling. At such times we expect our leaders to give first priority to people who have formally joined the church (Gal. 6:10), and to serve those who only attend the church by referring them to another source of godly counsel.

Commitment to Godly Speech and Confidentiality

The Bible teaches that Christians should carefully guard any personal and private information that others reveal to them. Protecting confidences is a sign of Christian love and respect (Matt. 7:12). It also discourages

harmful gossip (Prov. 26:20), invites confession (Prov. 11:13), and thus encourages people to seek needed counseling. Since these goals are essential to the ministry of the gospel and the work of the local church, all members and attendees are expected to refrain from gossip and to respect the confidences of others. In particular, our leaders will carefully protect all information that they receive through pastoral counseling, subject to the following guidelines.

Although confidentiality is to be respected as much as possible, there are times when it is appropriate to reveal certain information to others. In particular, when our leaders believe it is biblically necessary, they may disclose confidential information to appropriate people in the following circumstances:

- When a leader is uncertain of how to counsel a person about a particular problem and needs to seek advice from other leaders in our church or, if the person attends another church, from the leaders of that church (Prov. 11:14);
- When the person who disclosed the information, or any other person, is in imminent danger of serious harm unless others intervene (Prov. 24:11–12);
- When a person refuses to repent of sin and it becomes necessary to promote repentance through accountability and redemptive church discipline (Matt. 18:15–20); or,
- When leaders are required by law to report suspected abuse (Rom. 13:1).

Commitment to Accountability and Church Discipline

Like all of our Relational Commitments, the following applies to all those who attend our church, both members and attendees.

Signs of God's Love

God has established the church to reflect his character, wisdom, and glory in the midst of a fallen world (Eph. 3:10–11). He loves his church so much that he sent his Son to die for her (Eph. 5:25). His ultimate purpose for his church is to present her as a gift to his Son; thus Scripture refers to the church as the “bride” of Christ (Rev. 19:7). For this reason the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are continually working to purify the church and bring her to maturity (Eph. 5:25–27).

This does not mean that God expects the church to be made up of perfectly pure people. He knows that the best of churches are still companies of sinners who wrestle daily with remaining sin (1 John 1:8; Phil. 3:12). Therefore, it would be unbiblical for us to expect church members to live perfectly. What we can do, however, is confess our common struggle with sin and our mutual need for God’s mercy and grace. We can also spur one another on toward maturity by promoting mutual accountability to God’s standard of righteousness; that is, to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love your neighbor as you love yourself (Mark 12:30–31; Heb. 10:24–25).

The Bible sometimes refers to this process of mutual encouragement and accountability as “discipline.” The Bible never presents church discipline as being negative, legalistic, or harsh, as modern society does. True discipline originates from God himself and is always presented as a sign of genuine love. “The Lord disciplines those he loves” (Heb. 12:6). “Blessed is the man you discipline, O LORD, the man you teach from your law” (Ps. 94:12). “Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline” (Rev. 3:19).

God’s discipline in the church, like the discipline in a good family, is intended to be primarily positive, instructive, and encouraging. This process, which is sometimes referred to as “formative discipline,” involves

preaching, teaching, prayer, personal Bible study, small group fellowship, and countless other enjoyable activities that challenge and encourage us to love and serve God more wholeheartedly.

On rare occasions God's discipline, like the discipline in a family with growing children, also may have a corrective purpose. When we forget or disobey what God has taught us, he corrects us. One way he does this is to call the church to seek after us and lead us back onto the right track. This process, which is sometimes called "corrective" or "restorative" discipline, is likened in Scripture to a shepherd seeking after a lost sheep.

If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off (Matt. 18:12-13).

Thus, restorative or corrective discipline is never to be done in a harsh, vengeful, or self-righteous manner. It is always to be carried out in humility and love, with the goals of restoring someone to a close walk with Christ (Matt. 18:15; Gal. 6:1), protecting others from harm (1 Cor. 5:6), and showing respect for the honor and glory of God's name (1 Pet. 2:12).

Biblical discipline is similar to the discipline we value in other aspects of life. We admire parents who consistently teach their children how to behave properly and lovingly discipline them when they disobey. We value music teachers who bring out the best in their students by teaching them proper technique and consistently pointing out their errors so they can play a piece properly. And we applaud athletic coaches who diligently teach their players to do what is right and correct them when they make a mistake, so that the team works well together and can compete for the championship.

The same principles apply to the family of God. We, too, need to be taught what is right and to be lovingly corrected when we do something contrary to what God teaches us in his Word. Therefore, we as a church are committed to help one another obey God's commands to be holy and self-controlled (1 Pet. 1:13-16; 2 Pet. 1:5-9).

The leaders of our church recognize that God has called them to an even higher level of accountability regarding their faith and conduct (Ja. 3:1; 1 Tim. 5:19-20). Therefore, they are committed to listening humbly to loving correction from each other and from any member in our church, and, if necessary, to submitting themselves to the corrective discipline of our body.

Private, Personal and Informal

God gives every believer grace to be self-disciplined. "For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline" (2 Tim. 1:7). Thus discipline always begins as a personal matter and usually remains that way, as each of us studies God's Word, seeks him in prayer, and draws on his grace to identify and change sinful habits and grow in godliness.

But sometimes we are blind to our sins or so tangled in them that we cannot get free on our own. This is why the Bible says, "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently" (Gal. 6:1). In obedience to this command, we are committed to giving and receiving loving correction within our church whenever a sin (whether in word, behavior, or doctrine) seems too serious to overlook (Prov. 19:11).

If repeated private conversations do not lead another person to repentance, Jesus commands that we ask other brothers or sisters to get involved. "If he will not listen, take one or two others along" (Matt. 18:16). If informal conversations with these people fail to resolve the matter, then we may seek the involvement of more influential people, such as a small group leader, Sunday school teacher, or church leader. If even these

efforts fail to bring a brother or sister to repentance, and if the issue is too serious to overlook, we will move into what may be called “formal discipline.”

Formal Discipline May Involve the Entire Church

If an individual persistently refuses to listen to personal and informal correction to turn from speech or behavior that the Bible defines as sin, Jesus commands us to “tell it to the church” (Matt. 18:17a). This first involves informing one or more church leaders about the situation. If the offense is not likely to cause imminent harm to others, our leaders may approach the individual privately to personally establish the facts and encourage repentance of any sin they discover. The individual will be given every reasonable opportunity to explain and defend his or her actions. If the individual recognizes his sin and repents, the matter usually ends there, unless a confession to additional people is needed.

If an offense is likely to harm others or lead them into sin, or cause division or disruption, our leaders may accelerate the entire disciplinary process and move promptly to protect the church (Rom. 16:17; 1 Cor. 5:1–13; Titus 3:10–11).

As the disciplinary process progresses, our leaders may impose a variety of sanctions to encourage repentance, including but not limited to private and public admonition, withholding of the Lord’s Supper, removal from office, withdrawal of normal fellowship, and, as a last resort, removal from membership (Matt. 5:23–24; Matt. 18:17; 2 Thes. 3:6–15).

If the straying individual does not repent in response to private appeals from our leaders, our leaders may inform others in the church who may be able to influence that individual or be willing to pray for him or her, as well as people who might be harmed or affected by that individual’s behavior.¹ This step may include close friends, a small group, a Sunday school class, or the entire congregation if our leaders deem it to be appropriate (Matt. 18:17, 1 Tim. 5:20).²

If, after a reasonable period of time, the individual still refuses to change, then our leaders may formally remove him or her from membership and normal fellowship. They also may inform the church body of their decision and instruct the congregation to treat the individual as an unbeliever. This means that we will no longer treat him as a fellow Christian. Instead of having casual, relaxed fellowship with the individual, we will look for opportunities to lovingly bring the gospel to him, remind him of God’s holiness and mercy, and call him to repent and put his faith in Christ (Matt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:5; 1 Tim. 1:20).

We realize that our natural human response to correction often is to hide or run away from accountability (Gen. 3:8–10). To avoid falling into this age-old trap and to strengthen our church’s ability to rescue us if we are caught in sin, we agree not to run away from this church to avoid corrective discipline. Therefore, we waive our right to withdraw from membership or accountability if discipline is pending against us. Although we are free to stop attending the church at any time, we agree that a withdrawal while discipline is pending will not be given effect until the church has fulfilled its God-given responsibilities to encourage our repentance and restoration, and to bring the disciplinary process to an orderly conclusion, as described in these commitments (Matt. 18:12–20; Gal. 6:1; Heb. 13:17).

If an individual leaves the church while discipline is in effect or is being considered, and our leaders learn that he or she is attending another church, they may inform that church of the situation and ask its leaders to encourage the individual to repent and be reconciled to the Lord and to any people he or she has offended. This action is intended both to help the individual find freedom from his sin and to warn the other church about the harm that he or she might do to their members (see Matt. 18:12–20; Rom. 16:17; 1 Cor. 5:1–13; 3 John 1:9–10).³

Loving restoration always stands at the heart of the disciplinary process. If an individual repents, and our leaders confirm his or her sincerity, we will rejoice together and gladly imitate God's forgiveness by restoring the person to fellowship within the body (see Matt. 18:13; Luke 15:3-7, 11-32; 2 Cor. 2:5-11; Col. 3:12-14).

People who have been excluded from another church will not be allowed to partake of the sacraments in our church, to become members, or to participate in the regular fellowship of our church until they have repented of their sins and made a reasonable effort to be reconciled, or our leaders have determined that the discipline of the former church was not biblically appropriate.

As we pursue the blessings of accountability and church discipline, we will hold fast to the promise of Scripture: "God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it" (Heb. 12:10-11).

Become a Member of Our Church

Becoming a member of a church can be a life-changing decision. The preaching, teaching, fellowship, opportunities to use your gifts, and mutual accountability that you experience in a church can dramatically change your relationship with the Lord and with the people he places in your life. Therefore, we want you to take time to get to know our church, learn how we are fulfilling God's command to build his kingdom, and see how we love and relate to one another in daily life.

If you like what you see in our church, we invite you to attend our membership class. During that class you can learn more about our church's doctrines and vision for ministry, and about the privileges and responsibilities of formal membership. Attending the class will *not* obligate you to become a member.

If attending the membership class convinces you that joining our church will help to you grow in your ability to love and serve God, we would be delighted to have you become a member of our body. By joining our church, you will demonstrate in a concrete way your desire to unite with us to advance Christ's kingdom. Membership also will allow you to enjoy ministry opportunities and privileges that are not available to people who only attend our church, including the following:

- You may *participate and vote in congregational meetings*, where we seek to discern and plan how to follow God's vision for our church.
- You will be eligible to *teach the children and youth* in our church (after completing our standard screening process).
- You can seek *more opportunities to use your spiritual gifts*, including those of teaching, serving, and leading within the body.
- If you need counseling or support from our leaders when their time is limited, *your request for assistance will take precedence* over requests from people who have not joined the church.

We believe that God's plan is for every Christian to submit to whatever membership process the leadership of a local church has outlined for its people. To learn why, please read the following resources which provide a solid summary of the Bible's teaching on membership:

- *Stop Dating the Church* by Joshua Harris.
- *Spiritual Disciplines Within the Church* by Donald Whitney.
- *9 Marks of a Healthy Church* by Mark Dever.

All three books are available in our church library. You may also meet with our leaders, who would be happy to discuss any questions or concerns you may have about membership.

Member Covenant

Our Commitments to One Another in the Sight of God

Having been led, as we believe, by the Spirit of God to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior, and, on the profession of our faith, having been baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, we do now, in the presence of God and this assembly, most solemnly and joyfully enter into covenant with one another as one body in Christ.

We engage, therefore, by the aid of the Holy Spirit, to walk together in Christian love, to strive for the advancement of this church in knowledge, holiness, and comfort; to promote its prosperity and spirituality; to sustain its worship, ordinances, discipline, and doctrines; and to contribute cheerfully and regularly to the support of the ministry, the expenses of the church, the relief of the poor, and the spread of the gospel through all nations.

We also engage to maintain family and private devotion; to educate our children in the Christian faith; to seek the salvation of our family and acquaintances; to walk circumspectly in the world; to be just in our dealings, faithful in our activities, and exemplary in our behavior; to avoid all gossiping, backbiting, and excessive anger; to practice moderation; and avoid all substances and practices that bring unwarranted harm to the body or jeopardize our own or another's faith.

We further engage to watch over one another in brotherly love; to remember one another in prayer; to aid one another in sickness and distress; to cultivate Christian sympathy in feeling and courtesy in speech; and to be slow to take offense, but always ready for reconciliation and mindful of the command of our Savior to secure it without delay.

We acknowledge that implicit within this covenant is the consent to be governed by the Relational Commitments that have been officially adopted by the church and that address peacemaking and reconciliation, accountability and church discipline, marriage and divorce, counseling and confidentiality, and the protection of our children.

Endnotes

1. For example, it is not uncommon for a person to attend a church, develop relationships of trust, persuade people to give him money to invest, and then fail to return the money as promised. Senior citizens are particularly vulnerable to these schemes, and many people have lost much of what they had saved for retirement. When such sinful men are discovered, they usually leave a church, but continue to prey on members who have not heard about their schemes. If our leaders found such a man in our church, they would call him to repent and confess his wrongs. If he refused, they would bring him under formal discipline, and also warn the congregation not to trust him with their money.

2. If our leaders inform our entire congregation about a disciplinary situation, they have discretion whether to divulge the individual's name. This decision usually will depend on a variety of factors, such as: how widely known the situation already is; whether there might be people in the congregation who could persuade the individual to repent; or whether the congregation needs to be on guard against potential harm he might cause (see previous endnote). Even if our leaders decide it is not necessary to identify an individual specifically, they may still inform the congregation of the general situation and the disciplinary steps they have followed. This general information can help to enlist wide prayer support, let the congregation know that our leaders are obeying the Lord's command to seek after those who stray, and warn people who may be flirting with secret sin that they, too, may face discipline if they do not turn back to God.

3. For example, if we confronted a man in our church for seducing young women, or for acting inappropriately around little children, or for sowing gossip and division, and he left and started attending another church, we would consider it our duty to urge the leaders of that church to counsel with him and to protect their people from his harmful behavior.