

THE CORE VALUES AND PRACTICES OF GREAT COMMISSION CHURCHES

2006

INTRODUCTION

This paper is a written description of the commonly held core values and practices embraced by the individuals and churches in the Great Commission Churches (GCC). Great Commission Churches is a U.S. based association of churches that is part of the larger Great Commission church movement worldwide. This movement began in 1970 and is today an international fellowship of church movements and ministries, in North America, Latin America, Europe, and Asia.

The Purpose of this Paper

As a movement of churches that seeks to be an active part of God's movement in the hearts of men and women everywhere, Great Commission Churches values the Scriptures as our ultimate authority in faith and practice. We also value the leading of the Holy Spirit in each individual and in each church. This paper describes—in general terms—how the individuals and churches in this movement have interpreted and applied the Scriptures and how the Holy Spirit has led this movement. To whatever extent the reader detects that this paper is inconsistent with the Scriptures we welcome input so that this movement can be more faithful to God's word.

The purpose of this paper is to explain, not exclude; to build bridges, not walls; to inspire, not to restrict. The goal is to give an honest explanation of the commonly held values and practices of Great Commission Churches to those within as well as those outside of our movement. Our hope is that as we give a clear and honest picture of the Great Commission Churches, we will stimulate an increased cooperation with believers across the globe, for the advancement of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

How this Paper is Used

1. This paper helps build cooperation between churches within our association in church planting, nationally and internationally, by clarifying our unity in our values and practices.
2. This paper provides direction for what is taught at GCC conferences.
3. This paper is a guide for developing leadership training materials in Great Commission Churches.
4. This paper serves the rest of the body of Christ who desire to learn more about the beliefs and practices of our movement.
5. This paper gives clarity to churches joining our movement as to the commonly held beliefs and practices in Great Commission Churches.

This Paper and the Local Church

Each church in our association has final human authority under Christ over its own affairs. Therefore, diversity exists as to how these values and practices are applied in

churches in our association. We respect that diversity. In no way is this paper intended to hinder local churches from following the leading of the Holy Spirit. Rather Great Commission Churches strongly affirms the importance of local churches obeying Jesus Christ and the Scriptures as their supreme authority.

To be a member church in our association, each church must agree to the Great Commission Churches Statement of Faith and must honor this Core Values paper. This means that—unlike with the Statement of Faith—a church may disagree with parts of the following paper and still be a member of Great Commission Churches, as long as it honors the teaching of these values and practices in GCC conferences and ministry programs.

What should a member church do if it disagrees with this paper? In such cases, Great Commission Churches first strongly reaffirms our unity in Christ with that church as partners in the Great Commission. Our unity is centered on Jesus Christ and His mission to advance the gospel. Great Commission Churches also values the giving of mutual honor: The church honoring leaders in Great Commission Churches as they teach these values and practices in GCC conferences and ministry programs; and Great Commission Churches honoring that church as it follows its own Scriptural convictions.

If a member church disagrees with this paper, we invite dialogue for two reasons. First, it is possible that the paper will be revised after the dialogue. (This paper is reviewed regularly to make sure that it is Scriptural and that it truly reflects the views of the churches in our association.) Second, interaction on the points of disagreement will hopefully result in greater relational unity and a greater mutual understanding of the Scriptures, which will honor Jesus Christ and lead to a greater teamwork for the gospel.

A Word about Practices

Great Commission Churches decided to include not only values but common practices in this paper. The description of practices serves to paint a clearer picture of how most churches in our association have lived out their values. This becomes both instructional as well as inspirational to other churches. At the same time we want to make two points about practices:

1. Practices vary from individual to individual, from church to church and from culture to culture. Therefore, Great Commission Churches respects the Holy Spirit's leading of individuals and churches in how they practice their faith in Jesus Christ.
2. A concern has been raised concerning legalism. There can be a tendency to focus on the practices rather than the grace of God, and to take good practices and disciplines and turn them into legalistic requirements. Our prayer to God and our exhortation to the churches is that this tendency be resisted. Instead, please view this description of practices simply as practical examples of how the grace and truth of God is generally applied in churches in our association.

Finally, the Lord Jesus Christ, who died on the cross and rose from the dead, gave His church the Great Commission to fulfill. Our hope is that this paper will be an inspiration and an exhortation to believers in Jesus Christ to follow the Holy Spirit's leading as God multiplies Great Commission churches throughout the world.

I. THE GRACE OF GOD

A. VALUES

1. God's grace through Jesus Christ is our bedrock and power supply for our salvation, our life in Christ and our ministry, both individually and as churches (2 Corinthians 9:8).
2. God's grace to those who believe in Christ includes the following:
 - a. Our wonderful forgiveness through the death of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:7).
 - b. God's passionate and unconditional love for us in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 3:19).
 - c. The truth that eternal life is a free gift from God, received by faith apart from our religious or moral works (Ephesians 2:8-9).
 - d. The power and strengthening God gives us by the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 3:16).
 - e. Our glorious position in Christ as new creations (2 Corinthians 5:17).
 - f. The power given by God to Christians to overcome the world, the flesh, and the devil as well as to preserve us in trials and difficult circumstances (1 Corinthians 10:13).
 - g. The supernatural power to do ministry (John 15:5; 1 Corinthians 15:10; 2 Corinthians 12:9).
 - h. The future grace we will receive in heaven and at the return of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:13).
 - i. The grace we receive from God to meet whatever need we may have (Hebrews 4:16).
3. Grace will lead to works, and result in fruit in people's lives (Ephesians 2:8-10).
4. Those who have been born again by the Spirit are eternally secure and will not lose their salvation. (1 Peter 1:3-5).
5. We believe in a balance between God's grace and man's responsibility. We believe the Bible teaches both the sovereign grace of God and the solemn responsibility of man to trust, obey and serve God. (Philippians 2:12-13).

B. COMMON PRACTICES

1. When we sin, God's grace teaches us not to wallow in shame or make attempts to regain God's favor through our works, since we know we have already been cleansed by the blood of Christ once for all and are eternally accepted by God (Hebrews 10:14, Romans 8:31-39).

2. We aspire to model grace, not legalism, in churches where people can openly deal with their sins, failures, and weaknesses.
3. We aspire to proclaim a message to unbelievers and believers in which the grace of God in Jesus Christ is central.
4. God's grace inspires us to show every consideration to all men, knowing that we ourselves were also once foolish, disobedient and deceived and enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, yet God had mercy on us (Titus 3:1-3).

II. COMMITMENT TO GOD AND HIS WORD

A. VALUES

1. Our supreme desire is to glorify God. Our love for God and devotion to Him must be our deepest passion and greatest motivation—more than possessions, human relationships, and personal accomplishments, including ministry accomplishments (Matthew 22:37; Philippians 3:7-8).
2. Our lives and our ministries must aspire to wholehearted devotion to God through worship, through prayer and through studying, memorizing, meditating upon, obeying, and teaching His Word (Ezra 7:10).
3. We value a faith-filled, childlike approach of simply believing and obeying the Scriptures (Matthew 18:3-4; Acts 17:11).
4. Christian maturity is a work of God by the Holy Spirit. We do not believe that simply being a Christian a long time makes a person mature. Rather, following and trusting God and obeying His Word over time are the primary factors in becoming spiritually mature (Psalms 111:10).
5. The Bible is our final authority for doctrine and practice and our instruction manual for life. It is God's revealed communication for matters of our faith, for our personal lives, for raising our families, for our behavior in the workplace, and for all ministry (2 Timothy 3:16-17).
6. We recognize that the Bible is sometimes difficult to understand and was written in different languages and to different cultures than our own and that we must work hard to correctly understand it (2 Timothy 2:15).
7. In determining truth, if there is a conflict between what we believe the Bible teaches and what we believe the sciences or social sciences teach, we will give precedence to our understanding of the Bible (Psalms 1: 1-3).
8. Obedience to God's Word is crucial to an accurate understanding of the Bible. Without such an attitude of humility, His Word becomes mere knowledge which eventually leads to pride and possibly deception (James 1:22).
9. All of us are under the authority of Jesus Christ and the Scriptures as our ultimate and final authority. Yet God has given us human authorities that we are to submit to and obey within their God-ordained spheres of authority. Wives should submit to husbands (Ephesians 5:22), children to parents

(Ephesians 6:1), church members to elders (1 Peter 5:5), employees to employers (Ephesians 6:5-6), and citizens to the civil government (Romans 13:1-7).

B. COMMON PRACTICES.

1. A common practice for a member in a GCC church is to have a daily devotional time, in prayer and reading the Bible.
2. Another common practice is for church members to have extended times alone with God (at times with fasting) for the sake of personal direction, encouragement, reflection, and spiritual nourishment.
3. We desire to develop our Biblical understanding in community, since listening to different opinions, experiences and perspectives and working them out together inevitably gives us a clearer picture of the true meaning of the Scripture.

III. ALL NATIONS REACHED WITH THE GOSPEL

A. VALUES

1. Out of our love for God and people (The Great Commandment, Matthew 22:37-40), our mission as individuals and as churches is to fulfill the Great Commission—making disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all that Christ commanded (Matthew 28:18-20.)
2. God’s desire is that every individual in the church personally embrace the Great Commission—that, in one sense, we are all “missionaries” wherever we are located. All believers are to be “on mission,” to do their part in reaching their city, nation, and the world for Jesus Christ (1 Peter 2:9).
3. While personally embracing this mission, God’s will is that every individual work together with others as a team, serving within his giftedness and unique role as part of that team in fulfilling the Great Commission (Ephesians 4:11-16).

B. COMMON PRACTICES

1. A practice of churches in our association has been to equip and train members to effectively share their faith with nonbelievers.
2. Our church members take to heart Paul’s words when he said that he “did all things for the sake of the gospel” and consider how their life decisions regarding family, moves, career opportunities, etc. may affect their success in reaching the world.
3. Churches and members in our association seek to be “culturally relevant” to those we are trying to reach with the gospel.

4. Although we aspire to reach all generations with the gospel, we place a special emphasis on ministry to the next generation.
5. Church planting is a key strategy in fulfilling the Great Commission.
6. Participation in short term mission teams, domestically and internationally, has been a common practice of GCC churches.
7. Inspired by Jesus' call to serve the least in Matthew 25, our churches practice acts of compassion and service to the poor and needy in our local communities and beyond.
8. Based on the example in Acts 1:8, Great Commission churches have generally sought to follow a principle of progressive geographical expansion, reaching people in their city, their region, their nation and the world.
9. In international ministry, we believe both in Christians leaving their own country to spread the gospel to other countries and in entrusting the work to nationals. Because of cultural and language factors, we prefer, whenever possible, to entrust the reaching of a particular country to the nationals that have been saved and raised up.

IV. THE CHURCH

A. VALUES

1. God has commissioned and established the local church as His primary means of fulfilling the Great Commandment and the Great Commission—loving God and others by winning people to Christ, building them to maturity, raising up leaders, and sending teams to start new churches (1 Timothy 3:15).
2. As patterned in the New Testament, we believe that God sends teams of mature leaders to other cities, regions, and cultures to preach the gospel, gather converts into new churches, establish them in correct doctrine and life practice, and appoint leaders for the new churches. These missionary teams are to be sent out and supported by their local churches. (Acts 13:1-3; 14:21-28)
3. We value cooperation between Great Commission churches in a geographical region for mutual edification, accountability, and mission endeavors. To facilitate this, our churches partner with “church ministry teams” which coordinate regional mission efforts, encourage pastors, provide accountability, and assist in leadership training (2 Corinthians 8).
4. We believe that Jesus Christ is the Head of each local church and that each local church, once it has been established and elders appointed, has final human authority over its affairs under Christ. (Ephesians 1:22-23).
5. We believe that the church should function as a family, as a body, and as an army. (1 Timothy 5:1-2; Romans 12:4; Ephesians 6:10-18).

6. A key verse used in churches in describing church life is Acts 2:42: “And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”
7. We believe that the Scriptures combined with the local church are God’s primary system for providing pastoral care and the healing of souls. While God may lead pastors to refer certain individuals to godly, Biblically based counselors as a supplement, this works best when it is coordinated with the efforts of the church and its leaders (2 Timothy 3:16, Ephesians 4:15-16).
8. While God can use outside authors, teachers, and seminars to supplement the ministry of the Word in each local church (1 Corinthians 4:15), God desires the local church to be the primary source of preaching and teaching of the Scriptures for the building up of believers.

B. COMMON PRACTICES

1. It is typical for churches to organize around small groups for building friendships, Bible study, accountability, outreach, providing pastoral care and developing leaders.
2. It is a common practice in churches in our association for members to be “best friends,” sharing their lives together, in community, throughout the week.
3. As an example to the world, the church is to live in integrity and holiness. In that regard, occasionally, it has been necessary to exercise church discipline for individuals who are unrepentant of known sin.
4. GCC church members are encouraged to practice tithing, financially supporting the local church leadership and church ministries by giving the first 10% of their income to the local church. In addition, the common practice is for each local church to financially support its GCC church ministry team by tithing to that team.

V. CHURCH LEADERSHIP

A. VALUES

1. Recognizing Christ as the Head of the church, we further recognize that He has appointed certain men of character to be spiritual elders, or pastors in the local church. These men have the final human authority in their church’s affairs and decisions (Titus 1:5).
2. We believe that the terms “elder,” “overseer,” and “pastor” each refer to the same position (Acts 20:17, 28).
3. The New Testament model is that of a Christ-centered submissive plurality of pastors rather than a single pastor leadership structure (Acts 14:23; Phil, 1:1).
4. Elder/pastors are to be appointed based upon the character qualities described in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9.

5. Leadership in the church must be radically different from leadership in the world. The greatest in the church must be the servant of all. Church leaders are to be humble servants, aggressively teachable, responsive to criticism, and models of always learning, growing, and improving.
6. We believe that the character qualities and doctrinal understanding needed to become an elder/pastor/overseer are best developed within the local church. We view additional training (such as that offered by Bible schools or seminaries) not as a qualification for a pastor, but rather as a possible supplement to the equipping of a pastor within the local church (Titus 1:5).
7. We value and esteem women in the church and encourage their ministry in various roles, but in accordance with the New Testament, we reserve the office of elder/pastor/overseer for men alone (1 Timothy 3:1; 2:12).
8. A pastor/elder is to be a servant, modeling Christ-like humility, teachability and love, as well as a leader, demonstrating faith, courage and strength in managing the church (Luke 22:26; Hebrews 13:7).

B. COMMON PRACTICES

1. Churches in our association have practiced a plurality of elders model with elders having equal authority in the church, rather than a traditional senior pastor model. Some churches have chosen to select one of the elders to provide servant-leadership to the community of elders for the management of the church. Yet, even in these cases, the church is being led by Jesus Christ through the community of elders, not through just one man.
2. In GCC churches, the practice is for elders to be active as the spiritual leaders in the church, whether or not they are paid church employees.
3. Our practice in Great Commission Churches is to encourage men and women to share the word of God with each other (Col. 3:16)—but to do so in a way that does not violate 1 Timothy 2:12: “I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man.” How this verse is interpreted and applied varies somewhat from church to church and culture to culture.
4. In Great Commission Churches our preference is to have more than one elder in each church. However, where this does not exist, our preferred practice is for that one elder to select a group of mature men to act as an advisory group in order to protect, encourage, and confirm him in his leadership of the church.
5. Although there are exceptions, our general practice is to develop and appoint leaders (elders and staff) from within the local church.

VI. ONENESS (LOVE AND UNITY)

A. VALUES

1. We strongly revere the “doctrine of love and unity” within all of Christendom. God desires unity between believers as a high priority and we strive to maintain a unity with every believer, both within and without our association (Ephesians 4:3).
2. We believe that our unity must be centered in Jesus Christ and in the truth of the gospel and of the scripture. Unity is maintained and enhanced as we believe and obey the scriptures, unite in a common vision, and follow the Lord together.
3. We value a deep “Jonathan-David” covenant love and loyalty for one another, particularly among leaders in churches, regions, nationally and internationally (1 Samuel 18:1).

B. COMMON PRACTICES

1. For the sake of the gospel and the Great Commission, our practice has been to avoid divisive arguments on “gray areas” of doctrine.
2. When disunity arises on ministry and doctrinal issues, our practice is to encourage leaders to persevere in seeking unity so that the church can move forward.
3. When members have a disagreement with the leadership on secondary issues, our practice is to grant full fellowship to that member as long as he/she respects the teaching of the elders and does not create strife or disunity through that issue.
4. One reason that we advocate an elder-led (versus a congregational led) structure is that it promotes and encourages unity in the church.
5. Recognizing the spiritual warfare that exists and that our enemy seeks to divide, we place a high value on building and maintaining unity between elders and between their wives.
6. We promote the practice of church members being empathetic listeners, humbly seeking first to understand and then to be understood (Romans 12:15; James 1:19).
7. We promote the practice of defending and believing the best of one another, and not receiving an accusation against another person or an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses. (1 Timothy 5:19)
8. We seek to honor, love, pray for, and cooperate with God-fearing and Bible-believing churches and leaders in our cities and regions. Our goal is not to compete with other churches but to cooperate as allies in furthering the Kingdom of God.

9. In international ministry we aspire to support, cooperate with and honor the national Christians in each country, striving for the unity Jesus prayed for in John 17. We believe that God will honor our church planting efforts as we first humbly seek counsel from and unity with national Christian leaders in each country.

VII. RAISING GODLY FAMILIES

A. VALUES

1. We believe that strong families are foundational for the physical, social, emotional, and spiritual development of each individual; for healthy relational patterns within the church; and for stability in society. Strong families produce strong churches and strong communities (Ephesians 5:22-6:4).
2. We value both the husband and the wife mutually loving and honoring one another, in following Christ's supreme example. We also promote differing but complementary roles in the family with the husband as the head of the household, loving and leading his wife, and his wife honoring, supporting, and submitting to her husband wholeheartedly (Ephesians 5:22-33).
3. We believe that human sexuality is a gift and is to be celebrated and practiced exclusively within the marriage covenant between one man and one woman. Therefore, in accordance with the Bible, we consider homosexuality, adultery and fornication to be sin (1 Corinthians 6:9).
4. We believe that life is a gift from God that begins at conception and should be valued and protected at all stages of development and ability (Psalms 139:13-16).
5. We aspire to provide compassionate ministry to those who are divorced while at the same time teaching that God hates divorce and wants couples to stay married. Churches in our association (with some exceptions) generally teach that God permits remarriage after divorce in two instances—marital infidelity or if an unbeliever leaves a believing spouse. (Matthew 5:32; 1 Corinthians 7:15).
6. Parents are responsible for their child's upbringing in matters of spiritual, academic, and personal training. The means each parent uses to fulfill this responsibility will vary—and includes the parent choosing other people or institutions in that training, such as local churches, home school resources, public schools, and Christian school (Ephesians 6:4).

B. COMMON PRACTICES

1. When we evaluate a married man for leadership, we look at the strength of his marriage and his family before evaluating his ministry skills and other credentials.
2. Although ministry is important, we hold that one's home life takes precedence over ministry outside the home.
3. Our practice is to encourage families to be "on mission," actively involved in evangelism, discipleship and church planting.
4. Our practice is to affirm those whom God has led to be single in a desire to have an undistracted devotion to the Lord.
5. A common practice for families in our churches is to train children in accordance with the wisdom and instructions found in the book of Proverbs, including godly parental example, verbal instruction and correction, and spanking.

VIII. EVERY MEMBER A MINISTER

A. VALUES

1. Rather than a clergy-laity system, we affirm the "priesthood of all believers." All Christians are "priests," according to 1 Peter 2:5-9, empowered through the Holy Spirit to worship God and be workers in the church and the world.
2. The elders have the responsibility to train and equip the members in ministry, but not to actually perform all of the ministry of the church (Ephesians 4:11-16).
3. God desires each member to utilize his or her unique spiritual gifts in ministry (1 Peter 4:10-11).
4. All ministry is in vain without the help of, and our reliance upon, the Holy Spirit. He is our source of power in the church and in the believer. He is our Helper in all matters of faith, service, and direction (1 Corinthians 12:4-7).

B. COMMON PRACTICES

1. Churches in our association seek to equip members with certain basic spiritual disciplines such as daily devotional times, serving in the church, sharing the Word with believers, and sharing the gospel with unbelievers.
2. From the example of the Jerusalem church in Acts 8:1-4, the practice of many church members has been to voluntarily and spontaneously spread the gospel to new areas and new people groups, without relying upon pastors or paid staff.

3. While encouraging the use of spiritual gifts, most churches in our association have understood some of the gifts to be “sign” gifts, whose purpose is to authenticate the message to unbelievers. For example, most would understand the gift of tongues to be the super-natural ability to speak a known language as a sign to unbelievers (Acts 2), rather than a “private prayer language,” as taught by many charismatic churches.
4. Our practice has been to allow both pastors and non-pastors to baptize a new believer and to administer the breaking of bread (communion).
5. Our historical practice is for our church’s ministry to be both centralized (in a rented or church-owned building) and decentralized—ministry performed by church members in homes and in the marketplace (Acts 2:46; 5:42; 20:20).

CONCLUSION

Great Commission Churches has aspired to be empowered by the Holy Spirit to put into action New Testament Christianity in today’s world. The values and common practices detailed in this paper have given greater clarity to our understanding of what New Testament Christianity looks like today. As we have followed the Spirit’s leading in putting into action these values and practices, God has provided grace, blessing and power to individuals and churches. We give God all the glory for what He has done in this movement—and, in the future, we aspire to follow Him and His word ever more closely, so that the gospel of Jesus Christ will spread to the ends of the earth.