

Member Resignations

What is a member resignation?

One of our duties as a local church is to do our best to care for everyone who comes into our church and to care well for each of them as they leave. In order to do this, we must think well about member resignations. Every situation will be different, but we wanted to give a framework for how we think about this matter as elders.

Membership in a church is a voluntary process through which someone submits their discipleship to be overseen by a particular congregation. A member resignation then is when a member formally and voluntarily concludes their membership in our church. Just as we strive to think well together about how people join our church, we must also strive to agree on how people leave our church as well.

When possible, each saint is called by Jesus to be an active member of the body; a faithful member of a church. Though we are clearly commanded how to live in a church body, we are also given freedom as to which church we join—so long as it is a true church.

What does it mean to join a gospel-preaching church?

Wherever there is a recognized body of believers gathered under, and holding forward, the true gospel—you have a true church. While there are vast differences in the body of Christ as it relates to secondary doctrines, we share a fundamental unity on the matter of first importance (1 Cor. 15:1-3). That matter is the gospel, namely, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that He was buried and was raised in accordance with the Scriptures. There must be a right view about the nature of the Triune God, the inspiration of the Scriptures, and the gospel of Jesus Christ for there to be any true Christianity. Salvation entirely depends on these. And where these essential matters are shared and proclaimed by a body of believers, we should extend the right hand of fellowship (Gal. 2:9, 1 John 1:3).

This is what we would understand to be meant by **“a gospel-preaching church”**, a phrase we have at the end of our membership agreement. Every time someone joins our church, they are joining a gospel-preaching church. And, if/when someone leaves our church, we understand they must go and join another one. We don’t say this because there are real Christian churches that don’t preach the gospel, but we say this to highlight that only gospel preaching churches are in fact the only true churches.

When our membership agreement says, **“I agree to join another gospel-preaching church”** This is not an attempt to measure how much or how often a congregation preaches the gospel message explicitly, but rather that they understand that the whole life of a Christian ultimately depends on truly believing in the gospel message (Rom 16:25-26, Gal. 2:20, 2 Cor 5:14-15). While the ways this reality is expressed may differ from congregation to congregation, our union with other churches rests in our shared and simple trust in Christ for our salvation (1 Cor. 1:2).

To put it in other words, when someone leaves our church, they are committing to join another true church on the one hand and to never join a gospel-denying church on the other hand. We each have committed to being a member of a church now, and should we move, we are committed to joining up with a church wherever we go that preaches the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ as the only hope for mankind and as the basis for all our obedience.

What does it mean to carry out the spirit of this agreement?

We admit that the last phrase of our membership agreement is somewhat ambiguous when it says, **“where I can carry out the spirit of this agreement.”** We thought it helpful to share how we’d encourage the church to understand it with us. What we ought to mean by that statement is that those who leave our membership are committing to join up with a church that (1) values the whole bible,(1) approach/views the whole bible(all of scripture) as the inspired and authoritative word of God and (2) seeks to honor the full scope of biblical instruction that’s in the bible. In these two points, we are hoping to highlight that we expect members who leave us will only join churches where the gospel is actually preached, and the bible is actually believed to be the very Word of God (1 Thess. 2:13, 2 Tim 3:16).

What this means is that the door into our church is going to be much smaller than the door out of our church. We require a large amount of doctrinal agreement for someone to join our church because we believe a certain level of doctrinal unity is necessary to walk together as a local church in a unified, Christ-honoring way. But when people leave our church and resign their membership, they are effectively leaving that agreement. They aren’t leaving their agreement in the gospel at all, they are simply ending their participation in walking together with us as their church. And every saint is free to do that! Remember, membership in a church is a voluntary process through which someone submits their discipleship to be overseen by a particular congregation. Just as it can be voluntarily entered into, it can be voluntarily exited.

This will mean that some people will be a member of our church for a season, but then choose to head out to be helped and held accountable by a different church. It is common for godly saints to change churches for different reasons. Some times, when they leave us, they may go to a church that we would not prefer them to attend, or that we might have a significant disagreement with. And while it is important that we share those concerns, we must recognize that we don't have the right to control where they end up. Congregations can disagree with us about a great deal and yet still be good churches! We don't want to shrink the size of Christ's kingdom to only be those that agree with our congregation's philosophy of ministry. There is one who will judge the churches, and it Christ, the First and the Last (Rev. 1:17). If they are a true church, that means they are the Lord's church—and they will have to give an account to Him, as will we.

How is joining different than leaving?

So the front door to join our local is going to be more doctrinally narrow than the back door to leave our church. The front door of our church must be as tight and precise as we believe is required to effectively hold each other accountable as a congregation—but the door for leaving our church must be as wide as God's kingdom is. For example, someone can leave our church and join an Arminian church, they can join a Pentecostal church, they can join a Presbyterian church, they can join an Anglican church, they can join a church that doesn't have a stated membership! Just because we would understand a church to be irregular, unhealthy, or unhelpful—doesn't mean it isn't a true church. Whenever someone is leaving us and joining a true church, we should send them with our blessing. We may choose to send them with a warning, or a word of caution, but we should still lovingly commend them to the grace of God.

The resignation process isn't a time for us to control where people go. Of course, we will give our counsel where we feel it is helpful, but we do so understanding they are free in the Lord to join whichever true church they prefer. We want to make sure we have a lot of charity and be watchful against diminishing the bride of Christ down to just include churches who agree with us on secondary doctrinal matters. The kingdom of Christ is much bigger than our own congregation and one way we recognize that is by recognizing and affirming churches who believe in the true gospel, even if we disagree on many secondary matters.

When should we accept a resignation?

Just as someone assumes membership at our church of their own volition, they are free in the Lord to resign that membership for all different kinds of reasons—reasons we should willingly accept.

Here is a list of good reasons we should accept a member's resignation:

1. They are members in good standing and want to go to a different church, and we should accept this resignation willingly.
2. They are members in good standing and are moving away therefore they will go to a different church. While we can still influence them through whatever relationship is preserved through the move, we can't actually hold them meaningfully accountable in any way once they've left. When people move from among us, we can no longer meaningfully shepherd them (1 Pet. 5:2), and we should accept this resignation willingly.
3. They are members in good standing and their conscience changes and they feel they must go to a different church, and we should accept this resignation willingly.
4. They are members in good standing and they become dissatisfied with our church and no longer desire to be a member here, and we should accept this resignation willingly.

These are all reasons we should, in charity, receive someone's resignation, commend them to the grace of God, and trust the Lord will Shepherd them forever. In fact the only reason we would not want to accept a member's resignation is when the member is active under church discipline or there is good reason to think that the church a member is seeking to join is not a true church. In such cases we cannot accept their resignation, it would be unloving and unfaithful.

We hope this document serves our church body towards a more loving and united perspective about resignations as we seek to glorify the Lord with membership at RCF.

For reference:

(Regarding membership resignations from our Constitution and bylaws)

3.3.1 – In accord with the duties enumerated in the Membership Agreement each member shall be privileged and expected to participate in and contribute to the ministry and life of the church by regularly attending its Lord's Day meetings; by faithfully observing the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper; by submitting to its discipline and instruction; and by attending and voting on all matters submitted to the congregation's vote at its members' meetings.

3.4 Termination of membership in this church occurs: (a) when the church, at a duly convened members' meeting, approves the voluntary resignation of a member; (b) upon the death of the member; or (c) as an

act of church discipline as described in Part 3.5, when three-quarters of the members present and voting at a duly called member's meeting vote to terminate the membership of the member.

(Membership Agreement at Risen Christ Fellowship)

Having, as I trust, been brought by Divine Grace to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and to give up myself wholly to Him, and having been baptized upon my profession of faith, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, I do now, relying on His gracious aid, solemnly and joyfully submit my membership in the Lord to the local expression of His church at Risen Christ Fellowship.

I agree to carry out, as best as I can by God's grace, the full scope of biblical instruction and commands together with my fellow members at this church. I affirm and agree that the Bible is the chief governing document for the church. I have also read and agree with the Statement of Faith and the Bylaws and Constitution documents for Risen Christ Fellowship. I can, with a clear conscience, submit my discipleship to this church through joining in membership.

Should I ever find myself in disagreement with the Statement of Faith, I will notify the elders immediately. In the event that I should ever resign my membership at RCF (except in the case of apostasy), I agree to join another gospel-preaching church where I can carry out the spirit of this agreement.