

This booklet was not designed
to be an exhaustive explanation of
the General Association of General Baptists.
For more information see our book
General Baptist Doctrine and Usage.

Available through Stinson Press
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2nd Revision Oct 25, 2006

What It Means To Be A General Baptist



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A Case for Connection

Adapted from
Falling in Love With the Church
By Larry McKain

Many people have stated over the last few decades: “Why belong to a denomination? After all, there are no denominations in the Bible.” While that statement may be true, we feel the question comes from a misunderstanding of the calling and purpose of denominational bodies.

In the following pages we hope to build a case for connection in order to help you understand that joining a group of like-minded people is not a hindrance nor is it anti-biblical. Rather, it will enable your church to become a globally minded body of believers that will enable you to fulfill the Great Commission.

The six reasons for connecting to a larger body listed below have been adopted and adapted from Dr. Larry McKain’s book Falling in Love With the Church.

1. The Bible teaches Christians to be interdependent not independent.

Paul’s description of the church is a body. “...*the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the working of the measure of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the edification of itself in love*” (Eph 4:16).

Never in the Scripture will you find a case for being separated from other believers. Jesus prayed that those who follow Him would “...*be one; just as he was one with the Father*” (John 17:21).

We all believe that Christianity is to be lived out within the context of community. There is no such thing as a “lone ranger” Christian. We believe that the Scripture also supports that local churches are to be interdependent of one another not “lone ranger” churches.

The autonomy of the local church, while celebrated, must be kept in context of the larger body of believers. Even though each individual church in the New Testament was different and distinct, it was not by itself. The council in Acts 15 clearly shows us that each church was connected and held accountable. The council acted much like a governing body.

2. In the Old Testament, there were no independent Jews; everyone had a tribe.

The nation of Israel was a prototype of the church. Today’s church is the new Israel. “*After all, who is a real Jew, truly circumcised? It is not the man who is a Jew on the outside, whose circumcision is a physical thing. Rather, the real Jew is the person who is*

a Jew on the inside, that is, whose heart has been circumcised, and this is the work of God's Spirit, not of the written Law" (Rom 2:28-29).

We believe that denominational families resemble the tribes of Israel. As you study the history of Israel, you will quickly discover that each tribe was different. Many times they had differences of opinion and sometimes even warred with one another. Yet, all of them were a part of God's chosen people. There were no independent Jews.

3. The power of being connected to a denominational fellowship is that it provides local churches to do what they could not do on their own.

We are called as the body of Christ to be a witness for Christ "*...in Jerusalem, in all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth*" (Acts 1:8). No church is able to accomplish this on its own. Our obedience to this call must not stop with our local area. God has called us to be globally minded as well.

Ministry in the local area is expensive. At best, most local churches are able to reach Jerusalem and Judea. Being connected enables the local church to more fully fulfill the Great Commission and become an Acts 1:8 church. As local churches cooperate with other churches, the ability to do work for the Kingdom greatly increases. The local churches' global potential for reaching across social, economical, and ethnic barriers can be experienced only when we join together. Together we can do what no local church can do alone.

4. People in denominational families can walk hand-in-hand without seeing eye-to-eye.

Paul wrote to the Philippians, "*If there is therefore any encouragement in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any tender mercies, then fulfill my joy, that you may be like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord and of one mind*" (Phil 2:1-2).

To be in "one accord" does not mean that we see eye-to-eye on everything. To be in "one accord" means that we are extending our hand of fellowship to each other in order to accomplish the task that God has called us to do.

You don't have to read very far in the New Testament Book of Acts to see that differences existed between very godly men. Paul and Barnabas didn't see eye-to-eye on using Mark. Peter and Paul struggled with viewpoints about who is a Jew. The council in Acts dealt with differences between Gentile and Jewish believers. While these differences existed, they were still all in one accord.

Two great men of church history, John Wesley and George Whitfield, didn't see eye-to-eye on theological issues. Wesley said to Whitfield one day, "Is your heart one with my heart? Then give me your hand" (2 Kings 10:15-16).

Where we must always see eye-to-eye is on the essentials.

In essential beliefs we have unity.
In non-essential beliefs we have liberty.
In all our beliefs, we show love and mercy.

5. Jesus is present in imperfect local churches and denominational families.

I'm sure every one of us has heard people make negative comments about the imperfections of the local church. The problems many churches face are the main reasons many people stay outside the churches and denominations. There are literally millions of people who don't like the idea of the church, let alone denominations.

God told Hosea, “*Go and get married; your wife will be unfaithful, and your children will be just like her. In the same way my people have left me and become unfaithful.*’ So Hosea married a woman named Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim” (Hosea 1:2-3).

I think we all understand that God is calling Israel His bride, much like the church today. The church is seen as the bride of Christ in the New Testament.

God's point is this: Israel or the church is my bride; I love her; she is mine in spite of all her problems and imperfections, and they are many. But I love her. Listen to how Jesus speaks of the church. “*Husbands, go all out in your love for your wives, exactly as Christ did for the church—a love marked by giving, not getting. Christ's love makes the church whole. His words evoke her beauty. Everything he does and says is designed to bring the best out of her, dressing her in dazzling white silk, radiant with holiness*” (Eph 5:25-27).

God asked Hosea to marry a prostitute. Why would anyone subject himself to a relationship that had so much trouble attached to it? Why would God ask Hosea to marry such a tarnished and imperfect person? Because this is the way Jesus loves the church, even with all of its problems and discord.

Why does Jesus love the church this way? Because in spite of all the human trappings and problems of the local church and denominational families, they are God's chosen means of bringing blessing and salvation to a desperate world.

No church is perfect, nor is any denomination. As long as we live in this imperfect world, we will deal with imperfect systems. The good news is that God works through these imperfect systems in spite of all the problems.

6. Denominational families offer fellowship and accountability.

We all need each other. This world stands against all we proclaim, and according to God's Word it will get worse as the end draws near. That is why the writer of Hebrews said, “*Let us not give up the habit of meeting together, as some are doing. Instead, let us*

encourage one another all the more, since you see that the Day of the Lord is coming nearer” (Heb 10:25).

Fifty-eight times in the Bible it uses the phrase “one another.” It says, “Love one another, care for one another...Greet one another...Encourage one another...Pray for one another...Counsel one another...Share with one another... Help one another....” It is the mutual ministry of the body to itself. There can be no doubt about it, we need each other.

Benefits of Joining General Baptists

Over the years General Baptists have built many ministry opportunities throughout the world. We have also been able to build many programs to assist the local church and pastor in their local ministries. Here are a few things that you and your church will be able to be a part of, if you choose to join us.

FOR THE PASTOR

- General Baptist Pension Fund
- Group Life Insurance Program
- Access to Stinson Institute—A program designed to assist the local pastor in personal growth and continuing education.
- Various pastors' conferences and retreats
- Regional training
- Online degree program through Oakland City University
- Personal coaching from qualified pastoral coaches
- Multiple resources for developing your congregation

FOR THE CONGREGATION

- Professional consulting and Church Health Assessment
- National Youth Conference for your teens
- Short-term missionary trips to places like
 - Honduras, Mexico, Philippines, and China
- Opportunities to serve on both national and international mission fields
- Programs for raising up and training future leaders
- General Baptist Investment Fund (GBIF)—This fund serves as a way to invest your money in a way that will make a kingdom difference. All monies invested in GBIF are loaned to help local churches expand their ministries. Your church will also have access to loans through GBIF.
- Regional training and seminars for lay leaders
- Church growth resources
- Opportunity to be involved in global ministry through participation in Unified Giving.
- Access to Stinson Press. Stinson Press is our own press company that can provide churches with all the resources they will need.

General Baptist Statements of Faith

The movement of churches today called "General Baptists" began in America in 1823 when founder Benoni Stinson organized the Liberty Church (now Howell General Baptist Church) in southern Indiana. In 1870 the General Association of General Baptists was organized, bringing together General Baptist local associations of churches in cooperative efforts.

I. GOD

We believe that there is only one true, living, and eternal God and that the Godhead is revealed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

II. THE BIBLE

We believe that the Holy Scriptures are the Old and New Testaments; the inspired and infallible Word of God and therein is found the only reliable guide of Christian faith and conduct.

III. MAN

We believe that God created man in His own image to bring Him honor through obedience, and that when man disobeyed, he became a fallen and sinful creature, unable to save himself. We believe that infants are in the covenant of God's grace and that all persons become accountable to God when they reach a state of moral responsibility.

IV. SALVATION

We believe that salvation (regeneration, sanctification, justification, and redemption) has been provided for all mankind through the redemptive work (life, death, resurrection, ascension, and intercession) of Jesus Christ, and that this salvation can be received only through repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.

V. ASSURANCE AND ENDURANCE

We believe that those who abide in Christ have the assurance of salvation. However, we believe that the Christian retains his freedom of choice; therefore, it is possible for him to turn away from God and be finally lost.

VI. CHRISTIAN DUTIES

We believe that Christians should live faithfully by serving in and through the local church, praying diligently, witnessing earnestly, practicing tolerance, showing loving kindness, giving as God prospers, and conducting themselves in such a way as to bring glory to God.

VII. THE CHURCH

We believe that the Church Universal is the Body of Christ, the fellowship of all believers, and that its members have been called out from the world to come under the dominion and authority of Christ, its Head. We believe that a local church is a fellowship of Christians, a part of the Body of Christ, voluntarily banded together for worship, nurture, and service.

VIII. ORDINANCES

We believe that baptism and the Lord's Supper are ordinances instituted by Christ to be observed by Christians only. We also believe that the biblical mode of baptism is immersion and that participation in the Lord's Supper should be open to all Christians. (Note: Several associations and local churches recognize footwashing as an ordinance. We believe that this should be left to the individual, and that neither the practice nor the non-practice of it should be any bar to fellowship, either in the church, the local association, the Presbytery, or the General Association.)

IX. THE LORD' DAY

We believe in the sanctity of the Lord's Day, the first day of the week, and that this day ought to be observed by worshiping God, witnessing for Christ, and ministering to the needs of humanity. We believe that secular work on Sunday should be limited to cases of necessity or mercy.

X. LAST THINGS

We believe in the personal return of Jesus Christ, and in the bodily resurrection of the dead. We believe that God will judge all mankind by Jesus Christ; that He will reward the righteous with eternal life in heaven, and that He will banish the unrighteous to everlasting punishment in hell.

Note: The "General Baptist Statements of Faith" is available in the Spanish language. Pregunta para "Bautista General Declaraciones de Fe" en español también.

Leadership Essentials

A strategic priority of the General Association of General Baptists is to multiply godly and competent pastoral and lay leaders for today and for each new generation. Every group needs strong leadership, and every leader must be called by God and affirmed by the church. The church must discern and cultivate those who have abilities and character qualities for pastoral leadership. The church is also called to encourage those who, by the use of their spiritual gifts, give evidence of potential for spiritual oversight as consecrated deacons.

It is our firm conviction that all leaders are learners. When a leader stops learning, he/she stops leading. Every church and its leadership that wishes to join us must also carry this same conviction. While every association carries its own educational standards, we strongly encourage the constant pursuit of personal education.

It is because of that conviction that we are committed to helping every lay leader and local pastor to grow in their educational endeavors. Throughout the year we offer various pastoral and lay leader events. These events will enable and encourage you and your church in the process of reaching your community for Christ.

The following two sections explain our standing on leadership in the church.

I. Pastors

It is biblical for the church to set apart and ordain particular individuals for the special task of pastoral leadership. These individuals understand and are answering an inward call of the Holy Spirit. They are examined and set apart by public ordination, including the laying on of hands after the pattern of the early church. Although the church must discern and cultivate those who have such endowments, ordination is always first and foremost an act of God's calling and anointing.

These men/women are called to provide Spirit-filled leadership in the local church and to fulfill the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. Ordained ministers commit themselves to equipping the whole body of believers to these ends. Biblically and historically, they are set apart for the study and proclamation of the Word of God, intercessory prayer, the winning of persons to Christ, the administration of the sacraments, and the defense of the gospel.

Within the General Baptist heritage, this ordination may take place within each local church. However, it is common practice among our associations to assist and ordain each candidate through the associational presbytery or ordaining council.

Qualifications for Pastoral Ministry

A person called by God enters a vocation that carries significant responsibilities. An ordained pastor is responsible for dealing with the souls of people. Leading the church in making disciples requires spiritual discernment, character, integrity, and a desire to lead (1 Tim 3:1-7).

Ordained ministers should examine themselves in light of these qualifications.

1. Spiritual Qualifications

- called to ministry
- committed to Jesus Christ as Lord
- evidence of integrity through holiness of heart and life
- displays the fruit of the Holy Spirit
- receives and gives forgiveness
- possesses healthy self-esteem and maintains a positive attitude
- demonstrates faith, creativity, and initiative
- respects people regardless of race, gender, or economic status
- models a teachable spirit

2. Personal Characteristics

- practices spiritual disciplines
- gifted for leadership
- models a balanced life and a healthy self-discipline
- engages in lifelong learning
- submits biblically to authority
- seeks professional and personal accountability
- support from his/her spouse, if married

3. Pastoral Care

- responds appropriately and warmly to people
- embodies a passion for making disciples
- ensures appropriate care for the people of God
- builds up people and inspires hope

4. Communication

- handles the Word of God correctly
- calls people to faith in Christ
- understands the culture, community, and congregation
- utilizes effective means of communication
- affirms and articulates General Baptist history and theology
- prepares thoroughly for public presentation
- persuades people to make godly, life-changing decisions
- challenges the status quo in love, when necessary

5. Leadership

- leads out of personal and corporate prayer
- articulates and casts a vision from God
- sets strategic goals to accomplish the vision
- instills congregational ownership of vision and goals
- mobilizes resources to fulfill the vision
- practices sound principles in accomplishing change
- identifies, attracts, and equips leaders
- participates in the denomination's mission
- promotes involvement in world evangelization

Local churches and associations are encouraged to publicly review their pastors yearly in order to evaluate each ordained minister.

II. Deacons

Not all who express a sense of call are spiritually gifted to be the pastor of a local congregation. There is great diversity in ability, gifting, and in the call of God. Pastors are responsible for preaching God's Word and giving oversight of the congregation in fulfilling the mission and expected outcomes of the church. Many pastors serve as the senior pastor. Others serve as associate pastors with ministry focused to a particular segment or aspect of church life and ministry. All work as a team to fulfill the vision and mission of the church.

There are still others, however, who are called by the church to serve as consecrated deacons. This New Testament office is best defined in terms of servant leadership, assisting the pastor in congregational ministries and service in the world. Deacons complement the work of the pastor. They serve in a particular church and are not available for appointment elsewhere. Their gifts are most suited for a support role, though they may give leadership to a segment of the congregation.

Every deacon should be committed to fulfilling the mission and vision of the church. Senior pastors and local boards are encouraged to exercise great wisdom as they counsel those called of God toward ordination or consecration as a deacon. Pastors are encouraged, at the beginning of the mentoring process, to clarify the role of each deacon. Those who are called by the church and feel gifted to serve in this manner as a deacon begin preparation toward consecration as a deacon. (See "Deacons: Partners in Ministry and Growth," a video training series by Jim Henry. This is available through the General Baptist Congregational Ministries office.)

1. Deacons are members in good standing of the local churches. Deacons must remain active, regular members in their churches. They are people of good reputation and wisdom and filled with the Spirit of God whose gifts and calling have been confirmed by the local church.
2. Deacons are servant-leaders who serve the local congregation according to the gifts and graces given them by God. The deacon is to assist the local pastor to help the church fulfill the Great Commission in its community.
3. Possible area of service for a deacon
 - Worship leader
 - Administrative assistant
 - Sunday School teacher
 - Care and Outreach pastor
 - Spiritual counselor and guide
4. Under the guidance of the pastor and local board any person called to serve as a deacon will be mentored, trained, guided, and examined.

Note: Each association has its own standards and practices for the role of deacon.

Connectional Relationships

The General Association of General Baptists is a conglomeration of local churches and associations joined together for the purposes of doing kingdom work.

In this section we will explain certain entities within our framework that make us unique.

The Local Church

We believe that the local church is the highest ecclesiastical authority.

Associations

Each church within the General Association of General Baptists must belong to an association. This relationship will ensure two things:

- A. A voice in our annual general meetings
- B. Adequate and appropriate representation in the Council of Associations

Each association is made up of at least two churches and maintains jurisdiction only within the bounds of member churches. These churches do not have to be geographically close. Rather, most associations form around like-minded goals, values, and vision. Associations function to promote the unity, fellowship, and cooperation of like-minded churches. Together they engage in ministry, fellowship on an annual basis, and organize outreach projects. Each local association also forms a presbytery from which pastors and deacons are ordained.

Council of Associations

The Council of Associations is designed to give each General Baptist association a voice in the direction of the denomination as a whole. Council of Associations members are chosen by each local association.

“The Council of Associations is to be the eyes, ears, head, and heart of the General Association of General Baptists to enable the most effective means of fulfilling God’s will for the people of God called General Baptists.”

The Council of Associations exists to keep each member of the General Baptist denomination informed on the denominational issues and give each member a voice. From the smallest General Baptist congregation to the largest, each member is important to the success of our denomination. Communication is the key.

Financial Involvement

Giving always honors God and will benefit other people. We believe that giving is a divine act. God is a giver by nature, “*For God so loved the world that he gave...*” (John 3:16). As we participate in the act of giving, we become more like God. That should be the goal of every Christian and church.

Giving is also an act of obedience. The Bible teaches us that our obedience in the act of giving will produce a blessing.

“Bring the full amount of your tithes to the Temple, so that there will be plenty of food there. Put me to the test and you will see that I will open the windows of heaven and pour out on you in abundance all kinds of good things” (Mal 3:10).

The Scripture is replete with verses that remind us of God’s call to obediently give back to Him for the purposes of His kingdom. Through our obedience and sacrificial love, God is able to accomplish great things on this earth.

However, giving doesn’t just apply to individuals in the church. It also applies to the giving of a local body. Paul wrote, “*On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made*” (1 Cor 16:2).

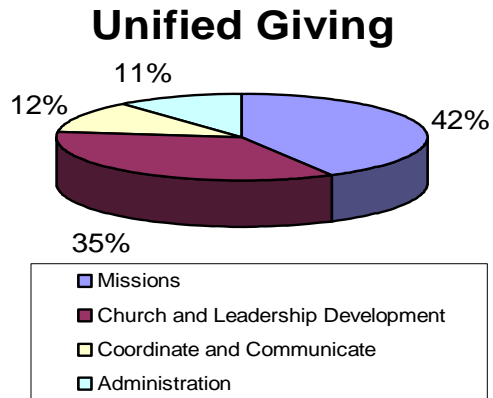
Paul referred to a program that he set up with the churches of Galatia. He intended to stop and pick up the offerings from these churches. Why? Because Paul understood that the combined resources of multiple churches would propel the gospel forward in a way that one church could not accomplish on its own.

It is in that spirit that we call all of those who wish to be a part of the General Association of General Baptists to participate in Unified Giving.

Unified Giving is the cooperative means by which we are able to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ around the world. Through Unified Giving we are able to resource our churches with training materials, help our pastors grow educationally and spiritually, plant new churches around our nation, and start new missions around the world. As we join together, we are able to accomplish great things for God.

Each dollar your church gives to Unified Giving changes a life. The following chart shows the breakdown of how your dollar will help.

For every dollar you give...



According to this Unified Giving chart, almost 80 percent of every dollar goes toward ministry and missions. With these resources we have planted churches around the United States that have led over 1,800 people to a first-time relationship with Christ in the last four years. Internationally we have impacted thousands of lives with the gospel of Jesus Christ over the last few years. Together we are able to do more than we could do alone.

Because we are passionately and tenaciously pursuing lost people with the gospel of Jesus Christ, every General Baptist church is asked to participate in our mission and ministry.

If you choose to join the General Association of General Baptists, you too will be asked to participate in our mission and ministry.

Every church is expected to...

- Use at least 5 percent of its annual budget toward outreach and evangelism in the local community. It is a priority for General Baptists to be passionately involved in the local community. If the church is not loving its community, little else matters.
- Contribute between 7 and 10 percent of monthly income to Unified Giving.
- Contribute up to 3 percent of monthly income to the local association/REAP for the purposes of spreading the gospel regionally if a project arises.

Membership Covenant

Feeling led by the Holy Spirit to unite with the General Association of General Baptists and being in agreement with the Statements of Faith, Leadership Essentials, Associational Structure, and Financial Involvement, we are excited to unite with the _____ Association of the General Baptist family. In doing so, we commit ourselves to the following:

1. *We will uphold the authority of the Scripture by...*
 - a. Keeping it central to all we do.
 - b. Preaching and teaching it as the only way and truth.
 - c. Encouraging the church to follow its rule.

2. *We will build the ministry of Christ by...*
 - a. Equipping our pastors and leaders to serve.
 - b. Developing a servanthood mentality in our members.
 - c. Training our members to evangelize their neighbors.

3. *We will protect Christian unity by...*
 - a. Acting in love toward the other associations and churches.
 - b. Respecting and appreciating the differences among various General Baptist groups.
 - c. Following General Baptist leaders as those “appointed to lead.”

4. *We will share the responsibility of General Baptist work by...*
 - a. Praying for its growth.
 - b. Supporting missions work both here and abroad.
 - c. Volunteering to serve wherever we are needed.

5. *We will faithfully support missions and ministries by...*
 - a. Contributing at least 7 percent of our monthly income to Unified Giving and 3 percent to our local association.
 - b. Contributing another 3 percent of our monthly income toward the missional endeavors and evangelism, in our community.

| | |
|--|--------------------|
| New Member Church | Association joined |
| Pastor/Leader | Date _____ |
| Church Leader | Date _____ |
| Church Leader | Date _____ |
| General Baptist National Missions Director | Date _____ |

New Church Registration

Year _____

Church Name _____

Mailing Address _____

Meeting Site Address _____

Phone _____ E-mail _____

Fax _____ Web site _____

Sponsoring Church/Association _____

Pastor's Name _____

Address _____

Home Phone: _____ Cell Phone _____ E-mail _____

___ Full-time ___ Bivocational

Ordination Date _____ Birth Date _____

Ethnicity (circle one) Caucasian African-American Hispanic Asian

Other _____

Language preference _____

Date launched _____ Number of people in group _____

Church Officers

| <u>Name/title</u> | <u>Address</u> | <u>Phone</u> | <u>E-mail</u> |
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