

“Automatic” Membership Placement?

By Dub McClish

Through the years I have come across brethren who believed that merely visiting with a congregation for a few weeks or months thereby made them members, with no request on their part and no announcement to the congregation. However, apparently such “automatic” membership placement in congregations did not occur in the first century when brethren changed their residence.

The case of Paul (at the time, “Saul”) is instructive. Although not done by letter, Paul well knew the value of an introduction by a respected brother. When he first came to Jerusalem and sought to identify (i.e., “place membership” in modern parlance) with the church, brethren did not know all they needed to know about him. Remembering his days as a persecutor of the saints in their city (8:1-4, 9:1-2), they were rightly fearful of him and at first rightly refused his fellowship (v. 26). However, Barnabas, whom the Jerusalem brethren knew well, knowing of Paul’s conversion and bold preaching at Damascus, vouched for him, upon which the brethren welcomed Paul without question (vv. 27-30).

Even when brethren were simply traveling, rather than moving their residence, they bore letters of commendation. Paul wrote to the church at Rome: “I commend unto you Phoebe our sister, who is a servant of the church that is at Cenchreae: that ye receive her in the Lord...” (Rom. 16:1-2). What Paul did for Phoebe, the Ephesian church did for Apollos when he went to Achaia (Acts 18:27-28). Likewise, Paul wrote the Corinthians to receive Timothy without hesitation or reservation (1 Cor. 16:10-11).

With the great mobility of modern times, such commendations are all the more necessary. Faithful brethren need some means of introduction/recommendation (i.e., by letter, phone call, personal conversation, etc.) from respected brethren when they move to a congregation that does not know them. It is not only wise, but eminently Scriptural, as indicated above, so to do.

This salutary practice results in the following benefits:

1. It introduces the newcomer(s) to the congregation as worthy of fellowship, enabling them to be accepted and the church to put them to work almost immediately.
2. It enables the ones placing membership to continue their faithful service to the Lord without undue interruption their relocation might otherwise cause.

3. It protects the church from those who may be morally impure and/or from false teachers, either of whom would do great damage to the Lord's people.

I am not suggesting that congregations arbitrarily look with suspicion and mistrust upon those who come without commendation. However, those who bear such are certainly a welcome sight to any church concerned about doctrinal and moral purity. With the current widespread moral permissiveness and doctrinal compromise among brethren, plus the element of the previously-mentioned general mobility, congregations are extremely unwise not to use caution in accepting without question any and all who wish to place membership unless they have been visiting long enough for them to become well known. A smooth-talking false teacher can move in and divide a church in a few months' time, as unwary elderships have learned to their great dismay. Likewise, a couple living in an adulterous "marriage" can so gain influence in a brief period as to cause great disturbance in a congregation when their adultery is discovered and must be dealt with.

Whether or not brethren have some form of commendation when they seek membership in a congregation, I commend the following practice: When brethren with whom the church is unfamiliar indicate their desire to place membership, the announcer should simply state that they have **expressed the desire** to be members of the congregation, rather than that they **have placed membership**. In the same announcement, indicate that the elders (or men in the absence of elders) will contact them immediately to arrange a time to discuss with them the work of the congregation. The following wording on the response card will be helpful: "We desire to place membership (Note: The elders will contact you immediately for the purpose of discussing the work and the doctrinal convictions of this congregation.)"

The interview should set before the newcomers the elders' determination to follow God's Word faithfully. Wisdom dictates that the elders/men should ask questions on doctrinal issues (e.g., worship, The Holy Spirit, women's role, premillennialism, marriage, divorce, remarriage, et al.) They should ask for evaluations of such things as the "change agent movement," Abilene Christian University, and such like, the answers to which will indicate their doctrinal direction. Elders should also inquire about their marital status (if they are married). The prospective members should be fully informed concerning the work in which the congregation is involved. Those seeking membership also have an opportunity to ask questions of the elders in this meeting. If the ones seeking membership are dedicated to the Lord and His Word, they will appreciate such care of shepherds who watch for souls (Acts 20:28-30).

Some brethren may want to place membership whom faithful brethren must not accept unless they first repent. Why should a congregation (with or without elders) feel obligated to accept all who request membership **just because they walk down the aisle or sign a card**? In fact, we are obligated **not** to accept those who are doctrinally perverted and/or morally corrupt (Rom. 16:17-18; 1 Cor. 5:1-13; et al.). How much better to find out who (and what) brethren are **before** they are welcomed with open arms, rather than afterward, when they have had time to influence others adversely. When elders discover that all is well with the newcomers, it can then be announced that the church should welcome them as new members.

[**Note:** I wrote this for my “Clippings” column in the April 2004 issue of *The Gospel Journal*, of which I was editor at the time.]

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