

"I Commend unto You Phoebe"

Dub McClish

Paul wrote to the Roman brethren: "I commend unto you Phoebe our sister, . . . that ye receive her in the Lord, worthily of the saints..." (Rom. 16:1-2). I conclude from this passage that as faithful saints move about it is both Scriptural and wise to take with them such a letter from respected brethren. The Ephesian church did the same for Apollos when he went to Achaia (Acts 18:27-28). Paul instructed the Corinthians by letter to receive Timothy (1 Cor. 16:10-11) and Titus (2 Cor. 8:23-24).

Such salutary letters of commendation produce at least two benefits:

1. They introduce those who are moving as worthy of fellowship, allowing them to be accepted and put to work immediately. Paul well knew the value of a respected introduction, having at first been refused fellowship in Jerusalem for lack of it (Acts 9:26);
2. They preserve the church from immoral persons and/or advocates and practitioners of error who would corrupt the church.

We need to restore this practice generally, especially in these days in which doctrinal and moral liberalism abound. I am not suggesting that all who neglect to secure such a letter are automatically to be mistrusted, but those who bear such a letter are certainly a welcome sight to any congregation concerned about doctrinal and moral purity. With the current widespread moral permissiveness and doctrinal error among brethren, plus the element of general mobility, congregations are extremely unwise not to use caution in accepting those who wish to "place membership." A smooth-talking false teacher can move in and divide a congregation, large or small, in a few months' time, as careless, unwary brethren have learned to their great dismay.

I commend the following practice of various congregations concerning those who wish to identify with a congregation. When strangers to a congregation respond for this purpose, it is premature to announce that they **have** placed membership. It is wise to announce at the time that they "**have expressed a desire** to be members." It should be announced at the same time that the one(s) **desiring** to place membership will be contacted by the elders (men of the congregation, as in our case, where there are no elders) for the purpose of discussing our work with them. In this discussion, they are given a questionnaire that deals with doctrinal and moral issues, their marital condition, their status at their previous congregation, and that states the congregation's determination to faithfully follow God's Word.

Frankly, there are some brethren who move to town to whom we cannot extend fellowship and whom we do not want to be with us. Why should any congregation feel "obligated" to accept someone or ones just because they walk down the aisle, sign a card, or otherwise express a desire to be a member thereof? How much better it is to find out who (and what) brethren are before they are welcomed with open arms. Many congregations have experienced grievous problems by quickly and prematurely embracing those who sought membership, only to learn after doing so that the ones embraced were not worthy of fellowship. Some spiritual "preventive medicine" is certainly the right "prescription" for this situation.

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