

Identifying With A Local Congregation

By Randall F. Matheny

Occasionally some well-meaning Christian objects on what he perceives to be scriptural grounds to “placing membership” with a local congregation of the Lord’s church, preferring to remain a “member at large” of the church universal and drifting from congregation to congregation without ever becoming a productive contributor to any particular one. Occasionally some Christian may refuse to identify with a particular local congregation in order to deliberately avoid committing themselves to becoming a productive member of it, and to attempt to escape the responsibility of submitting to that congregation’s eldership (1 Pet. 5:2; Hebrews 13:17). Whatever the rationalization may be, the question is, “Is there any biblical precedent for such a position?”



The phrase “place membership” usually refers to the means by which a Christian, who was baptized into Christ at another place expresses a desire to be identified with a local congregation, so that the local Christians may be assured of their commitment to faithfully serving God in fellowship with them. But it can refer to “placing membership by baptism,” when an individual who is baptized into Christ immediately identifies for purposes of fellowship and service with the local congregation at which he was baptized, having been baptized into the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:27) meeting at that location. It would be difficult to imagine anyone wanting to be baptized who makes it clear before hand that they do not want to “place membership,” or be identified with a local church and become a productive part of its work. Yet, one hears of Christians who have previously been baptized who believe that it is acceptable for them to refuse to make such a commitment. Some suggest that Paul was a “member at large” while on his evangelistic journeys, but the scriptures clearly teach that he went forth under the auspices of the church in Antioch (of Syria) (Acts 13:1-3), to which he later returned to give a report of his work (Acts 14:26-28).

There are several New Testament statements which indicate that the modern idea of a “member at large” who refuses to identify himself/herself with a local congregation is unknown in the scriptures. One who refuses to make such a commitment to fellowship in the life and activities of a local congregation makes it difficult for themselves to be embraced by a congregation on the same level as those who have shown no hesitation in making such a commitment. There is no biblical precedent for any faithful Christian not being identified with a local congregation. Neither is there any scriptural precedent which would support an individual’s choosing not to be identified with a local congregation. To the contrary, all the evidence points in the other direction.

Biblical Precedents for Letters of Commendation

Biblical precedents form the basis upon which a congregation may choose to receive into fellowship an individual, or individuals, with whom they are not familiar enough to ascertain their obedience to the gospel, or their subsequent faithfulness to it. The reason for, and the duration of, their fellowship is not at issue here. Bold type has been added for emphasis.

- (Acts 18:27-28) Regarding Apollos, “And when he desired to cross to Achaia, **the brethren wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive him**; and when he arrived, he greatly helped those who had believed through grace; for he vigorously refuted the Jews publicly, showing from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ.
- Paul wrote to the church at Rome to receive Phoebe (Rom. 16:1-2), “**I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a servant of the church in Cenchrea, that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints**, and assist her in whatever business she has need of you; for indeed she has been a helper of many and of myself also.”
- Paul wrote to the church at Philippi to receive Epaphroditus upon his return to them after having been away for some time (Phil. 3:25-30), “Yet I considered it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker, and fellow soldier, but your messenger and the one who ministered to my need; since he was longing for you all, and was distressed because you had heard that he was sick. For indeed he was sick almost unto death; but God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. Therefore I sent him the more eagerly, that when you see him again you may rejoice, and I may be less sorrowful. **Receive him therefore in the Lord with all gladness**, and hold such men in esteem; because for the work of Christ he came close to death, not regarding his life, to supply what was lacking in your service toward me.”
- An alternative to a written commendation would be a faithful local Christian who could vouch for the individual, such as Barnabas did for Saul (Acts 9:26-28), “And when Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple. But **Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. And he declared to them** how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus. **So he was with them at Jerusalem**, coming in and going out.”

In each case above, it was the concern of the writer, or speaker, of the personal commendation that the one being commended be known to be faithful to Christ, and that no damage to the church would occur by embracing them in fellowship. The reason for this is clear: “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us.” (1 John 2:19) and, “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1; also 2 Peter 2:1). It is within the rights and responsibilities of a local congregation to be cautious in extending fellowship when a person’s background is unknown, or when there is evidence that an individual has unresolved sin in his life, or when an individual distances himself from a congregation by refusing to make a commitment to faithfully serving the Lord with them. A congregation may choose to accept an individual into fellowship without a letter or some other form of commendation, but it is within its scriptural authority to request that such be provided.

Regarding Men for Leadership Roles in the Church

Proven faith and commitment are most important when regarding men for leadership roles in the church, for example, serving in the assembly, preaching, teaching, song leading, leading prayer, or other biblical services in which they represent the church. Acts 6:1-4 is a good place to start, because it is the first passage of scripture which recounts the selection of servants of the church, other than the apostles, to lead in a public way. “Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, “It is not desirable that we

should leave the word of God and serve tables. Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

There is no indication in the passage above that the seven were chosen to be elders or deacons, in the specific sense, although what is stated would certainly apply to them as well as it does to other leaders in the Lord's church. They were simply servants of the church who were to serve in a public way, and who in so doing represented the Lord and His church. As public servants of the church, they would automatically be viewed as leaders. Their qualifications were to be:

- (1) "Good reputation," meaning that they were to be faithful to Christ in a way that could be seen outwardly. This would include good personal habits, language, compassion, faithfulness to the assembly, good examples, and faithfulness in their family roles.
- (2) "Full of the Holy Spirit," meaning that they must be members of Christ's church (Acts 2:38) and guided by the teaching of the Spirit who's primary role in the New Testament was revelational. Men who are full of the Holy Spirit are men who are full of the Spirit inspired word, and as such, bear the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-26). The reference here is not to supernatural spiritual gifts, because the task at hand, meeting the needs of a segment of the congregation, did not require such gifts.
- (3) "And (full of) wisdom," meaning that they were of sufficient maturity in the faith to make faithful application of the Holy Spirit's teachings to their lives and help others to understand how to do the same. The reference here is not to supernatural wisdom for the same reason as given above.

Christian men who do not conform to these mere, basic standards for public service in the church should not be entrusted with leadership roles. A congregation that chooses men to serve who are not faithful puts itself in danger, because no matter how well intentioned the reasoning, the church can only be weakened for it is not possible that weak leadership can strengthen the church. It is biblical and better to have only a few faithful men serving the Lord, than to have a larger, corrupted leadership which will invariably do much harm.

Conclusion

All of the above are scriptural reasons why a Christian's faithfulness and level of commitment need to be known before they are embraced into fellowship in a local congregation, or a preacher is hired, or elders and deacons appointed, or men or women are called upon by the church to serve in their respective and biblically defined roles. There is no biblical case where it can be shown conclusively that a Christian did not identify with a local congregation after conversion, even if were only with the church in his or her house (e.g. Philemon 2). Early church history even avers that the Ethiopian treasurer took the gospel back to his land where a congregation was planted. After all, this is the only way that a congregation can exist, that is, when members of the church universal identify together in the church local, otherwise known as a congregation. If every member took the position that identifying with a local congregation was not scriptural (which has been shown to be an erroneous position), then no congregation could exist other than by mere chance meeting.
