

Placing Membership with a Local Church

March 2005

The Universal Church

When a sinner obeys the conditions of salvation as stipulated by God, God receives him back into His family: “*And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved*” (Ac 2:47, NKJ). This is a transaction that occurs between the individual and God. It is not administered by a religious body or ratified by any human agency. Regardless of what men may say or think, the sinner is reconciled to God wholly upon the basis of his or her cleansing of sin.

The Local Church

It is clear from the Scriptures, however, that God intends for Christians to congregate when they live in proximity to one another. There are various purposes for this congregating: mutual encouragement (Heb 10:24-25); joint acts of worship (1 Cor 11:17ff); pooling of resources for group duties (1 Cor 16:1-2).

Such group affiliation can only be created and maintained by some form of mutual consent or agreement among the individuals of the group. That is, in order to pool resources or work cooperatively, there must be a common intent expressed in some way. This becomes obvious when one considers how a new congregation is formed from scratch. By necessity there must be some coordination to establish intent, resources, meeting place, times, etc., not to mention the deeper question of doctrinal unity.

A problem sometimes arises because the new testament doesn't specify how this common intent is to be formed or expressed. This doesn't mean it is unauthorized or unnecessary, just that God left the specific method of “organizing” or becoming part of a local church.

After Paul escaped from Damascus and came to Jerusalem, “*he tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple*” (Ac 9:26). The word “join” is from the Gk. *kollao* which Thayer defines: “to join one's self to one as an associate, keep company with ... Ac 9:26” (p. 353). Gareth Reese comments: “Paul was seeking, in the language of our time, full communion with the disciples. He wanted them to accept him, and to have a sense of belonging to their group” (*New Testament History – Acts*, p. 367). Their fear of Paul aside, the only basis on which the Jerusalem saints could rightfully extend spiritual fellowship to Paul was to establish whether or not he was a person of legitimate faith. If this could be determined, there would be no basis for rejecting Paul. This process is fostered by Barnabas, and afterward Paul is received by the brethren (Ac 9:27-28).

Please note that Paul was *always* in fellowship with God even when the Jerusalem church delayed in accepting him. Likewise, when Diotrephes did not receive the apostles (3 Jn 9) and “put out of the church” those who rendered aid to faithful brethren (3 Jn 10), their fellowship with God was not affected. Men can and do err in their judgments as to who is fellowship with God, but such a process should be undertaken with the purest of motives.

People in any group cannot rightfully presume that casual association is a sign of intent to be part of the group. During a meeting in Texas last year, one of the members treated me to lunch at a monthly Kiwanis Club meeting. I was warmly received, served lunch, even introduced to the entire gathering, but I would have been offended to later receive a letter expecting me to pay yearly membership dues or a reprimand for not attending the next meeting.

A member of a local church accepts responsibility to contribute his/her resources to the group, consents to the authority of shepherds, recognizes their influence on others (and accepts the right of the group to discipline if that influence becomes ungodly). This full integration can only be achieved by mutual agreement, call it what you will: “placing membership,” “identifying with the church”; etc. The terminology is less important than the intent to be in joint fellowship.