

God Has Spoken

Tract Series

RECEIVING TRANSFER MEMBERS

by A. L. Parr

Almost every church has received members who have moved from churches in other towns or neighborhoods. Perhaps as many have had visitors from other churches, and sometimes these visitors ask to be recognized as faithful Christians (as, for example, when they are in need of assistance while away from home). Sometimes there are questions associated with such circumstances – questions that arise out of the knowledge that not all churches teach the same doctrine on matters most of us consider important (church cooperation, instrumental music, divorce & re-marriage, “evangelistic authority,” and denominational fellowship, to name just a few). This is unfortunate, but true, and we must deal with the situation in a biblical way.

There is ample Bible illustration of a similar state of affairs, and with it a God-authorized method of turning this difficult situation into a peaceful and productive fellowship among men (where fellowship exists between all parties and God).

BIBLE EXAMPLES

Saul of Tarsus obeyed the gospel in Damascus (Acts 9). He lived and worked in that area exclusively for perhaps three years (Gal. 1:15-18).

“And when Saul was come to Jerusalem, he assayed to join himself to the disciples: but they ... believed not that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him, and brought him to the apostles, and declared unto them how he had ... preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus (Acts 9:26-27).

The church in Jerusalem didn’t know Saul personally. What they had heard about him caused them to wonder whether he was indeed one of them.

God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds
(Hebrews 1:1-2).

Before they extended to him their fellowship (Gal. 2:9), they checked the facts with one who knew them.

“And a certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria, an eloquent man, and mighty in the scriptures, came to Ephesus. This man was instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in the spirit, he spake and taught diligently the things of the Lord, knowing only the baptism of John. And he began to speak boldly in the synagogue: whom when Aquila and Priscilla had heard, they took him unto them, and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly. And when he was disposed to pass into Achaia, the brethren wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive him: who, when he was come, helped them much which had believed through grace: For he mightily convinced the Jews, and that publickly, shewing by the scriptures that Jesus was Christ” (Acts 18:24-28).

Apollos came into Ephesus from another city. By all initial appearances he was a faithful Christian entitled to the fellowship of the church. It was extended to him and he began even to preach among them. By the things he said, it soon became apparent that all was not right with his faith. Some who had the understanding of the truth in his case, and the ability to teach it, guided him to a greater faithfulness to the Lord. He was a leader among the saints – and a preacher – yet he did not object to being questioned, nor did he hesitate to receive instruction when faithful brethren lovingly pointed out sin in his life.

When Apollos wanted to move to Corinth, he carried a letter of introduction from the brethren in Ephesus. The church in Ephesus wrote that letter “exhorting the disciples to receive him” (*i.e.* to inform the Corinthian church that Apollos was worthy of their fellowship and should be granted it). Since Apollos “helped them much which had believed,” it is apparent that the church received the letter as it was intended, and thus received Apollos into their fellowship.

TWO ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS

Paul often wrote letters of introduction for brethren who were traveling to churches that didn't know them personally. Some excellent examples of these letters are Romans 16:1-2 (for Phebe), Ephesians 6:21-22 (for Tychicus), and Colossian 4:7-8 (also for Tychicus). These letters are not wordy, but they all describe the person's works of faith sufficiently to show his spiritual character. Paul could perhaps simply have said, “This person is OK; accept him.” Paul's own reputation and authority might have made that a sufficient comment. But he didn't rely on those; he gave the evidence of the person's faithfulness. Too,

it must be noticed that the letters were not received simply because they described the person's faithfulness; the readers' knowledge of Paul's own faith and judgment made the evidence acceptable as truthful.

This was also the case with Paul (Saul) in Jerusalem and with Apollos in Corinth. When Saul came before the church in Jerusalem, he was introduced by Barnabas, a man well-known to the brethren in Jerusalem (Acts 4:36-37). He might have said, "You men know me to be honorable; I say to you that Saul should be accepted here." He didn't. Saul was recognized as faithful when the evidence of his faith was presented by a man known to the church. When "the brethren wrote" in Ephesus the letter for Apollos, among those brethren were Aquila and Priscilla. That godly couple had been a significant influence in the early days of the church in Corinth. Paul had shared their home and their tent-making business, and they had accompanied him in his evangelistic work (Acts 18:1-3; 18). The evidence of Apollos' faithfulness was presented to the church in Corinth by people well-known and respected in that church.

CONCLUSIONS

The conclusions we may draw from these observations are at least five:

(1) Letters of recommendation are not required when Christians move from one church to another. Apollos apparently did not bring one to Ephesus, and yet was accepted even as one of their preachers.

(2) Such letters are helpful and expedient. The church Apollos left (Ephesus) thought it good to send one, and the receiving church (Corinth) avoided the questions and confusion the previous church had experienced. Not only the church, but also the individual and the work of evangelizing the world benefitted from the harmony thus produced.

(3) Such letters, when employed, are sufficient when the receiving church knows and respects the writer, and the writer describes the evidence of the traveler's faithfulness. Apparently, neither the Jerusalem nor the Corinthian church investigated beyond the reports we know that they received. Yet in Jerusalem the newcomer's word alone had been IN-sufficient to produce harmonious fellowship.

(4) Personal conversation may be an effective substitute for the written letter, but the same conditions apply: Barnabas was well-known to the receiving church (Jerusalem), and he related his personal knowledge of the faithfulness of the one being recommended (Saul).

(5) Asking for such a letter or list of references does not necessarily imply the unfaithfulness of the transfer member, or an accusation of it. Saul certainly was a disciple when he returned to Jerusalem; the brethren just didn't know, and, given what they had heard, did not think it wise to take a chance. The letter in Ephesus and those included in Paul's epistles were written before such accusations could have been made (and perhaps to prevent such accusations from being made).

Letters of recommendation or a list of references that may be contacted are an advisable expedient when a Christian moves from one church to another, or when he travels and visits churches. Such letters, however should be signed by, or such lists should name, persons who are generally known where the traveler is going, or whose own faithfulness can be verified where the traveler wants to be accepted.

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