



"...TO JOIN HIMSELF TO THE DISCIPLES"

Al Parr

The concept of “joining the church” as it is regularly used in a denominational context is unscriptural. A person who is not a member of the body of Christ cannot become one simply by deciding to do so and requesting such membership. This we know because the scriptures teach that “the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved” (Acts 2:47). Man might (indeed, he must) “plant” and “water,” but it has always been God who “gave the increase” (I Corinthians 3:6).

The scriptures do teach, however, that a member of the body of Christ might move from one area to another, and in the new area “join himself to the disciples” (Acts 9:26). This is the case in the context of the book of Acts, chapter nine, verse 26. Saul of Tarsus, long-time resident of Jerusalem (Acts 22:3), and there a highly-placed Jew (Galatians 1:14; Philippians 3:5-6; Acts 22:3-5), but not a Christian (Acts 9:1), went to Damascus (Acts 9:2-9). While in that city, Saul heard and obeyed the gospel (Acts 22:14-16; 26:15-20). As a result of that obedience, as in all cases of gospel obedience, Saul was “added” to the church of the Lord (Acts 2:47), and specifically, became a member of the church in Damascus (Acts 9:19). He stayed a long time in Damascus (Galatians 1:17-18), but eventually returned to Jerusalem. It was on this return that he “assayed to join himself to the disciples.”

The record of Saul’s effort to gain acceptance and inclusion in the assembly of saints in Jerusalem stands today as a guide to us. Whether we find ourselves on Saul’s side of the matter (moving into, and seeking recognition by the church in, a new area), or on the side of the Jerusalem church (meeting someone seeking such recognition), we can find in the context of Acts 9 the expression of God’s authorization as to how we should proceed.

The first fact that we should notice is that Saul “assayed to join himself to the disciples.” It is the personal responsibility of every Christian to seek out the fellowship of other faithful Christians. There are certain practices among American Christians today which are hereby proven to be error. Those who move into a new city and fail to seek out the church, are not following Saul’s example. Those who visit many weeks with one or more faithful churches in the area before committing themselves to serving the Lord as a part of one of them, are failing to show themselves to be as faithful as was our example Saul in Jerusalem.

Secondly, notice that Saul “assayed to join himself to the disciples.” This interesting word (which means to try or to attempt) implies that the church’s recognition of Saul’s faithfulness was not necessarily to be assumed. Some effort on Saul’s part, and some consideration of that effort on the part of the church are implied. In any usual case of a person unknown to the church seeking the church’s fellowship, the brethren might naturally ask for some credentials (cf. Acts 18:27). In Saul’s case, however, there was considerable reason to doubt his sincerity and his faithfulness. He had, after all, left this city “breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples” (Acts 9:1), and there would be many in the church who still remembered that frightening time. It would be necessary for Saul to make some effort to prove his faithfulness to the Lord.

From the viewpoint of the church, then, we can see that it is neither necessary, nor always even a safe course, to accept without question the word of a stranger who says that he is a Christian and wants to be a member of the local assembly. The Bible says that in the Jerusalem church “they were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple.” There was serious skepticism, as well we might expect. Of course, that need not be the attitude in every case, but we can see that there were questions in the minds of the saints, and they expected Saul to be forthcoming with some answers.

In modern times many churches have reaped the sad consequences of having unquestioningly accepted into their fellowship one or more whose faith was not as their own. Multitudes could tell mournful tales of the effect of just one dissenter stirring up strife in a church by whispering in secret against the elders, preacher or others trying to stand for the right. This same Saul whose actions we are considering later became known as the apostle Paul. It was he who warned that “some shall depart from the faith ... speaking lies in hypocrisy” (I Timothy 4:1-2) and “the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers ... and they shall turn away their ears from the truth” (II Timothy 4:3-4). To the Christians in Rome the same apostle wrote, “Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple” (Romans 16:17-18).

The damage that can be caused to a peaceful church of faithful saints is a result too dangerous to risk where it is avoidable. The damage is avoidable in most cases of receiving into the fellowship those who come claiming to be faithful Christians. It is a simple matter for the elders, or other responsible saints, to interview such persons before accepting them. A faithful Christian will not mind having his faith examined (I Peter 3:15). Churches might elect to present a printed questionnaire to the new arrival, or they might schedule a personal interview, or both.

There is nothing in the scriptures that requires a church immediately to accept any and all who come requesting fellowship. Our fellowship should be extended only to those who are in fellowship with the Lord Himself (Revelation 1:20; 2:5).

for Confirming the Churches
strengthening smaller churches in difficult situations