



QUESTION: (1) Prayer for Truth Seekers and (2) Letters of Commendation



I must open the Question Box with a humble apology to a dear sister who, months ago, wrote a letter that I have rediscovered in a pile of *answered* correspondence! I am very sorry for the oversight, and I shall now, rather belatedly, attempt to address the quite important issues her letter raises.

Prayer and Progress.

Our sister asks five questions, but, I am relieved to say, she has left me to decide which questions to use for the Question Box. I have, therefore, chosen to deal with the first and the fifth questions, and the first requires a simple answer. It asks: "*Should we pray more persistently that people will seek the truth?*"

My response must be to say that pray alone, no matter how persistent or passionate, is simply not enough to accomplish the purpose for which the Church exists.

I am reminded of an experience we had in Corby many years ago, when a husband and wife who claimed to be members of the Lord's Church, arrived from N. Ireland with their children and needed both accommodation and financial help. Because we had an excellent relationship with the local Housing Office, we were able to obtain a house for them, and the Corby church provided financial help and furniture.

We were surprised and disappointed, however, when no member of the family ever attended a single meeting of the Church. When they were visited, the church-visitors were informed that, although the family never came to worship, they '*prayed for the church every day!*' This prompted the response, "*If every member of the Corby congregation merely 'prayed for the Church every day', and stayed at home, the Church would not survive for very long!*"

Prayer is good; it is essential. But prayer alone, like faith alone, when it comes to spreading the Truth, is dead. Taking this a step farther let me add that I fear that in these days many congregations are merely 'keeping house for the Lord'. We are holding regular services, singing, praying, and furnishing the Lord's Table, giving our 'mites', listening to some unremarkable sermons, the like of which might be heard in a denominational service, and doing little else!

In some cases there may be understandable reasons why this is so, but the fact remains that very little 'outreach' is taking place. What we need in these admittedly difficult times is much more positive evangelistic activity. C.H. Spurgeon is reported to have exclaimed, "*Ye men of Plymouth! Why stand ye gazing up into Heaven? Get on with your work!*" If we *worked* more, perhaps the Lord would excuse us if we *prayed* less.

'Letters of Commendation'

Question 5 raises the subject of church autonomy and, to use her words: '*the way in which churches will accept members from other congregations without any check on their behaviour.*'

Her letter reveals that she is troubled by the fact that congregations are sometimes prepared to receive into membership individuals who come to them, come from sister congregations, without showing respect for, and courtesy towards, the congregations from whence they come, by first establishing that the new-comers are brethren in good standing, thus acting in an orderly and scriptural manner.

For a people who claim to wish to '*restore the church of the New Testament*' – (at least, that is what I heard preached, as a young Christian over 70 years ago, although I have heard precious little of such preaching for a long time!) - we have adopted a very slack attitude in the matter inter-congregational communication, particularly in the matter of receiving people into fellowship.

In New Testament Times.

It seems clear, from a reading of the scriptures, that the New Testament Church was familiar with the use of what are described as '*letters of commendation*'. These were letters commonly carried by those

who had occasion to move about the Roman world of that time, and similar letters were used in Judaism when men were commissioned to tasks on behalf of the Priesthood or Sanhedrin.

Let me say at this point, that such letters were not required by divine command, but, as E.H.Plumtre, the highly regarded commentator states: "*The 'letters of commendation' deserve notice as an important element in the organisation of the early church*", and, as such, they were obviously regarded as a very effective expedient in maintaining good order among the congregations.

'The Known'

1. Of course, there were times when the character and reputation of the one seeking to be received into the fellowship by a particular congregation, was so *well-known* that identification was unnecessary, as in Paul's own case, mentioned in 2nd.Cor. 3:1.

Read the context and you will see that men had come from Jerusalem to Corinth, carrying what they claimed were 'letters of commendation' from the Judean leadership – probably the apostles, or the elders. Paul declared that, where he was concerned, the Corinthians needed no letter of commendation from him, since he had spent so much time among them.

'The Unknown'

2. There are other times when a brother in good standing is *not known* to the congregation to which he presents himself, as was the case of Apollos, in Acts 17:27. In his case, the church in Ephesus provided him with a letter to commend him to the church in Corinth. Indeed, for that matter, before his own conversion, 'Saul of Tarsus' had even *requested* letters of introduction to the synagogues in Damascus, and they were provided by the high priest in Jerusalem (Acts 9:1-2).

'The Questionable'

3. But there are also times when an individual's conduct creates a problem in his home assembly, and, instead of seeking to resolve the difficulty in the plainly-stated scriptural manner, he decides to leave and take up membership elsewhere. It is this last scenario which evidently concerns our questioner, when she asks, "*Are congregations so independent that they will accept members from other congregations without any check on their past behaviour?*"

The Duty of Church Leaders.

Well, the doctrine of the autonomy of individual congregations is one which is both scriptural and precious, and which churches of Christ have historically defended and maintained with vigour. But independence must never cause one congregation to behave in a discourteous manner towards another, nor to act, in the matter of fellowship, in a way that ignores biblical teaching on church-orderliness.

When we recognize that '*though we are many, we are one Body*', we also recognize that it is wrong for one who is '*out of fellowship*' with one congregation to think he may merely transfer himself to another. And it is equally wrong, in such circumstances, for that individual to be accepted by another congregation.

The scriptures clearly teach that, if an individual is out of fellowship with the one congregation, he is out of fellowship with the entire Body, until the cause of division has been eliminated. But it is a sad fact that this is not always recognized. Why not? Our questioning sister may well be right in suggesting that this sort of thing occurs because congregations '*tend to get into competition with each other*' (for members).

Therefore, church-leaders carry a solemn duty before God, to establish whether or not those who come to them in such circumstances, may *scripturally* be received into fellowship. And, furthermore, any who come to the Lord's Table having unresolved issues with another congregation should know that the scriptures warn against '**eating and drinking unworthily**' (1st Cor. 11:29).

To sit at the Lord's Table whilst neglecting, or refusing, to resolve ongoing problems, makes one guilty of '**failing to discern (recognize) the Lord's body**', thus dishonouring His body, which is His Church. What is the consequence? 1st Cor. 11: 30 describes it. "**For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep.**"

When sister congregations show respect and courtesy towards each other, and support each other in the maintenance of congregational order, we shall be a stronger, purer and more effective people.

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