**FLOATING MEMBERSHIP**

Is it proper for a Christian leave a faithful local church, and simply “float around” – with no intent of joining another faithful church? The short answer is “no;” but I believe more needs to be said. Let’s begin by laying some ground-work, using principles which are accepted by most brethren.

**First, local church membership is essential.** In the example of Acts 9:26-28, we note that Saul “tried to join the disciples” (v.26a). This shows the exercise of Saul’s will in expressing a desire to be a part of the church at Jerusalem. But also note that the disciples in Jerusalem “were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple” (v.26b). This brings into play the will of the congregation. Saul was not accepted until there was a MUTUAL agreement between him and the church to work together (v.27-28). *Faithfulness is “the tie that binds” a member and a church* (cf. 1Cor.5:11-13). These same principles apply today.

Based on the above, it seems clear that a Christian has “the right to join” a local church – *and “the right to leave” it!* As confirmation, consider Saul, who left Tarsus, then became a member at Antioch (Ac.11:25-26; cf. 13:1). The “right to leave” a particular church is inherent to the very nature of the relationship. *However, this does not mean that every Christian will act* ***properly*** *in such matters.* Sometimes, a Christian will leave, and “float around the brotherhood” – usually because something is amiss in their spiritual life. *This choice is wrong (sinful); but we must recognize their free will – even their right to do wrong!* John said of the false teachers of his day, “they went out from us...” (1Jn.2:19). They were wrong to leave in order to promote error; *but this did not negate their “right to leave,” per-se.* In fact, Paul suggests such separations should be expected (1Cor.11:19).

In light of the above, what should we do about those who choose to leave and just float around the brotherhood? About all we can do is to instruct them that they must join a faithful church (Ac.9:26). But, if they refuse to give heed, there isn’t much we can do to bring them into compliance with God’s law. We must simply recognize that they have made a poor choice, and respond accordingly. In a practical sense, this simply means that we cannot condone their actions (2Jn.9-11). ***We may even want to state the facts publicly, so others will be informed.*** That is exactly what John did in 1 John 2:19.

The problem which often arises in such situations is that some brethren just can’t let it go at that. They say, “We must DO something!” – which usually means, “Let’s send them a letter and tell them that they can’t leave us, because we’re withdrawing from them!” This is similar to the old cliché, “You can’t quit, because you’re fired!” This is immature at best. At worst, it reveals pride or ignorance. Pride, because we simply must have the last word. Ignorance, because we fail to recognize their God-given “right to leave.” We must learn that we cannot control what another person does; we can only react to it. I hasten to add that our reaction may be proper or improper!

I simply ask, “What is accomplished by writing a letter to such people?” Contrary to what many think, a letter is NOT a withdrawal. You don’t need a letter to “withdraw” from someone! The “withdrawal” occurs when individual brethren “keep no company” with such (2Th.3:6, 14-15). However, if there is no “company” being kept (e.g., if they have left), then there is nothing to “withdraw,” for the relationship is already terminated! Just state the facts, and move on (cf. 1Jn.2:19).

Writing a letter in such cases is simply a salve for our collective pride: “We sure showed them! How dare they think they can leave us!” It will not bring them back, for they have already made their decision to leave. *So, I say, write a letter if you simply must; but realize that it serves no constructive purpose.* (Incidentally, writing a letter is not required; it is merely an expedient.)

Closely related to the above discussion is the powerful truth that God does not rule His kingdom by force. His kingdom is based upon the principle of “volunteerism.” David said, *“Your people shall be* ***volunteers*** *in the day of Your power”* (Ps.110:3, NKJ). God doesn’t FORCE people to obey; He persuades (2Cor.5:11). Likewise, Christians can’t force one another to do right; we must persuade by teaching and example (1Cor.4:17; 11:1). If we would learn this simple truth, it would eliminate much confusion with regard to this matter. Finally, remember this: ***floating members are only fooling themselves!***

--Lanny Smith