

THE CHURCH LETTER

By: Robert J. Sargent

Typically, when a member of a Baptist church moves to a new location and unites with another Baptist church, he moves his membership by means of a Church Letter.

So, exactly what is a Church Letter? How is it used? Is it really necessary? And, most importantly, is it scriptural?

This article considers the subject of the Church Letter. It begins with some basic propositions, considers the Biblical principles involved, and then looks at some practical considerations.

PROPOSITIONS:

Proposition One: It is the will of God for every believer to unite with a New Testament church.

This is inherent in the so-called “Great Commission” that Christ gave to His churches. His command was not only to make disciples and baptize them, but to teach them to “observe all things ... commanded.” Obedience to Christ’s commands can only be *fully* realized through faithful and active membership in a Baptist church.

It is also demonstrated by example. Baptism and church membership for every Christian is the standard operating procedure seen in the New Testament — there is no biblical concession for any Christian not to join a church!

Proposition Two: There are scriptural prerequisites for membership in a Bible-believing Baptist church.

The moral requirements are regeneration and deportment — an inward *possession* and an outward *profession* of Christ. The candidate for membership is not required to be perfect or even completely sound in the faith, but he or she must first be sufficiently instructed so as not to cause “doubtful disputations” (Romans 14:1).

The ceremonial requirement is scriptural baptism. This is the order taught in the New Testament: “*Then they that gladly RECEIVED his word were BAPTIZED: and the same day there were ADDED unto them about three thousand souls*” (Acts 2:41). The new birth is the door to the kingdom of God (John 3:3,5) and baptism is the door to church membership. A believer is baptized “into” the body of believers (I Corinthians 12:13).

Proposition Three: In addition to baptism, there are two other scriptural ways a church may receive brethren into membership. (These apply when the would-be member has already received valid baptism.)

Baptist churches receive members who come from another Baptist church of like faith and order by means of a letter of commendation and transfer.

Baptist churches may also reinstate a member through restoration. This is done when a member, who was previously set apart from the membership for certain offenses

(Matthew 18:17; I Corinthians 5:1-7,9-13; Romans 16:17; Titus 3:10; II Thessalonians 3:6,14,15), has repented and seeks to be restored. He is to be completely forgiven and received to full membership (II Corinthians 2:6-8).

THE PRINCIPLES BEHIND THE CHURCH LETTER:

Scriptural baptism is not a repeatable ordinance. If a true believer was baptized (immersed) into, and by the authority of, a Bible-believing Baptist church — thereby setting forth a picture of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection — then he or she is not to be *re*-baptized as a prerequisite to joining another church. (The twelve men in Acts 19 were initially "baptized" as unregenerate disciples. Their valid baptism came in Acts 19:5.)

The scriptural method of receiving such a person is the "letter of commendation and transfer." This is a written communication from one church to another that bears witness of the transferee's standing, and acknowledges the transfer of membership.

The Church Letter is based upon two New Testament principles:

First: membership in another church must be on the basis of recommendation. When Brother Saul (a member in good standing of the church at Damascus) sought to join with the church at Jerusalem, he was not received at face value — he needed the recommendation of Barnabas.

"And when Saul was come to Jerusalem, he assayed to join himself to the disciples: but they were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him, and brought him to the apostles, and declared unto them how he had seen the Lord in the way, and that he had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus. And he was with them coming in and going out at Jerusalem" — Acts 9:26-28.

Later, Paul referred (with some sarcasm) to the practice of communicating with the letter of commendation when he wrote rhetorically to the church at Corinth:

"Do we begin again to commend ourselves? or need we, as some others, epistles of commendation to you, or letters of commendation from you?" — II Corinthians 3:1.

Second: churches must communicate with one another. Yes, Bible-believing Baptist churches are independent and autonomous, but they also share a commonality. Their connection includes the exchange of letters.

"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" — Acts 18:27.

"And when I come, whomsoever ye shall approve by your LETTERS, them will I send to bring your liberality unto Jerusalem" — I Corinthians 16:3.

THE PURPOSE OF A CHURCH LETTER:

The scriptures above show that letters were exchanged for the purpose of accrediting or commending a brother (or sister, Romans 16:1,2) in Christ. Evidently, no one was received on the basis of their *own* recommendation. While it may be necessary in rare circumstances (such as where a church has disbanded, or there has been an acrimonious church split), the common practice of receiving members “by statement” is NOT a Biblical one.

No pastor would invite to his pulpit a “preacher unknown;” why then would a church receive someone into its membership just on their say-so that they have been saved and baptized, and are a member in good standing of such-and-such Baptist church? To do so is asking for trouble!

Here are three practical reasons for the Church Letter:

One: It is a big help in maintaining accurate membership records — especially when many present-day Baptists seem to be so nonchalant about their church membership. Belonging to a Bible-believing Baptist church is a great privilege. According to I Corinthians 12, membership sets one in the body of Christ where even the feeblest members are necessary; according to I Peter 2:5 and Ephesians 2:20-22, every member is set as a lively stone in the temple of the Spirit of God. Churches (and their pastors) need to know who their members are. Exchanging letters enables churches to keep track of their members who relocate.

Two: It provides a vital protection for the church. It means someone who is under church discipline cannot simply go and join another church in some other place; it means those who have caused contention and strife in one church cannot easily repeat the harm in a different church. The letter helps “weed out” the perennial “spiritual gypsies!” It also means a church can receive with confidence a member of another Baptist church, with some knowledge of their spirituality, experience, and their gifts and talents.

Three: It is just good manners. So many problems in life could be avoided if people simply communicated; so, too, with inter-Church problems. Common courtesy should dictate that churches *request* letters, that church *grant* letters, and that churches *acknowledge* letters. It is part of conducting the Lord’s business “decently and in order.”

THE PRACTICE OF THE CHURCH LETTER:

Letters may only be properly exchanged between churches of like faith and order. “Faith” (belief) and “order” (practice) form the basis of church fellowship, Colossians 2:5. Baptist churches do not accept letters from, nor send letters to, other religious groups — because there is no commonality.

Letters should only be communicated on a church level. This ensures the information being exchanged is current. It is unwise to hand the letter to a member who is moving on (unless it contains an expiration date). An open-ended letter can be easily misused. For example, if the departing member decides to join an apostate Baptist “church” (or a non-Baptist church), his previous church has forfeited any opportunity for direction or input in that decision. If the letter is old, the receiving church will not know what may have transpired in the prospective member’s life over the intervening time.

The Church Letter should clearly acknowledge the member's standing in the church, and also mention the ministries he or she may have been faithfully involved in. The letter should be factual; great care must be taken to avoid making any accusation or other negative statement about the member. In today's litigious society, that could open the door to a lawsuit for libel. The letter should state: "Any personal or confidential comments concerning this member from the pastors will be included in a separate communication."

Letters should *never* be granted on behalf of a member who is under church discipline. Instead, the communication to the other church should factually state that the brother or sister is under disciplinary action and that no transfer of membership can be granted until the issue that brought about the withdrawal of fellowship has been resolved.

It is very common these days for church members to move away and literally "drop off the radar screen." People will move for a better job, or to be closer to family or other amenities, but fail to unite with another Bible-believing Baptist church. Then, years later, they finally get around to joining a church, and the church they once belonged to — out of the blue — receives a request for a letter of commendation and transfer. In this case, a letter may be granted — but it should include a "without recommendation" clause (a kind of spiritual "caveat emptor").

The "Promise of a Letter" is different than *receiving* a letter. A member remains a member of his or her previous church until a letter of commendation and transfer is granted. It is then recorded in the membership records, "Transferred by Letter to Such-and-Such Baptist Church on this date."

THE PROBLEM WITH THE CHURCH LETTER:

The problem is ... too many churches ignore the practice of asking for and/or granting church letters. This is actually a very grievous matter, and much harm has been done to the Lord's churches by its neglect. Failure in this area only cheapens church membership.

When a church fails to *request* a letter of commendation and transfer, it is disrespecting the other church, and leaves it wondering what became of their member who moved away.

When a church fails to *request* a letter of commendation and transfer, it is leaving itself wide open to trouble. It would never know if the member it received was a heretic, a gossip, a murmurer, or unruly. Sure, it might check the prospective member out ... but on whose say so?

When a church fails to *grant* a letter of commendation and transfer, it is disrespecting the church requesting it, and leaves it wondering whether the member who wishes to join is in good standing.

A very serious problem arises when a church willfully receives someone into membership *knowing* they are under the disciplinary action of their previous church (or has left under bad terms). This act sets church against church, often bringing to an end any meaningful fellowship between the two. It violates the sovereignty of a church. Why? Because the church receiving the disciplined member is in effect saying to the other church, "We don't agree with (or care for) your actions." Bible-believing Baptists are *independent* Baptists — we stay out of each others' business AND, we respect each others' business too. Think what it would do for the

purity of Baptist churches if unruly members and those under church discipline could find NO sanctuary or right hand of fellowship from any other Baptist church of like faith and order. Maybe they'd think twice about leaving without having settled the issues at hand in a scriptural way!

What about your church? How does it practice the requesting and granting of the Church Letter? Pastors, we do our level best to make certain a candidate for baptism and church membership is truly saved, and rightly so. Let's not be sloppy and unconcerned about the *other* door; let's not take things for granted based on hearsay.

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