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Reception or Joining a Church?

by David Dunlap

Christians have debated for many years the issue of membership in the local church. Some churches have taught that, unless a Christian is a church member, he cannot partake at the Lord's Supper, be married in the church, or be involved in ministries of the church. Some have gone so far as to refuse to recognize baptism from other evangelical fellowships and insist on re-baptism.¹ What does the Bible say about fellowship in the local church?

What is "Reception"?

Many churches talk about "joining a church", but the language the Bible uses for fellowship in the local church is not "join" but "receive". We read in the New Testament: "Receive us; we have wronged no man, we have corrupted no man, we have defrauded no man"(2 Cor. 7:2) ; "When Apollos was disposed to pass into Achaia, the brethren wrote, exhorting the disciples to *receive* him"(Acts 18:27); "For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest *receive* him forever, not now as a servant but above a servant, a brother beloved, especially to me but how much more to thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord"(Philemon 15-16). We might define "reception" as the welcoming of Christians into full Christian fellowship, privileges, and responsibilities within the local assembly. The Bible never uses the word "join" in referring to entrance into the universal or local church. When a person trusts in Christ as his Savior, he is "added"(Acts 2:41, 47) to the body of Christ, or the universal church. As we look closely at the New Testament, we see the word "received" used over twenty times in regard to fellowship in a local church. Reception as a New Testament doctrine is near to the heart of God, for it expresses the unity of the church and the nature of the body of Christ, and it refocuses the believer on Christ rather than on church polity. New Testament churches received into their local assemblies those who knew the Lord Jesus Christ as their Savior and did not participate in moral or doctrinal error. In some cases, they may have been weak or untaught Christians, but nevertheless, they were received on the basis of being received by the Lord in salvation. "Wherefore, *receive* ye one another, as Christ also *received* us to the glory of God"(Rom. 15:7); "Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations...for God hath *received* him"(Rom 14:1). The New Testament emphasizes four essential principles when receiving a believer into fellowship: (a) *Receive* without respect of persons (Jms 2:1-5); (b) *Receive* him that is weak in the faith (Rom 14:1); (c) *Receive* him on the basis of spiritual life and not the degree of biblical knowledge (Acts 9:26, 18:24-28). (d) *Receive* him on the basis of spiritual life, not on church affiliation (3 Jn. 9-10). Some, to whom this distinction is new, may object. One may say, "Isn't this difference between joining a church and reception into church fellowship merely a trivial nuance or a play on words?" What is the important difference between these viewpoints?

" Those who have received Christ by faith must receive all Christians by brotherly love...now the reason why Christians must receive one another is given—on the basis of the condescending love of Christ to us: As Christ also received us, to the glory of God."

Matthew Henry
(1662-1714)

What is the Difference Between “Reception” and “Joining a church” ?

When we look at this question, we must never lose sight of the fact that the church is not primarily an organization or institution but a living body. The New Testament lays great weight on this truth. The church has a head and members, it is indwelt by the Spirit of God, and it is composed of living stones. “You also, as living stones, are built up a spiritual house and holy priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifices...”(1 Peter 2:5). This truth must greatly influence any view on the doctrine of church membership. If the church is a living body, how then might one join such a living New Testament assembly? Many Church leaders would reply by outlining the typical process of joining a church. However, it should be pointed out that it is biblically impossible to *join* a church. Although many may strongly protest this statement consider the following illustration. Can an ear, of itself, join the human body? Of course not. To join the body of Christ means that one is still outside. If a believer is a part of the body, then there is no possible way to join. We, as believers, are already in the church and are, therefore, joined and in fellowship with one another. Thus, it is neither necessary nor possible to join the church. Of course, when one moves from the area of one local church to the area of another local church, he is *received* into the fellowship of that new group of believers. The New Testament teaches that entrance into the local church is based upon the same principles as entrance into the body of Christ. This doctrine has been understood by Bible students and scholars for many years, yet is largely neglected by many within the local church. The British New Testament Greek scholar F. J. A. Hort (1828-1892) writes:

“There is no indication that Paul regarded the conditions of fellowship in the universal Ecclesia (church) as differing from the conditions for fellowship in the local Ecclesia...The universal and the local Ecclesia alike were wholly made up of men who had each for himself believed, whose baptism of each was the outward expression...”²

Along a similar line, Dr. Robert L. Saucy, a professor at Talbot Theological Seminary, CA, writes:

At the time of salvation believers are first ‘called unto the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ, our Lord’ (1 Jn. 1:3). This fellowship or participation with Christ constitutes the believer as a member of the universal church in the sense of the spiritual reality of the unity of the Spirit in the body of Christ. But the New Testament does not stop with this fellowship. For when one is called into fellowship with God and made a member of the body of Christ, he is at the same time brought into fellowship with fellow members of that body.³

Many will give theological lip service to the truth of reception but then question its relevance. There is a distinct difference between joining a church and being received into the fellowship of a local church. What lasting spiritual implications might be involved?

Why Is This Difference Important?

One may say, “It is of no real consequence how a believer comes into the church, but rather, how he functions once he is in it.” There is some truth in this line of reasoning, but it does seem to miss the larger focus. All would doubtless agree that departure from God’s divine design for the church will have its consequences. Would not the God of incomparable order and design have specific purposes for the method of coming into church fellowship? What are some of God’s divine purposes for reception into fellowship of the local church?

Firstly, it safeguards against sectarianism, as it stresses the unity of the One Body. God knows, more than we ourselves, that man has the tendency towards sectarianism. Men will create conditions and build walls to keep out

“We do not join the church. Rather, we are already in the church and therefore are joined to one another. When a believer is redeemed and forgiven and receives new life, he is not only regenerated through resurrection life but is also put into the church by the power of God. It is God who has put him in; thus he is already in the church. He is an insider, so he has no need of joining.”

Watchman Nee
(1903-1972)

certain kinds of believers from the local church. These barriers may be beliefs concerning views on prophecy, favored versions of the Bible, baptism, or political issues of the day. Reception bypasses these walls and lays stress upon whether or not a person knows Christ, thereby strengthening the unity of the one body of Christ.

Secondly, it stresses a vital living fellowship with Christ as the basis of New Testament church life. The question is not primarily “are you baptized?” or “What church did you last attend?” Reception focuses on the most important issue in the believers life; do you have a vital living relationship with Christ? The heart of spiritual matters is usually a matter of the heart. When a believer is in proper fellowship with Christ, other areas of concern will usually fall into proper perspective. Instead of focusing merely on the outward marks of Christianity, reception places the main focus on the believer’s life in Christ and his love for Christ.

Thirdly, it emphasizes the living Body aspect of the church instead of a human organization. Reception stresses that Christians are welcomed into a living spiritual body where there is spiritual service and spiritual needs among its members. In this gathering, each member is a “living stone” in a spiritual house where Christ leads as the Chief Cornerstone. In this living body, each member has a responsibility to Christ and contributes to the health and growth of its other members. Reception emphasizes being a participant in a living body, rather than having a name on a membership list.

Finally, reception helps to re-focus the church on the very purpose of its meeting together—the person of Christ. Reception is not merely being a part of a religious center with its programs and activities. Joining a typical evangelical church usually focuses on the requirements of the new members, such as tithing and attendance, and the importance of the church’s programs and activities. However, reception focuses on the central attraction of the church—Christ. A believer is received into a gathering of saints, of which the Lord Jesus Christ is its head and center of worship. The very purpose of reception is to enable believers to turn away from the world and to turn their hearts and minds toward the Lord Jesus Christ in worship and service. This focus will by necessity invigorate the spiritual tone of worship and service in the local church.

How is a Believer Received into a Local Assembly?

When a believer visits a local assembly and shows interest in being an active part of that fellowship, the elders should meet with him. This visit should emphasize the spiritual character of the local church. This time together should also stress the mutual responsibility of the assembly to the believer and the believer to the assembly. The believer has the privilege of giving in time, talent, financial resources, and the use of his spiritual gift to the blessing the of other believers.□The believer, armed with a servant-attitude, also has the privilege of displaying acts of practical love to the brethren in praying, sharing, opening one’s home, and visiting others (John 13:34).

□The elders also have a responsibility to the believer. The believer will be held accountable to maintain a life pleasing to the Lord in doctrine and moral purity. The elders have a responsibility to the believer to disciple, challenge, and shepherd with the goal of being conformed to the image of Christ.□However, reception goes further than merely *accepting* one into the life of the assembly. The New Testament often uses the Greek word “proslambano”(Acts 18:26, Romans 14:1) and also “apodechomai”(Acts 15:4, 18:27) when setting forth the doctrine of reception. These words indicate that reception is more than the simple welcoming of a believer into the fellowship of an assembly. These words show that it includes hospitality, teaching, and the spiritual care of these new ones now in the assembly. This principle is beautifully illustrated in the example of Aquila and Priscilla. When this couple saw the spiritual zeal in Apollos, they took

“We should receive one another as Christ has received us. Here is the basis for reception in the local assembly. We do not receive on the basis of denominational affiliation, or spiritual maturity, or social status. We should receive those whom Christ has received, in order to promote the glory of God”.

**William
MacDonald**

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(*proslambano*, ie. nurtured, taught, etc.) him into their home and began to teach and encourage him in the faith. The Greek words, used in Acts 18, show the tenderness and care exhibited as they ministered to him. "Apollos began to speak boldly in the synagogue: whom when Priscilla and Aquila heard, they took (*proslambano*) him unto them and expounded to him the way more perfectly...when he was disposed to go to Achaia, the brethren wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive (*apodechomai*) him" (vv. 26, 27). Aquila and Priscilla showed sacrificial hospitality, taught, and gave spiritual guidance; then, when Apollos took his leave, a letter was written to the believers in Achaia asking them to receive him in the same way. This passage draws for us a word picture of what reception should look like in New Testament churches today. Reception goes much further than merely accepting a believer into fellowship. It must include spiritual care and teaching by the elders, along with the other believers in the assembly.

Reception does not urge believers to join a new church or become members in a new denomination, but rather, to share in a new fellowship with those who love the Lord in their common salvation. New Testament churches do not rejoice because a believer is now a member of their church or denomination, but because the believer now shares in the fellowship of saints as members of the body of Christ. This fellowship is emphasized throughout the New Testament. In the Lord's Supper, the cup is the "*communion* of the blood of Christ", and the bread is the "*communion* of the body of Christ." New Testament churches do not ordain ministers of the gospel but extend to them the "right hand of *fellowship*" (Gal. 2:9). Monetary gifts that are sent to support efforts in the gospel at home or on foreign soil are said to be "fellowship in the gospel" (Phil. 4:19). This fellowship was never considered by New Testament writers to be "partial", or "Sunday morning only", on the part of believers, but rather "steadfast" and continual. May all churches take up this New Testament pattern, striving to set forth reception and fellowship as a hallmark of their position in Christ and their love for Christ and for each other.

Endnotes

1. "Landmarkism", Fred S. Mead estimates 1,500,000 members of baptist churches hold to the Landmark position and doctrine (*Handbook of Denominations*, fifth edition, Abington Press,) p. 45
2. F. J. A. Hort, *The Christian Ecclesia*, (New York, Macmillan, 1897), p. 169-170
3. Robert Saucy, *The Church in God's Program*, (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1972), p. 102

