

# BAPTIST AND CHURCH LETTERS

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Church letters certainly have their place, and are very necessary, but unfortunately they have become widely abused, and even more commonly misunderstood. The question is asked and an attempt will be made to set forth in a clear way exactly what church letters are, the limitations on them, the abuses made of them, and responsibilities connected with them.

## I. WHAT ARE CHURCH LETTERS?

Perhaps a better designation for these would be "letters of recommendation," for this is exactly what these are. A church letter is simply a letter from one church to another recommending a member to the fellowship of the second church, and stating that the person recommended is in regular standing in the church, not accused of anything worthy of disciplinary action by the church. Typically, when a member of a Baptist church moves to a new location and unites with another Baptist church, he/she moves their membership by means of a Church Letter.

A church letter being a recommendation of an individual by one church to another is the very nature of the case and it can have no relevance to anyone but the two churches involved and the individual under consideration. It is a recommendation of the individual's Christian character and walk, and hence, it implies **nothing of the character of the church to which the individual is recommended beyond the fact that it is recognized** as a sister church, and therefore, a true New Testament church. This is why Baptist churches should exchange letters of recommendation with one another even when they do not agree upon all minor points. Least I be ostracized for such a statement let me explain. In a sound Baptist church the primary area of concern in today's religious culture should be the altar practice of the church. A Baptist church cannot be recognized if it has departed the faith by accepting unregenerate individuals into the church or has left the practice of requiring a born again experience prior to baptism (Matt 3:5), nor can it be recognized if it has departed the major doctrines of the bible that Baptist hold dear. However, and to the point, dis-fellowship over traditions with no valid scriptural support has caused much devastation.

It is true that many Baptist churches have departed the faith by practicing "pencil-card" salvation no longer requiring or instructing seekers to have a genuine conversion experience. Therefore there can be no association of so called "Baptist" churches of every shade without investigation as to certain heresy within and that care must be exercised in the exchange of church members. Sadly, not every congregation that calls itself a Baptist church is one. Some are veritable "synagogues of Satan," even as were some of the assemblies in Asia, (Rev. 2:9; 3:9). By the same token, let us also not be quick to judge without proper evidence.

Baptist recognize that many Protestant churches may contain many saved people, but having a defective origin and baptism they cannot be recognized as New Testament churches. Sainthood and churchhood are not co-extensive. A Baptist church cannot recommend a man to the fellowship of an alien church because of the detriment to the individual and would be guilty of condoning erroneous practice as

would reciprocal acceptance of one by letter from the alien church. And this would certainly have a deleterious effect upon any Baptist church doing so. Therefore consistency demands refusal to grant, as well as to receive, letters of recommendation to and from alien churches.

## II. ARE CHURCH LETTERS SCRIPTURAL?

We must ask, therefore, if there are Scriptures in which the interchange of letters of recommendation is to be found. The answer to this is Yes!

In writing to the church at Rome, Paul gives a very high recommendation to Phebe, a servant of the church at Cenchrea. "I commend unto you Phebe our sister, which is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea: that ye receive her in the Lord, as becometh saints, and that ye assist her in whatsoever business she had need of you: for she hath been a succourer of many, and of myself also," (Rom. 16:1-2).

**According to this scripture here are the necessary ingredients of a church letter.**

- (1) It is a recommendation to the church at Rome.
- (2) It is the recommendation of one that was a member of the Cenchrean church, but who was moving to Rome.
- (3) It testified of her character.
- (4) It also testified of her service or position in the Cenchrean church.

The one difference between this letter of recommendation and those of today is that this one was sent by an apostle, not by the Cenchrean church. However, the one who sent this, had "the care of all the [Gentile] churches" committed unto him, (2 Cor. 11:28), and consequently had the authority to do such things. The apostles had certain authority given unto them as Paul himself testifies, (2 Cor. 10:8), but they seldom exercised this, and chose rather to admonish the churches, and to encourage them to exercise the authority that was committed to them. But with the death of the last apostle, the churches became the sole religious tribunals on earth so that no more could there be apostolic recommendations of faithful brethren.

Another passage that bears a similar testimony relative to church letters is to be found in the book of Philemon. Onesimus had been a slave belonging to Philemon. He had evidently stolen some of his master's money and had run away, but in his travels he came to Rome, heard Paul preach and was converted and baptized. When Paul learned the details of Onesimus' former life, though he had become a beloved brother and helper in the truth, he sent him back to his master. But in a new relationship, "*not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, especially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord? If thou count me a partner, receive him as myself,*" (vv. 16-17).

If someone objects that this was simply a letter from one individual to another we reply as we have already done, that Paul wrote with apostolic authority, and the book of Philemon is not inserted in the Canon of Scripture without good cause. But the address of the book is to be noted. It was written "Unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlaborer, and to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, **and to the church in thy house,** (vv. 1-2). It is believed that Apphia was Philemon's wife and that Archippus was their son, and the pastor of the church addressed. Be that as it may, this epistle had equal weight with the church there, for it was addressed to it as well as to some of the individual members of it.

Though Paul denied the need of a letter of recommendation for himself, he manifestly declared that letters of recommendation were necessary in the case of some, for he says "need we, as some others, epistles of commendation to you. . ." Obviously he felt that there were some believers who, being unknown to the church at Corinth, would need letters of recommendation before they could unite with the church.

But the evidence is stronger yet. "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). Here, as before, we have all the constituent elements of a church letter, and one that is the perfect example for churches today. (1) Apollos was about to move from Ephesus to Achaia (probably to Corinth, 19:1). (2) The Ephesian church gave him a letter of recommendation. (3) The recommendation was that they "receive him." (4) This was sent to the "disciples" or church in Corinth.

Here is not one, but several Scriptural examples of the use of letters of recommendation by the churches of the New Testament. Apostolic examples are as binding as precepts where there are no precepts to the contrary, which is the case here. Was there but one such example of letters of recommendation, it would be binding upon us today if it violated no Scripture precept. But there is not just one. There are several.

### III. HOW MEMBERS ARE TO BE RECEIVED?

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

#### 1. *By Experience and Baptism.*

- a. 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, but he or she must have a conversion experience and a character that represents such a change.
- b. 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).

#### 2. *By Letters of Dismission*

*The other way of becoming members of a church is by presenting Letters of Dismission from sister churches. These letters affording satisfactory proof of their Christian character and standing, the applicants for membership are received and the hand of fellowship given, as in the former case. It is proper to say that by sister churches are meant churches of similar faith and order. Hence no Baptist church can receive and recognize, as a passport to membership, a letter from any Pedobaptist organization. (Pendleton's Manuel)*

Baptist churches receive members who come from another Baptist church of like faith and order by means of a letter of commendation and transfer. If for any reason a letter cannot be obtained for a qualified candidate Dr. J. M. Pendleton states:

*"It sometimes happens that persons who have been baptized where there is no church, and persons who, owing to the extinction of the church to which they belonged, **or to other circumstances**, find themselves without regular*

*Letters of Dismission, wish to enjoy the privileges of membership. In such cases it is only necessary for the church applied to be satisfied of the worthiness of the applicants, and they are received.” (Pendleton’s Manuel)*

Is such cases the receiving church is under obligation to follow God and even though a church may not recognize the receiving church for unscriptural reason’s it is still the candidate that is the object and not the church. If the church is satisfied with the candidate’s testimony, baptism and character then **“they are received.”**

The term “coming by statement” simply means that the church of which the person was a member no longer exists or that for a variety of reasons a record or letter could not be obtained. Dr. Pendleton was very clear that in such cases it is the candidate to be held in view.

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.

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 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, Baptist churches are 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.*

#### IV. THE OBJECT OF DISCIPLINE

One of the purposes of church letters is to guard the disciplinary action of the churches. If members were accepted into churches simply on the statement of the applying member, there would be much potential for evil. For then every carnal Christian who had been excluded from a church for wickedness or heresy, could simply go to another church, proclaim himself a good, spiritual Christian, and he would have to be received as a member. Then he would, in all likelihood, work his evil all over again in **another church**. But where a letter of recommendation is required of a person before he is received into a church, the danger of such things will be greatly curtailed.

It is sadly true that many churches, in their zeal for numbers, in effect, set aside the discipline of sister churches by knowingly receiving excluded members from other churches without requiring the excluded member to make things right with the first church. But such is neither right nor biblical, and the church that does so must answer to the Lord for it. But if every church would require letters of recommendation from sister churches before accepting new members, and only make exception to this rule after a thorough examination of the circumstances that made it impossible for the person to obtain a letter of recommendation, then it would stop much of the church wrecking by unspiritual persons who often move about as church tramps doing their nefarious work in one church after another.

However it seems that even this principal has exceptions and has fallen victim to abuse by churches who have wrongfully administered discipline. Some churches would exclude members for attending a sister church whom they have dis-fellowshipped for no apparent scriptural reason while their own house is full of sinful members who are oft relatives upon which discipline has been withheld. In many cases churches have become guilty of holding members hostage and such wrongful actions will be dealt with by God and provision must be made for those individuals who are victims of such action.

#### V. THE PROBLEM WITH THE CHURCH LETTER

The problem is ... too many churches ignore the practice of asking for and/or granting church letters or they simply abuse their own authority. 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. Some people have mistaken ideas about the duties involved in church membership, and therefore draw erroneous conclusions about church letters.

From what we have noted it is clear that misconceptions often result in abuses of church letters, and they are often abuses and not just unimportant negligence. Such abuse must necessarily result from one of two things—either ignorance of church polity or a total disregard of church duty. Most Baptist churches subscribe to the Baptist Church Covenant. The last paragraph of this reads: "We moreover engage that when we remove from this place, we will as soon as possible unite with some other church, where we can carry out the spirit of this covenant and the principles of God's Word." So far as we know, no other denomination has such a church covenant as this. Therefore, this is nothing less than a promise to continue to be faithful in some Baptist Church upon one's removal to another location. When a Baptist moves to a new location with the mind-set that a letter cannot be obtained because a church has abused or denied this privilege they are standing in front of the work of the Holy Spirit and God and that's a dangerous place to be.

- When a church denies a letter to a sister church based on non-scriptural reasons they are in turn denying what rightfully belongs to God and doing a great injustice to the candidate in consideration, harm to themselves, a sister church and God's cause in general.
- When a church grants a letter to a sister church without reporting honestly of the members character they are guilty of lying.
- 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.
- 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.

True Baptists believe that only saved persons should be members of a church. Baptists also believe that saved persons ought to be members of a church and no church has a right to hold its members hostage. Moving from one church to another should be a process involving the leadership of the Holy Spirit and politics should not be a factor. The exchange of letters should not be a difficult process and it works when biblical patterns are followed. Also the scripture is clear when as to what to do when biblical patterns are not followed, *"Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men."* Acts 5:29