

Reception of Believers

by Franklin Ferguson

The sermon emphasizes the importance of carefully receiving believers into church fellowship while addressing common misconceptions and the role of elders in this process.

Scripture: Acts 2:41, Romans 15:5, 1 Corinthians 12:12, 1 Corinthians 14:40, 1 Timothy 5:22

Topics: "Church Fellowship", "Discipleship"

Description

Robert Gessner discusses the challenges and misconceptions surrounding the reception of believers into local church fellowship, emphasizing the importance of addressing this topic despite the controversies it may bring. He highlights three common misconceptions related to reception, including the confusion between breaking of bread meeting and assembly fellowship, the belief that reception is solely an individual's responsibility, and the disregard for disciplinary actions taken by other churches. Gessner encourages the congregation to re-examine their reception policies and teachings, referencing Franklin Ferguson's booklet 'The Church of God' as a resource for understanding the biblical principles of reception without causing division.

Transcript

Introductory Remarks by Robert Gessner

The practice of receiving believers into fellowship in the local church has always been beset with many problems. Through the years, the policies of reception have been the cause of many divisions. Because it has been a source of disagreement, we tend to avoid discussing it. Consequently, rather than cause controversy, some assemblies have no reception policy or at least they avoid talking about it if they do. In fact, anyone who discusses it, does so at the risk of being considered extremely narrowminded. Because reception has been a problem area in the past, it does not give us a license to ignore it today. There are serious dangers that can take place in an assembly if there is no exercise among the elders and the saints regarding the reception of believers. Because the subject is so often not taught, there are three serious misconceptions that can and have developed in some cases.

The first misconception that often prevails today is that reception at the breaking of bread meeting and reception into assembly fellowship are the same thing. It often happens today that one is received at the breaking of bread, when, in fact, they have not entered into the partnership of the local assembly.

The second misconception is that reception is not an assembly responsibility. It is believed that if an individual chooses to fellowship with us, it is his responsibility and accountability before God and he needs to make sure that his confession is real and his life is right. The disastrous influences of a mixed congregation of true believers and professing unbelievers have been very damaging through the years in every kind of local church. Often the greatest problem has been within, among those growing up in the families of the assembly. In these days of "easy believism", the reception of unbelievers can become a common practice.

The third misconception is that the autonomy of the local church and its independence from a governing body, gives us the right to disregard any disciplinary action taken by another church upon an individual. Thus there has developed an unprecedented pattern of church "hopping". Individuals disciplined by one local church simply move on to another that will receive them.

Because of the above misconceptions, we need to be open to instruction in this area. Many have written on the subject in the past, but often they have expressed extreme views which have led to division. Let us look at one teacher who has attempted to teach us simply from the Scriptures the basic facts of reception without going into the controversies that have erupted from previous times. Over fifty years ago, Franklin Ferguson published a booklet, entitled *The Church of God*. It was so widely read that it went through seven editions. Mr. Ferguson was in the assemblies over fifty years before writing the booklet and he lived in New Zealand. Section 19 of this booklet discusses the reception of believers and is presented for your consideration. We may not agree with every word, but it should awaken us to the need of re-examining the policies of reception in these perilous last days.

The receiving or welcoming of the children of God is a very happy thing, and the fellowship of saints is most sweet, and it is of God. Every right facility for its accomplishment should be used, but with care to have everything in order, lest any abuse should be made of it.

FELLOWSHIP IS A PARTNERSHIP, the sharing of things in common. One who is welcomed to an assembly of saints is received to all that pertains to them; to a share in the privileges, the testimony, the responsibilities, etc. Let our conception of the idea be enlarged. The partnership is not partial: it is complete; it is just as God would have it. Fellowship, is like what we see exemplified in a human body (I Cor. 12:12-27). We see a wonderful joint action and relationship. Each member has a place; is necessary, is indispensable. All act together. Each one contributes something to the welfare of the whole. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one is honored all rejoice. All members are joined one to another, and there is no schism in the body. Each member is controlled by the Head. It has never been known that a hand or foot in our body, when functioning normally, has refused our will. There is always prompt obedience. What a lesson for the members of Christ!

TO SUCH A BLESSED FELLOWSHIP a child of God is welcomed, with the hope that it is permanent. It was so at the beginning. When Judaism, or some other religion, was left for Christ, it was considered as final; should there be a relapse it was an occasion of sorrow to the believers. There was a separation in those days, and that produced persecution; but it kept the church healthy, and true to the Lord. What is called "occasional fellowship" would have seemed a strange thing to the early church. Moreover, the phrase "receiving to the Lord's table" is not used in the Scriptures: reception is to church fellowship, which embraces everything that fellowship implies, including the "breaking of bread."

HOW TO RECEIVE BELIEVERS. "Receive one another, as Christ also received us, to the glory of God" (Rom. 15:5-7). In reception it must, first of all, be quite certain that the person is really the Lord's; has Christ received this one? Secondly, is he or she free from doctrinal error of a fundamental nature? Thirdly, the moral character must be above reproach. These are main considerations, and in no case may they be set aside. Should all things now seem satisfactory, then the question might be asked, "Have you been baptized (immersed) as a believer in Christ?" According to the Lord's commission, this act of obedience, and the records in the Book of Acts show that the disciples obeyed their instructions. In the early church there were no unbaptized believers. Baptism, of course, is neither necessary to salvation nor is it the door into the church, as some affirm. We are saved through faith alone (Eph. 2:8,9), and Christ is the door (John 10:9). Yet this ordinance is essential to obedience, and it follows conversion. Apart from controversy, it is a wise thing to follow the simple order and connection of Scripture, as undoubtedly observed by the early church. In Acts 2:41, we read, "Then they that gladly received the word were baptized, and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls." Conversion, baptism and adding are joined, and "what therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder."

NEED OF GUARDIANS. Elders are not only guides of the flock, they are also guardians. They are to guard the churches of the saints from those who would creep in unawares (Jude 4) and make no end of mischief-, from mere professors-, from any whose life is a bad testimony. We are bidden to do everything "decently and in order" (1 Cor. 14:40); therefore sufficient time and godly care must needs be exercised in the receiving of a professed Christian, concerning whom little or nothing is known. While it would be very nice to receive Christians on the simple basis of being in the 'one body," yet the present condition of things makes it increasingly difficult to do so. We deprecate a spirit of hardness toward any believer in the systems around; yea we would cherish a love for them and a desire to welcome them to what is better far; still we realize that a right exercise of care increases as the days go by. In the case of new converts, all is fairly simple and happy, and in the case of one bearing a letter from any assembly elsewhere, known to us, this too is generally quite satisfactory. The letter is read to the church, and the stranger-believer is accorded a welcome. All cases of reception come before elders, and on their commendation the church receives them.

THE CHURCH RECEIVES THEM. So reception, strictly speaking, is not by the elders, but by the whole church. No one has a personal right to bring another to the Lord's table, nor has any one the liberty to tell someone not to come. Reasonable time, also, should be allowed for any member to produce evidence, if such exists, that may bar the reception meantime. Often has the wisdom of such a course been seen, in the case of a total stranger.

WE CANNOT LAY DOWN A UNIFORM RULE to fit all cases; for there arises at times one which is exceptional, and must be considered on its own merit. But what we have sought to do is to state general guiding principles, rather than details over which there has been much controversy. Our remarks should only be taken as implying an urge for more care in the face of increasing perils, with no wish to exclude any whom the Lord would have us welcome. "Lay hands suddenly on no man" (1 Tim. 5:22) is what we wish to emphasize.

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