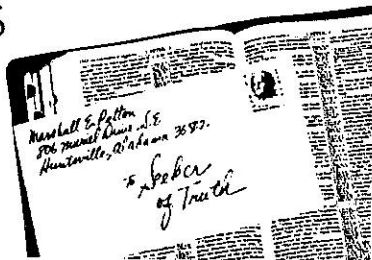


ANSWERS for our hope



Send Bible questions to:

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QUESTION: Will you please discuss how one congregation may start another congregation and be scriptural? May the original church buy a lot, set aside a fund for building at the new site, when as yet no congregation has been started? In other words, may one congregation plan, buy, and build a meeting house for the purpose of starting a new church and not move there itself? Should the new congregation be formed first and then plan, buy, and build on their own? — (Initials withheld by request — M.E.P.)

ANSWER: Many of the matters involved in answering the above questions concern matters of expediency. This means that human judgment is involved, which judgment, of course, must be within the realm of divine authority — all expedients must first be lawful (I Cor. 10:23).

In apostolic days new churches were started by an individual or individuals either going out on their own or being supported by some church or churches, and preaching the gospel in some place where there was no church. When, as a result, souls obeyed the gospel and purposed to function together as a church, a new congregation existed. When these souls obeyed the gospel, they were, of course, added to the church of our Lord (Acts 2:47). This church to which they were added was not a local church, but rather the church in the aggregate or in the general sense (Matt. 16:18; Eph. 1:22,23). In such instances, there may be an understanding on the part of all concerned that those obeying the gospel will work and worship together as a local church, but their obedience to the gospel, of itself, does not necessarily begin a local church, as the following facts will reveal.

The sum total of divine revelation concerning local churches reveals the following facts pertinent to the issue under study.

1. Membership in a local congregation is established by mutual agreement on the part of the faithful children of God involved (Acts 9:26).
2. A local church may exist for a while without being fully organized, i.e., without elders and deacons (Acts 14:21-23).
3. Congregational autonomy must be maintained by each church (Acts 14:23; 20:28; I Pet. 5:2). This means that there can be no organic connection between churches. Furthermore, this precludes one church exercising any control or oversight over another church in any of its affairs.
4. Congregational equality is to be maintained (II Cor. 8:13, 14). This means that one church may

receive from another church, if and when the objective is to bring about equality — “freedom from want.” The expressions “freedom from want” and “that there may be equality” do not mean that each church should have the same number of dollars in its treasury, but rather that each church should have power to meet the obligations that are peculiarly its own. Lacking this power it is in “want” in the scriptural sense, and may, therefore, receive from another until power to meet such obligations has been established. Thus, “equality” is brought about.

With this background of knowledge, we should be able to answer the questions at hand. One church may scripturally start another church if and when all actions involved harmonize with the above mentioned divine principles.

One church may start another church by having fellowship with those who go forth preaching the gospel. I realize that the starting of the new church is the result of preaching the gospel; that whether we speak of a church preaching the gospel or establishing a church depends upon whether we are talking about the work done or the results of that work. The point to be observed is that there is a sense in which one church may start another church.

One church may start another church by affecting a peaceful division, sometimes called “swarming.” In such instance, one part remains at the former place for worship and continues to function as a local church, while the other part moves to a new location for worship and thereafter functions as a local church. This action is justified upon the grounds of point One above, namely, membership in a local church is established or may be withdrawn voluntarily and by mutual agreement. Furthermore, all other principles mentioned above should be carefully observed. This would preclude the following:

1. One church appointing elders or deacons for the new church, either before or after its beginning.
2. One church exercising control, in any way, over the property of the new congregation from the time of its beginning.
3. One church maintaining a treasury for both congregations.
4. One church or eldership overseeing the new church, in any of its affairs, until the new church is fully organized with its own elders and deacons.
5. One church selecting the preacher for the new congregation. This, however, would not preclude one church supporting a preacher for the new church. Under these conditions the preacher for the new church may be selected and approved by the new church, and at the same time be subject to the approval of the church supporting him. No church should be expected to support any preacher it did not approve.

While this does not cover all things that would be precluded by the principles already laid down, these definitely identify matters that would be in violation of the fundamental principle of congregation autonomy.

From a positive viewpoint, the following may be done by the church which anticipates and plans for the beginning of a new church by peacefully divid-

ing. It should be clearly understood that the purpose of such division would be to further the work of evangelism, which work, of course, is lawful. It would be the sentiment of all concerned that greater things can be accomplished to the glory of the Lord by forming the two churches, instead of continuing as one. The human judgment involved simply determines how the church should proceed or which is the best way to accomplish the divine objective without violating any divine principle.

In planning for such the original church may set aside funds with which to begin the new church. It may purchase property, build a building, or furnish other facilities with which to begin the new congregation. All of this may be done, provided there is transfer of all such at the time of the beginning of the new church. This would be necessary to avoid violation of congregational autonomy. It is my persuasion that such may be done for two reasons, at least. First, prior to the beginning of the new church, both worked together as one in planning for and sharing in the expenses necessary for such beginning. Every principle of honor, fairness, and integrity demands such under the above described circumstances. Second, the principle of congregational equality justifies it. Hardly any church would be able, of itself, to begin by "swarming" with all the material necessities commensurate with its needs and the standards of the time. After all, human judgment determines when and how much to give the needy. How thin must one's shoes be before he needs a new pair? How bare must the cupboard be before groceries are needed? This, of course, would not justify giving one a Cadillac automobile to supply his needs for transportation. Judgment commensurate with the standards of the time, country, etc. prevails in such instances. It is no less true with a church.

In forming a new church under the above circumstances, I would suggest the following as a matter of expediency or good judgment. First, that the original church know the nucleus with which the new church begins well enough to determine with a good measure of confidence its future security in relation to truth. Second, that the new congregation begin with sufficient number to establish a mainstream of action in soundness, otherwise, new members, not firmly grounded in truth, might sweep it into digression and the investment be lost. Remember, no organic ties can exist between the churches nor can control be exercised one over the other — even for the purpose of future security in relation to truth. For this reason good judgment demands following the above suggestions.

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REGARDING CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

WHAT CHURCH?

In this article I make no reference to what one must do to become a Methodist, a Baptist, a Presbyterian, etc.

I am discussing what one must do to become a member of the church that one may read about in Matt. 16:18, etc.

TWO FUNDAMENTALS

I note here two fundamental teachings of the New Testament: first, the conditions on which we are redeemed from our past sins are the very conditions that admit us into the body of Christ, Acts 2:38,47; second, and consequently, membership in the body of Christ is just as essential as redemption from past sins.

Therefore, when we determine the conditions on which we are saved, we will have at the same time determined the requirements of membership in the New Testament church.

THREE SOURCES

From three sources we may determine the requirements of church membership: first, from the teaching of Christ; second, from the teaching of the apostles of Christ; third, from the examples of conversion recorded in Acts of Apostles.

TEACHING OF JESUS

Christ tells us in Mark 16:16 that in order to be saved one must believe and be baptized. He does not say he who believes only shall be saved; neither does He say that he who is baptized only shall be saved.

Both faith and baptism are made essentials to salvation. Baptism is as essential as faith, in procuring remission of sins.

But these very conditions laid down by Christ are said in Acts 2:38, 47 to constitute one a member of the Lord's church. Consequently, what Christ demands in Mark 16:16 is what makes a person a member of the church.

TEACHING OF APOSTLES

In Acts 2:38 the apostle Peter affirms that to the believer, repentance and baptism are both joined to secure the same result; namely, the remission of sins.

Acts 2:47 teaches us that the obedient Jews who received the Word became members of the Lord's church. Consequently, the conditions of Acts 2:38