Conducted by
Alf Marsden

"Is it right for Christians from one community to take up membership with Christians in another community. If so, on what basis should such moves be made?"

This is an interesting question. I don't believe that I have ever heard it discussed previously, so I shall do my best with it.

The immediate thought would be, that on the face of it there should be no valid reason why Christians should not meet wherever they want to (you will realise, of course, that I am speaking about what we call 'local churches of Christ,' because this is what the questioner has in mind). That is the theory, but to my mind it does not take into account the *practicalities* of the question. I myself have never been an itinerant Christian in the sense of the question, but I have known quite a few others who have. The church at Albert Street, Wigan experienced such 'comings' and 'goings' quite regularly but I had never any great enthusiasm for it. My reasons for this were practical rather than theoretical, and I want to set out those reasons in answer to this question.

LACK OF ACTIVITY

This is one reason frequently adduced by Christians who leave one assembly for another. I have known some who, ostensibly, have moved for this reason, but I believe their assumptions to have been false.

Maybe the *real* reason has been that they see themselves cast in a more authoritative role in the group to which they are going; such a thing is not unknown. Such a reason is not a valid one in my book. The whole ethos of the Christian message is that change must come *from within* a person, and I am convinced that the whole ethos of the community spirit is that change, if needed, must also come from within. It maybe thought that the 'grass is greener' on the other side of the fence, but possibly the lack of aridity in appearance may not always indicate that the soil is more 'fertile.'

Dear Christian, if you believe that your assembly is not, for example, promoting the Gospel as well as it should, then *you* start *from where you are* and do whatever work you can; perhaps your example will motivate others. One thing you musn't do, however; you must not look for *easier* pastures. If your assembly is in the dire straits you believe it to be, then surely you must understand that *your* drive and energy are *needed* there,

PERSONAL ANTAGONISM

I have seen Christians leave one assembly and take up membership at another for no better reason than that they don't 'get on' with fellow-Christians. Such a reason, to my mind, is appalling. How can we hope to influence others to the Gospel when we ourselves are seen to renounce the very basis of the Gospel, i.e., peace. It may very well be that the causes for such friction lie deep in family histories, but that does not make it any more acceptable; possibly it makes it worse. I have even seen success in secular life used as a means to engender strife. I once heard a Christian say of a brother in Christ, "Who does he think he is? Does he want to take over the church, too?" Such thoughts are ignoble in social life; to the Christian they should be anathema.

It may very well be that a brother or sister may feel they have been 'sinned' against; if so, there is a scriptural way for resolving this in the Church; it is found in Matt. 18:15-17. It is quite explicit and does not need comment from me, except to

say that every Christian should know and understand it.

When I was an elder at Albert Street, Wigan, there was particular method I employed and which I found to be quite useful. At the end of the Breaking of Bread Service I would stand aside a little and watch. What was I looking for? Brethren who seemed to ignore other brethren; no smile or handshake; the look on the face which might indicate some degree of hostility. If this sort of thing happened on a number of occasions to the same people then I knew that it was time to take some action. I once saw a play on television; it was a courtroom scene, and showed a man and his wife wringing their hands over their son who was in the dock, convicted of some serious crime. The parents were looking at each other in bewilderment and saying, "How did this happen?" Well it had been happening for a long time but it had gone unnoticed. Generally, we see what we want to see, and hear what we want to hear, and attempt to put out of our minds the sometimes unpleasant things which intrude. The end result can be very unpleasant, and the repercussions long-lasting.

Sometimes we are so intent in promoting what we call 'the plan of salvation' that we tend to minimise what the plan is about. It is about the inter-personal out-working of love among the brotherhood. The Gospel starts in love; it is lived in love; and it will end in love. It is the living in love which embodies Gospel principles. Jesus said, **"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."** John 13:34,35. Brethren, do not let personal antagonisms make you leave brethren you should love; you will send out a message which will be interpreted by others, perhaps to your detriment: certainly to the detriment of the Church.

CONTINUITY

Many highly successful family businesses have been built and maintained by continuity; of family, of principles, of a certain type of personnel, of honesty and integrity, etc. The Church is, perhaps, the greatest 'family business' of all time, if you will permit the expression. It should come as no surprise, then, that continuity in the Church is of paramount importance: of the Godhead, of the doctrine, of the conduct of those who bear the name of Christ, of the promotion of Christ and His Church until He comes again, etc.

The foregoing is particularly true of the 'local assembly.' How can anyone plan for the development of an assembly in order to ensure continuity of witness if Christians leave and go somewhere else at the slightest provocation? How can we cement relationships in Christ if those relationships are consistently undermined? We pride ourselves in 'speaking where the Bible speaks, and remaining silent where it is silent,' and yet the responses of our egoistical human natures nullify the very words to which we attach such importance. From the very first chapter of Genesis we are exhorted to view the Church and the world through the window of spiritual maturity with its concurrent love, and to realise that our faith reaches in continuity even to Heaven itself. This is the way that God has ordained it. This is why God is love, and that the immutability of His counsel insists that our relationship with Him and with each other must be maintained in love, as He has maintained everything since Creation.

There are, of course, times when employment takes families into another area; this is particularly true today. The Oversight of any assembly should know when reasons are valid. And let me say this. I have always believed that before any Christian moves out of an assembly he should have discussed the problem with his Oversight. Futhermore, if Christians turn up at an assembly without warning, then the receiving assembly should contact the assembly from which they have come immediately in order to establish reasons. It may be very nice to gain numerical strength but it may not be in the best interests of the Church as a whole.

So the message is clear. No itinerant Christians; work in the assembly where you are; eschew all antagonism, and foster love; and ensure that so far as you are concerned, you will do all you can to ensure the continuity of the Church in its several localities. If we do this, then we shall be furthering the prosperity of the Church.

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