

## **Welcoming Newcomers**

The man was a newcomer in town. On his first morning he went into the local restaurant for breakfast. Around a large round table was a group of locals eating breakfast, drinking coffee, and sharing stories and laughs. He could tell he didn't belong in that circle, so he quietly found a booth where he would eat alone. If one in that circle had gone over to him, introduced himself, and invited him to join the group, he might have accepted or politely declined, but he would have been impressed with the friendliness of the town into which he had moved and might have been inclined to return to the restaurant to speak again to the man who had befriended him.

On the Lord's Day, he went to worship with the church. As he walked in she noticed several groups standing together, enjoying conversation. He could tell they were close friends who had known each other a long time. He was hesitant to join any of the groups, so he quietly went to seek out a place where he could worship. When he came to the first pew, however, it was filled with notebooks and Bibles, so he knew that seat was not for him. He went on to the next, but there was a line of footstools, and so it went until he found a place in the middle of a pew that seemed not to be "reserved." There were a few polite "hellos," but his reception was hardly better than it had been at the local restaurant. He "just didn't seem to belong."

Does the Bible not speak of some who "just didn't belong"? "My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality. For if there should come into your assembly a man with gold rings, in fine apparel, and there should also come in a poor man in filthy clothes, and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say to him, 'You sit here in a good place,' and say to the poor man, 'You stand there,' or, 'Sit here at my footstool,' have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?" (James 2:1-4). The poor man would know "he didn't belong in that group." But one does not have to be poor to feel that a group is not warmly receiving him.

### **Efforts to Correct the Problem**

Some churches appoint "greeters" who stand at the door to welcome visitors. This no doubt is helpful. The visitor can recognize, however, that the "greeter," no matter how warm and friendly he may be, is fulfilling a role given to him. Consequently, his good work cannot substitute for spontaneous warmth, friendliness, and concern on the part of the congregation as a whole.

Others deliberately "dress down" so that a visitor who comes in casual clothes will not feel uncomfortable. We appreciate the thought and are very respectful of brethren who are doing this, but we wonder about the effectiveness of this practice. After all, there are people who have been taught from childhood that when they go to worship, they should wear their "Sunday best," and when they find the whole group dressed in jeans, they might wonder about their disregard for the occasion. We would also ask: If a man in a suit showed genuine warmth to a visitor in jeans, would his warmth not communicate that he doesn't judge others by the clothes they wear?

### **The Answer: Genuine Concern for Others**

An incident that occurred several years ago provides the best answer. A young lady, a member of a denomination, had married a Christian. Having promised to attend services with him, she found a seat and immediately said, "I wonder whose seat we have." "You don't have anyone's seat," the lady seated in front of her said, "You are welcome here and you can sit anywhere you like." "My heart just melted," the young lady told me later. Is it surprising that a few months later she was baptized? Her husband now serves as a deacon.

Concern for others! Counting others better than ourselves (Phil. 2:3-4)! Leaving our little group of friends to welcome a visitor! Even going up to a visitor whom we see in the parking area, introducing ourselves, welcoming him, and introducing him to others! Giving up our "end of the pew" seat so the visitor doesn't have to crawl over us. This is the answer.

By the way, our newcomer (mentioned earlier) learned of another faithful church in town and went to worship with them the next Sunday. He was welcomed warmly and he soon asked to be received in the group. And the first church wonders why the church across town is growing while they seem to be stagnant???

**- by Bill Hall**

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## ***Taking Things for Granted***

We often feed the birds in our backyard during the winter. It's quite interesting to watch the different birds come to the feeder throughout the day. Birds are like people, in a way. Some are short and plump, others are long and lean. Some species come in groups ('birds of a feather...'), but others have more solitary ways. And they have a tendency to fight one another - just like people do.

As any bird watcher knows, the big thrill is to see a new kind of bird. Oh yes, the finches are nice, and the chickadees are so cute. We like the tufted titmouse, and we've seen pine siskins. But we're prone to take all of these for granted. "Oh, it's just another blue jay", we'll say. BUT WAIT! Just another blue jay!?! Take a look at that beautiful creature. Few birds in all of God's creation can match the beauty of the blue jay. We've seen exotic birds in the pet store - the kind that people pay the big bucks for - that can not hold a candle to him. Yet we take him for granted because he's always near. We see him every day. "It's just another blue jay."

We were thinking that we tend to take things for granted in the church, too - things that are always near - things that we see all the time. "That's just brother X, he's here at all the assemblies." "That's one of our faithful members reaching out to a fellow member who needs extra help and encouragement - he always does that." "Oh, that's sister so-and-so carrying food to a family that's been sick, but she does that sort of thing all the time." BUT WAIT! These are wonderful things, and we ought never to take them for granted. Thank God for our blessings in the body of Christ.

***- by Greg Gwin***