

Two Types of Congregations: Cold and Warm

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One Lord's day my family and I were out of town on vacation. We were in an unfamiliar area, but a few days earlier I had called and spoken to the preacher of a local congregation there. Based on my conversation with him, we had decided we would worship with them that Sunday morning.

During our visit with this congregation, we noticed that the preacher was very friendly to us, but most of the members either simply stared at us or acted as if we were not there. I discovered that if there were going to be any communication between me and the members there, I would have to initiate the conversation by introducing myself to them. To be honest, it was an uncomfortable situation, and I felt like I was "forcing" them to speak to me!

We decided that we would look for somewhere else to worship that evening, so we visited another congregation who were supposed to be meeting for worship at 6:00PM. We arrived about fifteen minutes early to find several members singing in the auditorium. We thought that we may have arrived at the wrong time, but we went in and sat down anyway. Apparently some of the members had met early to sing for a while before everyone assembled for evening worship. They stopped singing a few minutes before 6:00, and many of them came to where we were sitting and greeted us. Then others came in and worship began. Afterwards we had more members come to us and welcome us. We actually stayed for quite a while after worship, talking to them.

There is no question that there was a great difference between these two congregations. While the first congregation gave the impression that they did not care much about visitors, the second congregation made it very clear that they cared and were interested in others.

Although both congregations were about the same size, there were several children at the first congregation and very few or no children at the second congregation. Even so, my daughter remarked that she enjoyed being with the second congregation more than the first. I had not asked, but I suppose she felt so strongly about it that she volunteered that information. My son agreed with her. Normally my children would prefer to visit places where other children their age are present, but this was an exception.

Dear reader, if you had a choice, assuming that both congregations were doctrinally sound, with which congregation would you worship? It is easy to answer

such a question, but perhaps these are more difficult questions to answer: How do we treat visitors? Are we like those in the first congregation, or the second? Do we believe that it is “the preacher’s job” to greet visitors and be friendly to others? Do we get stuck in little cliques, forgetting or neglecting to reach out to others who are present? How would we want to be treated if we visited another congregation? Do we practice the golden rule towards our visitors? (Matthew 7:12). Do we show our visitors that we love and care about all people, not just our close friends and family members? Do we show impartiality regarding whom we treat with loving-kindness?

Notice a warning James gave about how we might treat visitors:

My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons. For if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment; And ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool: Are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts?...If ye fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself, ye do well. But if ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin, and are convinced of the law as transgressors. For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all (James 2:1-4, 8-10).

James said some might treat a wealthy visitor better than they would a poor visitor. Hopefully we would not be guilty of such discrimination, whether it is because of a visitor’s financial situation, skin color, or other superficial distinctions. However, notice how the brethren in James’ example treated the wealthy visitor by giving him special attention and a warm welcome. Is it not implied that whether the visitor had been wealthy or poor, they should have eagerly greeted the visitor and treated him in a warm, loving way? The lesson for us is that no matter who visits the assembly of the saints, let us make them feel special, giving them a warm greeting filled with love! To refuse to do so is to refuse to “fulfill the royal law” in loving our neighbors as ourselves. Again, we must consider how we would want to be treated (Matthew 7:12).

Although we understand that our main purpose for gathering is to worship God (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 11:20; 16:2), the Bible also says that there are other purposes accomplished when we gather, such as edifying one another, teaching one another, admonishing one another, exhorting one another, and comforting one another (1 Corinthians 14:3; Ephesians 4:16; Colossians 3:16; 1 Thessalonians 4:18; 5:11). We are also commanded to “consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works,” but how could we do such things if we never spoke to one another? (Hebrews 10:24-25). Should

we not also “*consider*” our visitors and “*provoke*” them “*unto love and to good works*”? How can we do such if we do not even speak to them?

Whether a congregation is warm or cold is determined by the choice each individual makes regarding whether or not to reach out to visitors. Perhaps the first congregation assumed that since they had a friendly preacher, that was enough to make visitors feel welcome. However, the truth is that if a congregation is warm, it is because the congregation as a whole has purposed in their hearts to make visitors feel welcome. If a congregation is cold, it is because the members have not made such a determination.

As an individual member of a congregation, how have you determined to treat visitors? Will you ignore them, or will you implore them to return? Will you look for visitors at the next assembly so you can approach them and greet them? May we all give our visitors a warm welcome, thus fulfilling “*the royal law,*” loving our neighbors as ourselves.

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