

Welcome

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Introduction.

- A. There are few things that are more welcome to humankind than being welcomed. It's one of the reasons why those of us who can love to go home and visit with our parents over the holidays. For me in particular, I love the feeling of knowing that my folks have been spending days cleaning and preparing for my arrival, that they're going to spend the entirety of my stay feeding me all the great-tasting, decadent, bad-for-you food that only company got when I was growing up, that as I'm pulling into the driveway, they're going to see me because they've been watching for me for hours. That kind of welcome makes anybody feel special.
- B. Likewise, it's a wonderful feeling to be welcomed to a church as a visitor. For instance, when Lauren and I visited my brother last February, we worshiped with the church in Roanoke, Virginia. It wasn't a very big church, couldn't have had more than 50 or 60 people there on Sunday morning, but when we came in, literally dozens of those brethren came to greet us. When they found out why we were in town, several of them offered to study with my brother. They really made us feel like honored guests, and I know that if my brother does ever decide to obey the gospel, that such a congregation will receive him with open arms.
- C. On the other end of the scale, I can remember other congregations we've visited that had five times as many people and about one tenth the welcome. We came into this big building, filled with Christians, but the only people who talked to us were the ones who already knew us. Lauren and I didn't go away from that assembly feeling welcome at all, and we won't go back. Friends, when I consider those two churches, I know which one I want this church to be like. Let's look at some Scriptures, then, that show the importance of welcome.

I. Our Duty.

- A. In order to understand this, we probably need to start with the Scriptures that define our duty to welcome. In this context, the ultimate big-picture Scripture is Matthew 28:19-20. This is one that many of us are quite familiar with, and it's also the one that is going to frame our discussion, because our biggest concern in being welcoming is welcoming outsiders. It's rude to give the cold shoulder to brethren who are traveling, but most Christians are not going to fall away because they got a chilly reception on the road. Conversely, it's great to give brethren from other places a warm welcome, but it's not really part of our central mission. On the other hand, when we deal with visitors who are outsiders, especially outsiders from the community, that's when the welcome is most important. If someone like that, who's mustered the courage to come to a strange assembly, often alone, gets a brush-off, they may never come back to another church service as long as they live. As a result of our failure to be friendly and courteous, they may end up being eternally lost.
- B. Now, someone might say, "But that's not really our problem. They're responsible for hearing and obeying the gospel, regardless of how we treat them. If somebody gets offended because we weren't nice enough and goes away, obviously they weren't listening." Friends, the problem with that is that the way we act is part of teaching the gospel too. Notice Jesus' phrasing in Matthew 5:14-16. He isn't saying that people are going to be moved to glorify God because of our subtle Scriptural understanding or our doctrinal correctness. Instead, they will come to the Lord as they see our good works. Almost without exception, people become Christians because they see Christ in the life of another person. We get the opening to teach because of the light with which we shine. That's why making sure we're shining everywhere is so important.
- C. Now, friends, I know that every time a preacher gets up to talk about saving the lost and starts quoting Matthew 28, a massive wave of guilt washes over the congregation. Maybe some Christians are trying to save their friends and not getting through; maybe others just aren't trying. Maybe there just aren't any non-Christians that we're close enough to to teach. What we can always do, though, is shine. In this specific instance, we can shine in our assemblies, so that our visitors know that God is truly present with us.

II. How to Carry It Out.

- A. Now that we've framed our need for being welcoming, let's look at some passages that advise us on how to carry out this responsibility we have. First of all, the Scripture teaches us that we need to **REDEEM THE TIME**. Look at how Paul puts this in Colossians 4:5. Here's what Paul is saying. We have a limited number of opportunities in our lives to influence those outside the church. That means that on a daily basis, we need to make the most of the opportunities we've got. This is true as we go through the normal round of our lives, but it is especially true as we deal with outsiders who have come to our assembly. Think of it like this: if God gives us an opportunity to speak with our co-worker, and we boot it and say nothing, there very well may be another opportunity next week. After all, it's not uncommon for us to work next to somebody for years. On the other hand, though, if we have the chance to speak to a visitor to our worship services, and we miss out on it, we may never have another opportunity to influence that visitor again. Those visitors are high-quality

prospects; after all, they've already demonstrated by their actions that they're looking for God. However, we only have a short window of time in which to exploit that opportunity. We need to strike while the iron is hot. We need to make our contact with them as high-quality as possible. We need to redeem the time.

- B. In a similar vein, except even more so, we need to **WORK TO WIN HEARTS**. Look at the influence that Peter describes in 1 Peter 2:12. Peter says that if Christians shine brightly enough, they can win over even those who speak against them. Now, hopefully, there aren't that many people in the Joliet area who are so entrenched in their opposition to us, but we definitely get folks through the door who aren't here because they love God. It's not uncommon for outsiders to visit services here because they're brought by their wives or their children or their friends, not because they're interested in hearing the gospel. Sometimes, when I'm preaching, it's kind of funny to watch folks like that. Instead of listening to me, they're staring up at the ceiling watching the ceiling fans go round and round. Friends, it's important for us to do everything we can to reach people like that too. It's up to us to show them that Christianity isn't just about coming to a boring building and listening to a boring sermon and going home again. It's about being different. It's about being transformed by the power of the gospel so that people can see Jesus in our lives. Now, some of our unwilling visitors may not be moved by even that, but some may be. It's important for us to try.
- C. As we work at welcoming our visitors, it's also important for us to **ACT IMPARTIALLY**. Look at the scenario that James describes in James 2:2-4. As all of us know, class distinctions are just as alive and well today as they were 2000 years ago. What do we do, friends, when some visitor drives up in a beat-up old Buick that's leaking oil all over the parking lot, and they come in, and they bring with them a fragrance that says they haven't bathed for several days, and they smile at us, and we see they're missing some teeth? How do we treat people like that? Do we treat them the same as the respectable man with his photo-album family and nice suit, or do we assume that the poor folks are just looking for money? Nor is that the only thing we can be partial about. It's just as easy for us to judge people on the basis of race, or age, or even something as subtle as demeanor. Brethren, that's not the way Christ wants us to act. When Jesus looked at people, He didn't see rich or poor, or black or white, or male or female. He just saw souls, and that's what we need to see too. No matter what a visitor is like, he still needs the gospel, and we have to welcome him so that he'll listen.
- D. In similar fashion, we need to **CONSIDER THE IMPACT** of our behavior on outsiders. We see this principle set out by Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:23-25. Of course, the specific details of this verse don't apply to us today. We don't have to worry about making sure that our use of miraculous spiritual gifts doesn't present us in a bad light. However, we do have to look at ourselves through our visitors' eyes. We have to ask whether the things that we are doing are smoothing the way for the gospel or presenting an obstacle to it. Along these lines, Jeff Andrews has been doing a lot of work recently, and we're going to be seeing the fruits of that over the next year, but even in our roles as individual Christians, we have to ask what impression we're making on outsiders. Do we greet them, or do we ignore them? Do we show interest in them, or is it obvious that we couldn't care less about their presence? We must think about these things, so that as many as possible will glorify God.
- E. Finally, though, as we work to welcome visitors, we need to **REMEMBER LOVE**. James urges this upon us in the same context as his comments on partiality, in James 2:8. This, friends, is the real reason why we need to be welcoming. We're not troweling on the fake charm like a used-car salesman. We're not being friendly to sucker somebody in to buying our product. We're being welcoming because Jesus wants us to love everybody, and being welcoming is an expression of love. Doesn't matter if a visitor is a total stranger to us; we're still commanded to love him and desire his good, and the best thing we can do for him is to lead him to Christ.
- F. As we consider all of these Scriptures, it's evident that the Bible has a lot to say about how we should handle visitors to our assembly. To help us with our responsibilities, the elders have decided to set up a **WELCOME SERVICE GROUP**, headed by Jeff Andrews. Here's the way this group is going to work:
 1. **Each group member greets each visitor.** Basically, these group members have to be on the alert for outsiders and be willing to talk to them. You don't have to get their life stories; just make a connection.
 2. **Group leader collects visitor information from all visitors.** We still need our visitors to fill out visitor cards, but now, those cards go to Jeff, so that he can deal usefully with the information.
 3. **Group leader relays information to group members.** In practice, this probably means that Jeff sends out a Monday e-mail to all members with names and addresses of visitors.
 4. **Each group member contacts all visitors.** Notice that this is a little different than the encouragement group. Here, because it's so important to get as much impact out of that visit as possible, each member is responsible for contacting all visitors. This will result in a little bit more work, but not much.
- G. That's what the group does, and here are some **REASONS WHY WE MIGHT JOIN** it.
 1. **We prefer to work regularly for small amounts of time.** Some groups are going to require a Saturday a couple of times a year; this group just looks for about a half hour a week.
 2. **We want to be involved in evangelism.** This is going to be the most outward-looking of our groups.
 3. **We enjoy meeting new people.** Obviously, this group will work better for extroverts.
 4. **We care about the impression the church makes.** We want to be known as a loving church.

Conclusion. If you want to share in the work of the Lord, you have to join Him first.