

*Church 1.0*  
**Acts 9:19-25**  
**“Putting Out the Welcome Mat”**

1. *The Most Noble Order of the Garter* may be the most exclusive club in the world. It dates back to the year 1348, when British king, Edward III, founded the elite society of royals and knights.
2. Membership in the *Order of the Garter* is limited to the king or queen of England, the Prince of Wales, and no more than 24 others. The king or queen alone has the right to name new members, and that only upon the death or replacement of an existing member.
3. Current members include former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, the Duke of Wellington, and Winston Churchill’s daughter, Mary Soames. Needless to say, they aren’t taking any applications for new members.
4. Contrary to what some people might think, the church is not an exclusive club for religious royals and spiritual snobs. Membership is not restricted to the pious and the perfect, and churches *should* be more like a walk-in clinic than a country club.
5. In Acts chapter 9, we find a brief glimpse into the hospitality and warmth of the members of the church at Damascus upon the news that their arch nemesis, Saul of Tarsus, had been gloriously converted to Christ.
6. The conversion of Saul, who would later become Paul, is one of the most significant events in human history. It is the primary story in Acts 9. However, like a fine detail in the background of a painting, the welcome Saul received from the believers in Damascus carries an important lesson for the church today.
7. From this text, the early church speaks to our church about the necessity of putting out the welcome mat for new people who enter into the family of God, and the fellowship of our church.
8. From this text we find some things that new people need from us, and that we ought to strive to do for every new soul the Lord sends our way. Notice first of all that new people and new Christians need to be:

**I. ACCEPTED IN OUR FAMILY**

1. For some reason, there has been a fascination of late with large families. Right now there are at least three television shows that focus on big families with lots of kids.

2. *John and Kate Plus Eight*, and the Dugger Family, with their 18 kids have fascinated the American public.

3. One of the analogies that is often used for the church is that of a large family. We like to sing about "The Family of God". In Galatians 6:10, the Apostle Paul refers to "the household of faith."

4. In Acts 9, after Saul of Tarsus was born again, we find that the church welcomed him into their family. Verse 19 says that after Saul was baptized, "...*Then was Saul certain days with the disciples which were at Damascus.*"

5. In this text, the early church reminds us that our spiritual family is a constantly growing family, and we must be willing to accept into our family those whom the Lord sends our way.

6. Notice a couple of things these believers in Damascus teach us about accepting new people. First of all, they teach us that we must accept new people into our family:

#### **A. Regardless of their past**

1. If you recall in the previous chapter in Acts, we were told, "*As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison (8:3).*"

2. Now we find this same Saul being welcomed into the life and family of this church. The man who had once been the church's number one enemy, is now placed on her membership roll.

3. The man who had come to Damascus to arrest the Christians there now attends worship with them, and sings *Amazing Grace* alongside them, and partakes in communion with them.

4. Is this not how it should be? Does the gospel not promise forgiveness for all types of sinners with all types of sin? Yes! I John 1:7 says, "...*the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.*"

5. What this means is that the family of God is not limited to classy, dignified, respectable sinners who have only gossiped, lied, or coveted.

6. No, the gospel says that prostitutes and pimps, drunks and drug addicts, homosexuals and whoremongers, rogues and rapists, murderers and menaces of all types are allowed in the family of God through the shed blood of Jesus Christ.

7. In I Corinthians 6, the Apostle Paul (who is the Saul in our text), listed a number of sinners that would not inherit the kingdom of God. Then he added this: *“And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God (6:11).”*

8. I saw an article online recently that gave some suggestions to folks who are searching for a job, but have something on their record that would hurt their chances. Because the majority of companies do a background check, people with something in their background struggle to find jobs.

9. Regardless of someone’s background, finding a church family should never be a struggle. We should accept people into our family, regardless of their background. Notice something further. We should accept people into our family:

### **B. Responding to their profession**

1. After Saul’s conversion on the road to Damascus, the Lord sent a believer named Ananias to go and minister to him. When Ananias heard that the Lord wanted him to go and speak to Saul of Tarsus, he was initially hesitant.

2. Verse 13 says, *“Then Ananias answered, Lord, I have heard by many of this man, how much evil he hath done to thy saints at Jerusalem.”*

3. The Lord responded to Ananias saying, *“...Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel.”*

4. It was obvious that the Lord Jesus had done something in Saul’s life. Upon hearing of this, we read in verse 17, *“And Ananias went his way, and entered into the house; and putting his hands on him said, Brother Saul...”*

5. Notice that Ananias called him “brother”. Saul had been a bother to the church, but now, upon his profession of faith in Christ, he was accepted as a brother.

6. When a person has been saved by the grace of God, and professes their faith in the Lord Jesus, we are to accept them into our family based upon that profession.

7. We don’t require them to know all the books of the Bible, recite the Baptist Faith and Message, or go through a probation period before we welcome them into our family.

8. Saul of Tarsus, the legendary persecutor, was baptized, and then accepted into the very family he had sought to destroy. What a testimony to the grace of God, and the love of His people!

9. I read about a church sign that said, "Church: one place where you aren't too bad to come in, nor too good to stay out." Regardless of who they may be, where they have been, or what they have done, we must open the arms of our fellowship and welcome new folks into our family.

10. Notice a second truth the early church teaches us about putting out the welcome mat. New people not only need to be *accepted in our family*, but notice also that they need to be:

## **II. APPLIED TO THE MINISTRY**

1. Look again at our text. In verse 19, we are told that Saul was with the disciples in Damascus. Then in verse 20, we read, "*And straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God.*"

2. Notice that word "straightway". It is translated from a word that means instantly, or immediately. Think about that! No sooner had Saul joined the church at Damascus than he was preaching and participating in the work of evangelism.

3. The text does not specifically say so, but I can't imagine that Saul just branched out into this ministry alone. No doubt, the believers were with him in those synagogue services, and encouraged his involvement in the ministry.

4. Too often new people feel like they are locked out of the ministry of the church. They are unfortunately overlooked in the efforts and work of the church.

5. Hear the early church encourages us to open up opportunities of service for the new people that God sends our way. Notice a couple of reasons why we should apply new people to the ministry of our church. Think first of all about:

### **A. The testimony they can give**

1. Verse 20 says that Paul's first sermons were simple. He just, "*...preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God.*"

2. Saul's Christian education was limited at this point. Very soon, God would carry him off into Arabia, and there the future Apostle to the Gentiles would receive first hand instruction from the Lord.

3. However, in spite of Saul's limited understanding in those early days in Damascus, notice what verse 21 says. "*But all that heard him were amazed, and said; Is not this he that destroyed them which called on this name in Jerusalem, and came hither for that intent, that he might bring them bound unto the chief priests?*"

4. I imagine it was standing room only in the synagogue of Damascus during those first sermons of Brother Saul. Everyone was interested in hearing what had happened that had so changed a Christian persecutor into a gospel preacher.

5. Saul had a powerful story to tell, and for the church to hold him back, or to limit his service would have been wrong and foolish. His simple testimony of conversion was one of their most powerful tools.

6. Tony Campolo tells a story of an experience he had while serving as a counselor at a junior high Christian camp. One of the campers was a boy named Billy who suffered from cerebral palsy. Unfortunately, many of the kids mocked Billy, and made fun of his disability.

7. In what was intended to be a joke, the kids elected Billy to give a devotion in front of the whole camp. Campolo says he remembers Billy lumbering toward the front. Once he began to speak, it literally took Billy several minutes just to say seven words.

8. Billy said, "Jesus...loves...me....and...I...love...Jesus." By the time he had finished that simple sentence, the kids were weeping, and revival swept through the camp. Campolo said they had brought some of the greatest speakers in the world to that camp, but it was Billy's simple testimony that impacted those kids for Christ.<sup>1</sup>

9. New Christians and new members may not speak with our religious lingo. They may not understand our long-standing policies and procedures. They may not know all our songs and where to find them in the hymnal.

10. However, very often their testimony is unusually powerful, and we must apply them to the work of the ministry. Notice not only that we should apply new people to the ministry because of the testimony they can give, but we should also apply them to the ministry because of:

### **B. The training they can get**

1. Look again at the text, and notice verse 22. It says, "*But Saul increased the more in strength, and confounded the Jews which dwelt at Damascus, proving that this is very Christ.*"

2. Notice that phrase "increased the more in strength". One translation renders it, "But Saul grew more capable..." The idea is that Saul was gaining strength.

3. The more Saul was involved in the preaching ministry the stronger his witness and message became.

4. If we never let new people step up and participate in the work of ministry, they will never learn what it is to serve the Lord, and they will never grow in the use of their spiritual gifts.

5. When I was first starting as a preacher boy, there were a number of young men in my home church who had answered the call to preach around the same time as I did.

6. On occasion at the church, we would have “preacher boy night”, and all the young preachers would be given five or six minutes to deliver a mini-sermon. As you can imagine, there were not a lot of dynamic nuggets of truth in those mini-sermons, but more than the preaching helped the people, it helped the preacher boys.

7. When Ronald Reagan ran for his second term as president, some contended that he was too old, at age 73, to be president. When asked about his age at a debate with his opponent, Walter Mondale, Reagan said, “I’m not going to inject the issue of age into the campaign. I’m not going to exploit, for political gain, my opponents youth and inexperience.”<sup>iii</sup>

8. Someone’s youth and inexperience should not disqualify them from being a part of the ministry of the church. As soon as possible, we must apply new people to the work God has given us to do, both for our sake, and for theirs.

9. Notice a further truth we draw from this text. The early church reminds us here that new people need to be *accepted in our family, applied to the ministry*, and also, they need to be:

### **III. ASSISTED ON THEIR JOURNEY**

1. Look again at our text. We are told in verse 23 that the Jews, angered by Saul’s conversion, were conspiring to kill him.

2. When word of this reached the church at Damascus, they rallied to their new member, and did what they could to assist him and to protect him.

3. Verse 24 says that the Jewish enemies watched the gate of the city around the clock, hoping to catch Saul. Verse 25 says, “*Then the disciples took him by night, and let him down by the wall in a basket.*”

4. I love this scene. It reminds us that having new people and new Christians is not without its challenges. New people require our help and our assistance as they begin their walk with the Lord.

5. As we think about these believers in Damascus assisting the Apostle Paul, we are reminded of a couple of things regarding the help we must offer to those the Lord sends our way. First of all, they remind us that we must be:

#### **A. Flexible to serve them**

1. Saul needed to escape Damascus. His life was in jeopardy. However, at every exit from the city, there were men waiting to kill him.

2. Someone in the congregation came up with a strange idea. They said, "You know, I have a large basket back at the house. Brother Ananias has some rope. Why don't we wait until after dark, and then lower Brother Saul down in that basket?"

3. I imagine someone spoke up and said, "But wait, we have never done that before! Since when do the distinguished members of Damascus Baptist Church go sneaking around doing covert basket drops? That is just not very churchy behavior."

4. In spite of the fact that a night-time basket drop had never been used before, the church was flexible enough to try something new in order to serve Saul and his journey with the Lord.

5. It is unfortunate that many churches would rather die than do anything new or innovative in order to reach and serve new people. They simply expect that new people will either adapt to their ways, or find somewhere else to worship the Lord.

6. The truth is that we as a church can be flexible and faithful at the same time. We can still stand for the faith of our fathers while accommodating and ministering to those who have little or no knowledge of what it means to be a Christian and to serve the Lord.

7. A friend of mine has a unique ministry that reaches out to kids who live in low-income trailer parks and mobile home communities. He has seen a lot of kids come to know Christ through his work.

8. One of the greatest challenges he faces is integrating those kids into the local church. Most of them have little parental influence, and no church experience. They are loud, rowdy, and hard to handle.

9. As a result, more than one dignified church member has pulled him aside and expressed their righteous indignation over the behavior of "those kids." Rather than gracious, loving, patience, my friend has found that many church members would rather those kids were not in church at all, than to have to put up with them disturbing the status quo.

10. Oh God, help us to see that at times we must be flexible in order to best serve the new people God sends our way. We must assist them on their spiritual journey, even if assisting them means that we break a tradition or bend a policy.

11. Notice something else these believers in Damascus teach us about assisting new people on their journey. We must not only be flexible to serve them, but we must also be:

### **B. Faithful to support them**

1. Imagine these members of the Damascus church holding that rope with the Apostle Paul suspended from the other end. What if they weren't there? What if they let go?

2. The man in the basket would go on to write at least 11 books of the New Testament. He would carry the gospel into new regions, and would be responsible for the founding of countless new churches.

3. However, at that moment, he was completely dependent upon the support of these anonymous church members on the other end of that rope.

4. I don't know that we have any potential Paul's in our congregation, but who knows what future preacher, missionary, teacher, leader, writer, scholar, worker might be sitting among us, completely dependent at this point on our support.

5. We must hold the rope for the new ones. We must support them through our prayers. We must encourage them in their journey, and help them along in their Christian life.

6. It is likely that no one here has ever heard of Guy Marlowe. Guy Marlowe was the pastor of the Northwood Baptist Church in West Palm Beach, FL. A young man who grew up under the ministry of Pastor Marlowe says that the pastor was influential in helping him to respond to the call of God upon his life.

7. He said, "Guy Marlowe was a man who invested his life in the lives of his flock and took an interest in teenagers. Marlowe invited teenagers to participate in ministry..."<sup>iii</sup>

8. While you may not know Guy Marlowe, I am sure most of you are familiar with the young man who praised his life. That young man so influenced by Pastor Marlowe was the late Dr. Adrian Rogers, former SBC president, and pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis.

9. New people around us and among us need our support. We must not allow them to fall prey to the enemy who would destroy them and their future.

1. Dr. Russell Moore is the current dean of theology at Southern Seminary in Louisville, KY, and he is one of my favorite preachers. He always has a very creative and intriguing title for his sermons.
2. Not too long ago he preached a message entitled, "The Blood-Spattered Welcome Mat". I love that title. I wish I had thought of it first.
3. The reality is that outside the entrance point of every congregation of Christ, there ought to be a blood-spattered welcome mat, saying to all who would enter that through the shed blood of Jesus Christ, all our welcome into this family, and all are received into this fellowship.
4. Churches are not gated communities where the pious and the perfect hide themselves from a sinful and sick society. Churches are homes with open doors where new people, redeemed by God's grace can be accepted in the family, applied to the ministry, and assisted in their journey.
5. By God's grace, may we learn from the church in the book of Acts, and may we put out the welcome mat!

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<sup>i</sup> McHenry, Raymond, *McHenry's Stories for the Soul*, (Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, 2001), p. 286

<sup>ii</sup> Experience, *anecdote.com*, accessed 6/27/09, <http://www.anecdote.com/index.php?aid=4040>

<sup>iii</sup> Rogers, Joyce, *Love Worth Finding*, (Broadman and Holman Publishers, Nashville, 2005), p. 16