

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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A Consistent Walk

And this I say, lest any man should beguile you with enticing words. For though I be absent in the flesh, yet am I with you in the spirit, joying and beholding your order, and the stedfastness of your faith in Christ. As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him: Rooted and built up in him, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving. Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ. For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. (Colossians 2:4-9)

Almost every "cult" or otherwise aberrant group that claims to be Christian follows a similar strategy. They claim that "true" Christianity was lost over time. Churches that at one time were true to New Testament faith slowly strayed, lost their light, and drifted into error. In some way or another, these neo-Christians discovered the truth, often claiming that God "revealed" the real truth to them, but He strangely did not reveal it to His church¹. They claim they are not at all trying to start a new religion or to introduce new ideas into their existing church. They simply want to restore the original truth that existing churches long ago forsook. This was Joseph Smith's chant as he claimed to have seen the plates, but the plates were never found, so the only basis for Smith's claims was in Smith's mind. Judge Russell made a similar claim as he sought to re-invent Christianity in the mold of the ancient heretic Arius. Christians should rightly be wary of anyone who starts teaching ideas that seem strange and different, especially when they defend their ideas as an attempt to restore "original" and pure Christian faith.

"Yea, hath God said...?" succeeded quite effectively in the Garden of Eden, the first "revisionist" movement that ever invaded humanity and challenged God's Word--and words. Satan still uses the same strategy. Why not? It still works quite effectively. Humans are slow to learn, oh so slow, if ever.

¹ In 1 Timothy 3:15 Paul described the church as the "...pillar and ground of the truth." If we accept this passage in its simple, straightforward wording, we'd expect a church to discover and correct its "drift," if such actually occurred, not one individual person or a small group of persons. One individual or a small group making such a claim of drift, followed by their claim of a divine "revelation" of the lost truth hardly mirrors the Biblical pattern we see in this passage.

As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him: Rooted and built up in him, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught.... Paul's exhortation to consistency in this lesson challenges us with the timeless Biblical defense against any, and all, revisionist movements to lead God's children away from Biblical truth into the countless human contrivances that seek to alter God's truth.

Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen. (Ephesians 3:21)

Every claim that God's church has drifted away from Biblical truth, has lost its way, and needs one particular man to restore its vision and purity fails to respect the truth of this verse. God promised to preserve His church, and necessarily His truth as well, in that church "...throughout all ages...." If the Lord's church "drifted" away from that truth, even for one generation, this passage falls to the ground in shame as an empty notion. When confronted with the choice between the validity of God's promise of providential protection and preservation or revisionists' claims of "drift," every time I'll take God's Word, not man's. Smith was wrong, Judge Russell was wrong, Ellen G. White was wrong, and so is any other person who claims that God's church drifted into error and lost its light, leaving her future existence in this one person's exclusive hands and abilities to protect and to preserve. Can you imagine the ego problem such a person faces? He/she stands alone as the one hope of God's church for the future. Friends, if God has been so reduced to incompetence as to be required to put all His "eggs in one man's basket," God is in dire straits. Such an incompetent deity fails to measure up to the Bible's description of the true God whom Scripture commands us to worship.

Why would Paul introduce this warning at this point to the Colossians? The answer is quite obvious. At this time, pagan Gnosticism had begun to creep into the Christian community. Clearly from the errors that Paul confronts in the Colossian letter, Gnostic heresy had attempted to gain a foothold in the Colossian Church, and Paul wrote this letter to expose it and to excise it from that church. Colossians 2:16-23 directly confronts and rejects the heart and soul of Gnostic heresy.

Paul's point directly and powerfully refutes the foundation of Gnostic error. Since this error was new to the early church, the leaders and teachers of Gnostic ideas necessarily appealed to the same notion as Joseph Smith, Judge Russell, Ellen G. White, and the near endless list of other self-appointed reformers who have introduced new and errant ideas into the Christian community across the centuries. They framed their unique and errant ideas on the notion that they had received a private "revelation," or a verbal (or written) tradition of teaching, not directly found in the writings that we hold to be inspired Scripture. Only professing Christians who submit to their extrapolated or otherwise invented private teachings can hope to ascend to the "real truth" of the Christian faith. An integral part of ancient Gnostic teachings dissected the Jesus of the New Testament from the Jehovah God of the Old Testament. Jesus "got it right," but supposedly only the verbal Gnostic transmission preserved the true "scoop" on the "real Jesus," not the writings of Scripture. Jehovah in Gnostic thought was a bumbling, misguided underling to the supreme deity. The supreme one despised all things material, but the poor misguided Jehovah underling simply misunderstood the big man's desires and so created a material universe, much to the supreme one's consternation. The only sane course for a faithful disciple of the deeper and "real" truth of Gnosticism was therefore to avoid, as much as possible, all contact with anything material. We see this idea exposed and refuted in Paul's rejection of the Gnostic idea in Colossians 2:20-23.

Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances, (Touch not; taste not; handle not; Which all are to perish with the using;) after the commandments and doctrines of men? Which things have indeed a shew of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body; not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh. (Colossians 2:20-23)

Paul rejected the heart of Gnostic error and reduced it to a phony "...shew of wisdom in will

worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body...." Ah, Paul also exposed another favorite strategy of the revisionist purveyors of error. They always put on a profound and convincing show of wisdom, will worship (worship of man's will, not God, and usually the will of the Gnostic leader), humility, and pretentious personal neglect or suffering "for the cause." What ancient Gnostics and modern revisionists alike often fail to reveal is that the primary cause they seek to promote is their own cause, not God's. The pretense is prominent, but the substance and the confirmed, historical Biblical truth is conspicuously absent. No thank you, I'll stand with Scripture, "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament sheweth his handiwork." (Psalm 19:1) How beautifully the poet has captured this truth, a truth that Gnosticism wholly rejects, **"This is my Father's world!"**

As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him: Rooted and built up in him, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught.... Paul's simple teaching requires us to measure any new or different idea against the old truth of revealed Scripture. When the latest and most appealing ideas fail to match up to Scripture, the truth by which the Colossians--and we--first received the truth of the Lord Jesus Christ, we remain faithful and consistent with that foundational truth. "...so walk ye in him...as ye have been taught..." a vivid contrast to what the Gnostics, or any subsequent revisionist teacher, starts to teach.

Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ. For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. Fascinating, isn't it, that all the major leaders of error mentioned above (Smith, Russell, and White) appealed to Scripture, but they always added a private interpretation to Scripture that strained and contradicted the obvious and clear teaching of Scripture.

Let me give you a contemporary example. A few years ago a prominent preacher from southern California started teaching what has come to be known as "Lordship salvation." While John MacArthur claims to believe in salvation by grace, a number of his critics have, I believe rightly, challenged his present teaching as effectively advocating indirect or "backdoor salvation by works." MacArthur's view is that there can be no disobedient children in God's family. No, he doesn't use this analogy, but the analogy accurately defines his teaching. His description, often in almost these exact words, is "You cannot claim Jesus as your Savior unless you also make Him Lord of your life." Others who sympathize or wholly agree with MacArthur's

ideas sometimes try to avoid the criticisms rightly raised against his ideas by teaching the same idea with different terms. They will wholly extract "perseverance" out of its Biblical setting and pervert it into an identical twin of the MacArthur idea. According to their teaching, "I cannot give you any assurance of your salvation unless you persevere in faith and holiness. If you are **really** a child of God, you will persevere, and actually increase in the purity of your faith and holiness till you die."

Here is a simple test to evaluate this idea. Take any comprehensive English concordance of the Bible, and look up the appearance of the word "perseverance" in your King James Bible. You will discover that this word appears once--**and only once**--in the whole King James Bible. That appearance is Ephesians 6:18. It appears as an admonition to faithful continuance in prayer, not even remotely as an essential test of your salvation or of your eternal standing with God.

Thus, advocates of this idea must appeal to "...philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ." They morph a very important New Testament admonition into a test of your true spiritual standing with God.

A common feature of believers' perseverance in faith and holiness as necessary evidence of salvation is to interpret virtually all salvation texts as pertaining to eternal salvation. When people adopt this extra-biblical view of perseverance, they seem rather consistently to deny two distinct salvations taught in Scripture, one related to God's effectual and eternal work of grace and the other related to our discipleship, temporal or time salvation as distinguished from eternal salvation. The result is a highly confused one and only one salvation philosophy with one of three glaring inconsistencies.

1. All salvation is wholly, irresistibly, and effectually wrought by God, denying the multitude of Scriptures that impose moral obligations onto God's regenerated children. Do we live in a robotic universe in which God orchestrates every act of man and every event that occurs? Or do we live in a moral universe in which God rules, but He rules by commandment and by law, not by predestined and effectual decree that either directly causes or indirectly orchestrates every event that occurs, including your discipleship, as well as every act of human sin? If our discipleship results from a divine effectual and irresistible divine decree, how do advocates of this view explain the endless gradients of faithfulness--and of

unfaithfulness--in individuals' obedience? Does God cause half-hearted discipleship "irresistibly and effectually"?

2. All salvation is wholly of man, the common Arminian view of salvation by works.
3. Salvation at one end of the continuum is all of God and at the other end of the continuum is part of God and part of man. So how do we explain salvation between these two ends of the continuum?

A major problem exists with all three of these ideas mirrors the fundamental problem with both the distorted view of perseverance and the equally distorted view of only one salvation taught in Scripture. ***The Bible does not teach that all salvations, or deliverances, contained in its teachings fall within one continuum.*** A wiser method of understanding Biblical salvation--more correctly Biblical salvations--looks at each passage and asks two questions. 1) Saved from what? 2) Saved to what?

Paul wraps up the weight of his effective expose and refutation of Gnosticism, and with it, any pretense of revisionist doctrine, with a bedrock truth of historical Christianity, the Christianity that the Lord's church has consistently preached and defended "...throughout all ages...." *For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily.* The fullness of God cannot be reduced to anyone's favorite philosophical, pseudo-Christian or perverted Christian idea. God's fullness appears exclusively in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the faithful and true representation of Him in Scripture. Our hope of eternity with God does not stand on the shifting sands of how well we perform our Christian duty, but on the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The truth of Paul's teaching in our study lesson is a timeless filter to protect the Lord's sheep from every appearance of new--or perverted old--ideas that God has protected and preserved in His church "...throughout all ages...." If we were to identify even one generation during which the Lord's church failed to preserve God's essential truth, we would by that very act also prove this passage false. No way!

In the end our choice is marked. Join the philosophical and errant claims of Smith, Russell, White, and others in asserting that the Lord's church has drifted from her faith, Christian truth has been lost, and God singled you out to restore it, or stand with inspired New Testament teachings that affirm God's faithful promise to preserve His church, and, in it, His truth throughout all ages. Here, my friends, I take my stand. From Genesis to Revelation, Scripture teaches that God created and rules over a moral universe in which He sovereignly saves His

chosen people from their sins through the finished work of His Son alone. But He also guides and assists His regenerated (born again) children in their pursuit of godliness with the dual weight of His law written in their hearts and with the aid of the Holy Spirit, encouraged and confirmed by the teachings of Scripture and of the gospel. He gives them moral instructions, commandments, and blesses their obedience to these commands. He warns them to avoid violations of those commands, and chastens those in His family who refuse them and the guiding aid of the Holy Spirit. He shall ultimately judge the wicked by His fixed moral Law and sentence them to appropriate punishment. This, my friends, distinctly describes a moral universe, not a robotic one. This is the universe that God created, and this is the world in which your God has said, "This is the way. Walk ye in it." (Isaiah 30:21)

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Worship service each Sunday 10:30 A. M.
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