

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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The Gospel: A Gnostic Secret or a Public Proclamation?

PAUL, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timotheus our brother, To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ which are at Colosse: Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. We give thanks to God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, Since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, and of the love which ye have to all the saints, For the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, whereof ye heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel; Which is come unto you, as it is in all the world; and bringeth forth fruit, as it doth also in you, since the day ye heard of it, and knew the grace of God in truth: As ye also learned of Epaphras our dear fellowservant, who is for you a faithful minister of Christ; Who also declared unto us your love in the Spirit. (Colossians 1:1–8)

We are sometimes inclined to gloss over the introductions to New Testament letters. Yes, we know Paul wrote Colossians, etc. However, often the added details we find in these introductions, contrasted with the rather dry, factual introductions that followed literary protocol of the day, add pertinent details to our knowledge of these letters. For example, the common letter of the day would have Paul introduce himself by the mere mention of his name, along with a similar formal, though somewhat impersonal reference to his recipient. In this letter, Paul introduces himself, but then he also adds the details, "...an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God..." Paul identifies his position in the gospel that authorizes him to write the Colossian Church this letter. The New Testament does not know such a thing as "pastors at large," men who claim authority over large numbers of churches and preachers. Such a posture betrays a man's ego, not his deep care for "the cause" or whatever pretense he uses to usurp authority over others.

Next Paul enlarges his description of the Colossians to whom he writes this letter, "...saints and faithful brethren in Christ..." Not only are these people "in Christ," but they are also saints and faithful in Christ. Not enough, Paul then communicates his prayerful desire for these people richly to experience God's grace and peace.

We give thanks to God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, Since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, and of the love which ye have to all the saints.... The faith and the "faith-walk" of the Colossians was common public knowledge. Paul knew it as well as others. The clear public reputation of which Paul writes in these words directly confronts the secretive Gnostic attitude that endangered the Colossians. Not enough, Paul drives the point

home with more emphasis. *...whereof ye heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel; Which is come unto you, as it is in all the world; and bringeth forth fruit, as it doth also in you, since the day ye heard of it, and knew the grace of God in truth....*" The Colossians did not come to the "knowledge of the truth" by the secretive, elitist teachings of a Gnostic mystic. The truth that they heard in the gospel was the truth—period. This same message was proclaimed in the public-most form, "...as it is in all the world..." not in the secretive back room of a Gnostic teacher.

Jesus required this public, transparent demeanor of all His disciples who wish to follow His example.

Jesus answered him, I spake openly to the world; I ever taught in the synagogue, and in the temple, whither the Jews always resort; and in secret have I said nothing. (John 18:20)

If we expect to be regarded as true followers of Jesus by those who observe us, we cannot hide our lives or our beliefs behind closed, secretive doors.

Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much. (James 5:16)

Why is it that so many Christians will frequently quote the second half of this verse, but seldom quote the first half? And if anyone suggests that they should confess their sins, or faults—there is no real difference in the two—to their brothers and sisters, folks tend to become secretive and defensive, "I'll confess my sins to God; they are none of your business." In a particular sense I

would agree, but I cannot erase this verse from the Bible, nor should I attempt to do so de facto by contradicting it or by pretending it doesn't exist. It has been my observation over some fifty years of ministry that people are incredibly forgiving of confessed sins, and they are rather unforgiving of unconfessed sins, particularly when the sinner pretends that he/she has not so sinned. Factually, if we erase the part of this verse requiring confession of our faults to one another from the Bible, we must also erase "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much." Do you really want to take that truth out of the Bible?

A true experience will serve as a powerful example. The man who lived this experience told it to me himself. He made a public profession of his faith at a rather early age. As he entered junior high school and early high school, he fell into friendships with a group of unruly kids. He quickly began to adopt their attitudes and habits. Despite enjoying a sense of belonging, he also suffered from deep convictions that his present lifestyle was dishonoring to his God and to his church. Eventually the conviction overwhelmed him. At a church business meeting, the pastor called for "Acknowledgements," and this young man rose to his feet, confessed his sins in tears to the church, concluding with his understanding that he no longer deserved to remain in the church's membership, and assuring the church that he fully understood the gravity of his sins. In tears a wise old member rose to his feet, observed that the sin was truly as grave as the young man observed, but also reminding the church that the young man had clearly demonstrated grief and repentance over the sin. He then urged the church to forgive the young man and to take no disciplinary action against him. The church agreed, most of them also in tears. They sang a song, and all the members shook the young man's hand, affirming their love for him. He went home overwhelmed at the church's loving forgiveness and determined to change his circle of friends and his lifestyle. On Monday morning at school that decision was more difficult than it had been at church. Those same old friends pulled him right back into their circle and habits. The young man was tempted. However, every time he started to go back to that old way he remembered his church's affirmation of love and their forgiveness. Their loving forgiveness gave him the courage to make new friends and to start a new, godly lifestyle at school. Today this forgiven young man is a godly, powerful, and quite effective preacher of the gospel! Don't tell me any sentence in the Bible doesn't apply to your life or doesn't work for our day and age. Have you tried it?

I made my first public profession of faith at the age of fourteen and was baptized shortly thereafter. I had lived in the shadows of this young brother's junior high school experience. Almost immediately after my baptism, I began to realize deep convictions about preaching. Within a couple of months of that date my pastor gently confronted me with a question about my conviction, though I had never spoken a word to him about it. He asked, and I agreed, to start speaking before the church. Within a few days the word had spread in my school. Occasionally some of my former friends would taunt me with "Hey preacher." Like this young man, the love of my church and the abiding conviction that God was greater than friends gave me the courage to change.

Godly, sincere confession is an incredibly healing experience, and it typically results in many people praying for you, effectual prayers that make a difference.

The most credible and authentic Christian testimony is the transparent, public testimony, a life that follows fully in Jesus' footsteps, including His statement to Pilate. Paul reiterates this point in his prologue to the Colossian letter. The Gnostic secret elitism philosophy is working to make its inroads into the church, and Paul from the first section of the letter shows the Colossians and us that the most effective testimony of the gospel is also the most public testimony and lifestyle.

The first sermon after Jesus ascended victoriously back to heaven was preached in the presence of a large crowd of people in the temple on a Jewish holiday. Large numbers of non-Christians were present. At the most, the number of faithful followers was around a hundred twenty people, but on that one day their number increased by three thousand people. And, based on the closing verses of Acts the second chapter, this growth continued.

When the apostles and others who traveled the Mediterranean world and preached when ever and where ever opportunity allowed, entered a new city, they did not look for a secret band of elite mystics. They looked for a public gathering of worshippers. Sometimes—most often—it was a Jewish synagogue, but occasionally they found other religious sites and sought opportunity to preach Jesus and the resurrection. A consistent common denominator of every sermon we read in Acts, every act of evangelism we see there, is that the message was public and consistent. The apostles did not present the Gnostic idea that they were teaching a commoner's version of a deeper truth. They rather taught that the message they

taught was the whole message of the gospel, good news for all of God's children, as the words from an old hymn describe, "...help for today and bright hope for tomorrow."

Clearly, had it gained entrance and standing in the first generation church, Gnosticism would have destroyed the spirit of the New Testament church. Paul did well to confront and to oppose it. We do well to stand with Paul—in public.

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Worship service each Sunday 10:30 A. M.
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