

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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A "Preaching" Church

And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him. As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison. Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word. (Acts 8:1-4)

If we study the first seven chapters of Acts, noting each time a number of people was added to the Jerusalem Church, obviously the church consisted of several thousand people. This number is a significant contrast to the New Testament's description of the typical smaller first generation church that often met in a wealthy member's home. Several years ago I was surprised by a statistic that I read. In our age that trumpets the "Mega-church," the survey indicated that the average church size in the United States at that time was approximately one hundred members, hardly the mega-church that attracts the headlines.

We have spent a significant time studying the spiritual gifts that the Lord has placed "...in the church." (1 Corinthians 12:28) Spiritual gifts are not designed as museum pieces to be proudly displayed under a glass case for observation only. The Lord gives them for work, not for display or self-indulgence. Notice Paul's primary description of the man who is truly qualified for the office of "Bishop," "...he desireth a good work." (1 Timothy 3:1b) Perhaps too many shipwrecked lives in church result from the believer desiring a particular office or position of authority that the Lord didn't "Gift" him to occupy. Or they may not understand that every gift the Lord gives to us He intends for us to use that gift to "work" for His glory, not feather our own nest and rule the church according to our personal whims.

Based on the logical and Biblical function of a spiritual gift, our study of spiritual gifts from First Corinthians 12-14 brings us to understand that a church is not left destitute of spiritual gifts to actively carry on the work that the Lord assigned her to do. Churches may neglect their assignment, their true spiritual assignment, by any number of lesser distractions and detours, but no church that actively and in a **united desire** seeks to serve the Lord can fail for lack of the necessary spiritual gifts. If a church senses a need for spiritual gifts to move forward with its spiritual work, Scripture requires and enlightens the church to join in united prayer for the Lord to send the gifts needed for that work. Could it be that deficiencies in spiritual gifts result

from a church not praying in unison for the Lord to send them?

I recall visiting a church in my youth that was quite active and spiritually warm and blessed. The members told me a story about the church's history. There was a time many years earlier when this church declined to only two widows who were sisters. Despite their decline, these two saints would dress for church every Sunday morning, and take their hymnals and their Bibles to the church. They'd spend time sweeping and cleaning up the church inside and out. At their appointed worship hour, these two saints would sit down in the church, take out their hymnals, and sing a few hymns. Then one of them would pray, always praying for the Lord to send them a pastor and renew their church. Then the other would read a passage from the Bible. This cycle went on for several years. On one occasion a preacher was scheduled to preach at the churches in the area. He made an unusual request of the local pastor who was arranging his appointments. He asked to preach at every single church in the area. The local pastor made the arrangements and sent him the schedule. The visiting preacher replied, "Does this include every single church?" The local pastor answered that he had left one tiny church off the list because it had declined to only two widow ladies. The visiting preacher insisted on preaching at this church. When the two widows learned that they would have a visiting minister, they invested extra effort to clean up the church facility and grounds. Then they went about the far more important business of inviting every neighbor in the community to join them at this service. To everyone's surprise—I suspect, except these two godly women—a significant number of people attended to hear the visiting preacher. After the appointment, this preacher moved his family to the community and started preaching there. Soon people were attending regularly, and a good number joined the church. The Lord heard the prayers of these godly women and sent revival to this church that everyone except them had counted as dead. So if your church is in decline or struggling with problems, don't "Preach its funeral" and expect me to congratulate you. Get on your knees the way

those two saints did and ask the Lord to send laborers, spiritual gifts, and renewal. And get up off your knees and start acting the part instead of indulging in a gloom contest. These two saints didn't have a group of people to order around and get them to do the necessary work for their church's future. They rolled up their sleeves and worked themselves. Beware the church member who constantly barks orders, but seldom does anything that generates a drop of sweat themselves. *"Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might..."* (Ecclesiastes 9:10a) I have yet to find the verse that teaches, *"Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, tell other believers they need to do it."*

Contrary to popular opinion, the greatest power in a church other than its foundation, the Lord Jesus Christ, is its members, not its deacons or its preachers. Throughout this study I have often repeated Paul's teaching that the church is the *"...the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth."* (1 Timothy 3:15b) Paul didn't write that deacons and preachers are the church or the pillar and ground of the truth. If we study the recipients of each New Testament letter that names a recipient, three letters were written to two young preachers, a few letters were written to individuals, and a significant number were written to churches. Not a single letter was written to deacons in a church, and only three were written to preachers. Paul practiced his conviction that the church is the Lord's house, His appointed *"...pillar and ground of the truth."* Whenever a single individual, regardless their position, real or imagined, attempts to usurp his/her position and lord himself or herself over the church, they contradict and violate New Testament teaching and set themselves up for a season of severe chastening. They never bless the church by attempting to root out the Lord and to usurp His exclusive position of lordship over His church. You might consider studying this word "Usurp." It is a Bible word that contains a grave warning to every conscientious believer. Are we doing our faith according to our private opinions or according to the Lord's "Rule of faith" as revealed in Scripture and His abiding lordship over His (Not your) church?

Our study passage is rich with instruction and light regarding the Lord's care over His churches. Despite several thousand members, the time came when intense persecution diminished Jerusalem Church to a rather small number. Only the apostles remained. Even with such a small number, they never considered giving up or going back to the synagogue. When the fires of persecution became heated, they dispersed from Jerusalem, but they took their faith and their faithful convictions and trust in their faithful Lord with them wherever they went. We read no signs of a collective plan or of a preacher telling them what to do, but their conduct proves that they had been well taught.

...and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the

apostles. ...they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word. Who were these people? Those who dispersed from Jerusalem were not preachers and apostles. They were the "Ordinary" members of the church. Although the passage says nothing about how they preached, I suggest that every member of a faithful church can and should constantly "Preach" the gospel to friends, neighbors, family, and work associates by their words and by their conduct. You may not preach with the same formality as the Sunday sermon; you shouldn't try. You may not "Preach" with the same pattern of Bible citations and Scriptural research as those sermons you hear, but your life-sermon should manifest in content the same gospel that you hear from the pulpit. If the sermon from the pulpit emphasizes the Lord Jesus, not the preacher (*"For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake."* 2 Corinthians 4:5), your "Word and foot sermon" should follow that example. Never model your Christianity so as to put yourself forward in any way. Keep self out of the limelight and keep the Lord Jesus prominent.

Often the pastor who is teaching church members to do more of this kind of "Life preaching" will hear the words back, "But I don't know how to talk to people about grace." Thanks for being honest. Your next step should be to engage in a conscientious study, likely with your pastor, to become more first-hand familiar with your faith so that you are comfortable talking to others about your faith. But far more important, study to learn how to practice your faith daily in a selfless and gracious manner. The religious world of our time abounds with self-righteous, self-centered religious folks whose self-promotion is a really big put-off to unbelievers, not at all a winsome attraction. Don't brag to others about what you don't know or what you do know. The religious world also abounds with arrogant pretend believers who have far more to say about themselves and how much they know than anything else. These attitudes are colossal "Put-offs" to an inquiring mind. You'll chase people away with them, but you definitely won't attract anyone with these attitudes.

Take a look this week at your "Foot preaching." You often, even if privately in your thoughts, give your pastor a weekly "Report card" on his sermon. Try the same grading of your mouth, your eyes, your ears, and your feet. Grade yourself! If you practiced selfless Biblical Christian conduct, how might you impact the people in your life outside your church? And how in fact are you impacting them?

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Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor