

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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What is in a Name?

And unto the angel of the church in Sardis write; These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars; I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead. (Revelation 3:1, KJV 1900)

The Lord rebuked the Church at Sardis because she did not live up to her "Name," her reputation or His divine expectation of her conduct. Be it a church or an individual, conduct grows reputation and gives a name its meaning in the eyes of onlookers. Our study of the New Testament doctrine of the church begins with the most basic point. Of all the names that the Lord might have chosen to give to His institution of New Testament worshippers, He chose one particular name that was ancient in its origin and rich and deep in its history. He might have comfortably called his new community of followers the new "Synagogue." That name would have been readily understood and accepted by the Jewish culture in which He taught and established His new community. If popular appeal is the deciding factor for a church's name, "The New Synagogue" would have been the ideal name, but Jesus didn't give His new community of believers that name. He chose a name rich and ancient in Greek history and tradition, a culture that religious Jews living in Judea despised. Surely there must be a good reason for His choice.

Today's Christian culture often more emphasizes "Para-Church" "Ministries" and actives than the Bible doctrine of the church itself. Mention church in these circles and prepare yourself for a "Ho-hum" interest from your hearers. Mention "Para-Church," and you will have their undivided interest. This attitude contradicts every tenet of New Testament testimony regarding what the Lord's church should be in the world. If something is "Para" to the church, the direct implication is that the church is lacking something that the "Para" organization will fulfill. Given the obvious witness of Scripture that Jesus built His "Church," we must conclude from anything "Para" to that church that sponsors of the "Para" group must think that He failed to build everything into His church that His people would need, so they must now resort to their own creativity to do what He failed to do. I reject this idea and stand unapologetically on the Biblical ground that Jesus built His church as He intended her to function in this world, fully equipping and instructing her to fulfill His charge to her. This study and this series shall build on this basic and, I believe, obvious Biblical premise.

This week's Gleanings will address two themes of New Testament teaching.

1. What is the significance of the Lord's name of His new worshipping, believing community as a "Church"?
2. What is the point of Ephesians 1:22, that Christ is "...head over all things to the church"? Effectively, what are the implications of this word "Church" on a local assembled body and how it goes about making routine decisions, all decisions for that matter? The casual New Testament reader will sense an apparent tension between these two points. A core meaning of the Greek word translated "Church" in the New Testament treated every citizen in the Greek "ekklesia" as an equal with full responsibility to voice his/her judgment by voting on matters brought before the assembly. Ephesians 1:22 indicates that Jesus is the uncompromising and unlimited Head over His church. How do we resolve this apparent tension? Acts 13:2 exemplifies the New Testament teaching that removes any appearance of tension. While the Holy Spirit separated Paul and Barnabas to a specific spiritual assignment, He also commanded the church at Antioch to cooperate and to support that calling. In matters of essential doctrine and practice, Acts 13:2 falling under the "Practice" side, the Lord makes the call, but He also commands His church to acknowledge that call and to make a conscious choice to support it and to participate in its work. In matters that are not so essential, the New Testament abounds with examples and teachings that require the church to approach its decisions with grace and with the heart of a servant, not a lord over the church. Philippians 2:1-11 serves as a foundational lesson regarding this teaching. As a local church approaches its "Routine business" necessary to carry on its work and to prepare the way for future generations, the decisions are to be made with each member honoring and serving other members, not fighting with carnal political pressure to gain his/her way. The Holy Spirit doesn't care what color we paint the walls of the church, but He does care and commands the manner in which a church makes such

decisions. There is no real tension between the two points.

Implications of the word “Church”

The common Greek word translated “Church” in the New Testament likely originated in Athens around the fifth century B. C. The “*ekklesia*” referred to the body of citizens in a Greek city-state. Colin Brown, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Volume 1, (Regency Reference Library, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1986. Quotes below appear in the article on “Church, Synagogue,” beginning on Page 291) gives an extensive thesis regarding this word, its origin, and its prevailing use in the Greek culture where it originated, as well as its early use in the church. Given the importance of this word in the New Testament, I will quote extensively from Brown’s thesis.

“It reached its greatest importance in the 5th cent. (B. C.) and met at regular intervals (in Athens about 30-40 times a year, elsewhere less frequently) and also in cases of urgency as an extra-ordinary *ekklesia*. Its sphere of competence included decisions on suggested changes in the law...on appointments to official positions and—at least in its heyday—on every important question of internal and external policy (contracts, treaties, war and peace, finance). ...It was bound by the existing laws. Every citizen had the right to speak and to propose matters for discussion....A decision was only valid if it won a certain number of votes. Authorization to participate, and the methods of summoning the assembly and of voting—by show of hands in Athens, by acclaim, by ballot sheets or stones—were strictly regulated.”

“Thus *ekklesia*, centuries before the translation of the OT and the time of the NT, was clearly characterized as a political phenomenon, repeated according to certain rules and within a certain framework. It was the assembly of full citizens, functionally rooted in the constitution of the democracy, an assembly in which fundamental political and judicial decisions were taken.”

“What is noteworthy, however, is that the word *ekklesia* throughout the GK. and Hel. areas, always retained its reference to the assembly of the *polis*. (“Polis” refers to the city-state. JH)

As Brown moves from the Greek city-state “*ekklesia*” to the New Testament church, he affirms many of the features that explain why Jesus chose this name for His new believers’ community.

“It is striking that Jesus’ followers did not describe their meetings and the community represented by them as a synagogue.”

“It is not only the church’s origin which lies with God. The *ekklesia* can only be understood in relation to the Lord, as the *ekklesia tou theou*, the congregation of God.”

“There is no gradation according to importance. Instead, the concept shows a remarkable breadth in the way it embraces gifts of leadership and organization, as well as healing, speaking in tongues and the discernment of spirits (1 Cor. 12:14 ff.; Rom. 12:4 ff.). They are all manifestations of the body, through which the salvation event becomes contemporary, and the congregation becomes an eschatological reality. Their development and orderly growth requires Christian community life (1 Cor. 14:33). But Paul clearly did not intend to secure this by means of a rigid system of offices. The exercise of the gifts must be thought of concretely. Paul always understands the *ekklesia* as the living, assembled congregation. This is expressed particularly in 1 Cor. 14 (vv. 4 f., 12, 19, 23, 28). It is only in the meeting and living together of the members that love, described in 1 Cor. 13 as the supreme gift, can be made real, just as it is only in this way that the other God-given gifts can be recognized and acknowledged.”

“The fact that small groups in individual houses are called *ekklesia* (Phlm. 2; 1 Cor. 16:19; Rom. 16:5; cf. also Col. 4:15) indicates that neither the significance of the place nor the numerical size of the assembly determines the use of the term. What counts is the presence of Christ among them (cf. Gal. 3:1) and faith nourished by him.”

What distinguishes the ancient meaning of “*ekklesia*,” or “Church” as the King James Bible normally translates the word, from the Jewish synagogue? Both were religious, worshipping, teaching, local communities of believers in God. Aside from the obvious doctrinal divide (Jews in the synagogue did not believe in Jesus as their Messiah or as God Incarnate), the basic organizational structure of the two groups is almost mirror opposite. We find six references in the New Testament to the “*ruler of the synagogue*.” (Mark 5:36; 5:38; Luke 8:41; 13:14; Acts 18:8; 18:17). This term was translated from a Greek word that specifically identifies the person as holding a degree of superiority over the local synagogue. Every historical marker associated with the meaning of the word “*ekklesia*” rejects the whole concept of any form or hierarchical rule or of one person holding superiority, either in office or person, over another. In the Jewish synagogue, each local assembly was “Ruled” by one man. In the “*ekklesia*,” every member of the assembly was considered of equal standing, had the right to bring up matters to the assembly, to speak on matters before the assembly, and to vote on matters in the

assembly's decision making process. Of all Christian people, historically Baptists have championed this concept more consistently than any other group. The principle of democratic governance (One member one vote) did not begin among Baptists in the United States. The founding fathers learned from Baptists and implemented many of the principles advocated and practiced historically by Baptists in the founding documents. Along the eastern seaboard, as one example, you will find a historical marker regarding John Leland's correspondence with Thomas Jefferson regarding the importance of religious freedom in the Bill of Rights. Thus, the founding fathers learned from the existing Baptist churches and their historical practice of democratic governance, not the opposite.

Practical Implications

The Lord's church, as described in the New Testament, has one and only one "Superior" who has legitimate authority to rule over it, the Lord Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 1:22; "to be" in this verse identifies all present and future times. When Jesus arose from the dead, the Father announced once for all time that His Son is Lord of lords and King of kings, and that He is permanently, exclusively, and preeminently, not temporarily "...head over all things to the church.") Apostles and ministers in the New Testament never describe themselves as rulers over or as superiors to the people in the churches. Quite the opposite, they regard themselves as subject to Jesus and servants of, not lords over the churches.

For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake. (2 Corinthians 4:5)

When the Holy Spirit inspired men to write the New Testament, many of those letters are addressed to local, individual churches. Paul typically is very precise in his description of the local church to whom he writes. For example.

Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours. (1 Corinthians 1:2)

As we read through these letters, First Corinthians serving as a clear and consistent pattern, Paul never addressed any ruling and presumably elite class within the church to take the actions that he directs and teaches. He didn't write a single letter to such a non-existent ruling body or class. Not one. He always requires action of the whole church as a body. If the Lord intended His "Church" to be governed by a ruling body or board, surely in some way he would have directed these letters to such a body or board. That every letter

other than the letters to individuals or groups of churches is addressed to such a local assembly, and all the teachings of those letters direct the whole assembly to take the action taught cannot be ignored by the faithful Bible reader.

Typically Reformed (Originating in the Protestant Reformation) churches practice some form of hierarchical, top-down rule over local churches. Given that these churches began as a protest against one of the most hierarchical churches in Christian history, the Roman Catholic Church, it is no real surprise. However, neither the Roman Church nor the Protestant reformers have authority that transcends New Testament teaching, teaching that consistently rejects this form of human hierarchical rule. The idea of a ruling class that governs a local church has no support or example whatever in the New Testament. In fact, two passages in Revelation suggest that the Lord despises such an idea in His church where He alone rules each local church.

But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitanes, which I also hate. (Revelation 2:6)

So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes, which thing I hate. (Revelation 2:15)

Early Christian writers and many historical commentaries generally associate this wholly unacceptable group with Nicolas, one of the first deacons, designated by the Jerusalem church, and ordained by the apostles to take responsibility for distributing the daily provisions to all members alike, not neglecting anyone because of class, race, or culture. "...Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch." (Acts 6:5b). That Nicolas is here identified as a "proselytes" suggests that he was likely a Gentile convert to Judaism prior to his conversion to faith in Jesus. Perhaps over time, Nicolas decided that he preferred the top-down rule of the synagogue to the idea of equal members of one body working for the good of the body and not for supremacy or personal preeminence over the church. The general belief is; while first viewed as a well-qualified man of spiritual wisdom and grace, Nicolas fell away from his faithfulness and lead his followers away from the faith. Some commentaries note that the Greek word translated "Nicolaitanes" in these verses means "Conquerors of the people." Whether the man holds the office of deacon, elder or minister, or is a member of the local assembly but holds no other office, the idea of anyone presuming a superiority role over a local church is a deed and doctrine that these verses remind us; the Lord hates both the deed and the doctrine.

If the Lord had intended His new worshipping community to be organized under the rule of any one man or class of men, He would have had no reason not to name that new body His new

“Synagogue.” The word would have been readily understood in that way by the apostles and first generation of disciples. That Jesus Himself twice in Matthew (16:18; 18:17) referred to His new community of intimate followers by the word “Church” is notable. In no way did Jesus redefine the word “*ekklesia*.” He chose the word, He taught His disciples, and directed His chosen New Testament writers to use the word with no indication that its accepted, very well known, and historical meaning was to be in any way modified. The New Testament church is to regard itself as a united body of like-minded believers who collectively and individually serve the Lord and each other as brothers and sisters¹ who respectfully answer to the Lord and seek to follow Him together as a safe, unified, and harmonious body, not as a hierarchical body ruled by a man or group of men who presume—**who usurp**—authority over the Lord’s church. (John 17:21-22; Romans 12:16; 15:5; 1 Corinthians 1:10; Ephesians 4:1-6; Philippians 2:2; 3:16; 4:2; 1 Peter 4:1) Unity of mind, heart, and faith is as dominant and as essential in New Testament teaching regarding the culture of the Lord’s church as is His doctrinal teaching in the church’s faith.

The New Testament repeatedly affirms that the pastor of each local church assembly is that assembly’s teaching authority. (Hebrews 13:7; 2 Timothy 2:25-26) In the Second Timothy passage the word “strive,” a behavior that Paul strictly forbids, means to dispute or to quarrel. The minister of the gospel is to teach and to lead by example and by kind instruction, and the church is likewise to respectfully heed his teachings. This gentle teaching requirement keeps even the pastor on equal footing in the church brotherhood. The Lord’s church has no Biblical grounds for separate classes of “Clergy” versus “Laity,” none whatever. The minister is forbidden from engaging the members of the church in disputing and quarreling over the teachings of Scripture. Highly unpopular to many folks in our time, fractious debating is not a Biblically accepted or commended form of intellectual or spiritual entertainment. It is forbidden and to be avoided. Further, the idea of scanning the internet and listening to preaching of men of varying degrees of soundness, but all of whom have no Biblical authority in the local church, is unheard of in Scripture. The New Testament allows no intrusion by men, preachers included, from outside the local church who might teach contrary to the local pastor or otherwise confuse the teaching authority of the local church that the New Testament affirms. (Hebrews 13:7-8; 1 Peter 5:1-3)

¹ The New Testament word frequently used is “servant,” as exemplified in 2 Corinthians 4:5 above. The Biblical equality of all believers is further emphasized by the frequent reference to them in the New Testament as “Brethren.”

Likewise, the New Testament in no way teaches or permits the establishing of a superior “Mother church” that serves as a superior authority over other churches. Whether within a local assembly or within a collective fellowship of churches, the New Testament forbids any form of hierarchical rule by one person or group over others. Occasionally a pastor of the largest church in a region, or even the whole membership of the largest or oldest church in such a region, may try to presume a position of superiority and hierarchical rule over the other preachers and churches. All such forms of domination by one believer or group of believers over other believers contradict every tenet of New Testament teaching that Jesus alone is “...*head over all things to the church*.” Therefore all such forms of sinful and typically bully-type influence, however subtly imposed, should be soundly rejected by faithful and sound believers in the Lord’s church.

Similar in principle to the “Mother church” error are any number of other “Para-Church” ideas that come and go in the historical flow of the Lord’s church. In my youth, almost all churches in our fellowship belonged to a regional “Association,” a union of churches in a given region. Though never intended to function as superior to any church, often these associations openly bullied member churches to tow the line or face the association’s censure. Thankfully, associations have slowly faded. However, human nature prefers man’s way to God’s way. Today, you see other equally “Para-Church” activities. For example, regional or wider general “Preachers’ meetings” often gather with the stated purpose of preachers rubbing shoulders and helping each other, though at times, not at all different from the old associations. If not wisely and carefully guarded, these meetings drift into one or another effort to undermine the Biblical authority of a local church with the supposedly wiser ideas of the elite group of preachers in the gathering. When the leaders of these meetings bully local preachers and churches, either blatantly or with subtlety, to go along with the ideas of the preachers who support the meetings, they in fact practice the same error that was rejected in the old associations. They attempt to lord their personal ideas and opinions over the Lord’s church and pastor and thereby put themselves in the highly unbiblical and untenable position of competing with the Lord for lordship over His church.

Additionally, while Scripture emphasizes true evangelism, it consistently imbeds Biblical evangelism in the function of the local church, not in a separate non-profit IRS licensed business venture apart from the church. In the early days of Baptist missions, para-church mission/evangelistic societies abounded. Those societies demonstrate the problem of this approach. They took on a life of their own and became the private instrument of their leaders and their leaders’ personal beliefs, not a function of the Lord’s church that the church

governed and directed. What is the model of Biblical evangelism? (Acts 13:2) Within the Church at Antioch, the Holy Spirit directed the church to “*Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them.*” That work was an evangelistic labor, not anything specific to the internal workings of the Church at Antioch. In this work, both the church and the two men called by the Holy Spirit to the work cooperated in their evangelism. This is the New Testament model of evangelism. The New Testament contains no example of a para-church evangelistic body or function. A godly and Biblical evangelistic work will operate within and under the direction and authority of a local church, not independent of such a church.

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Worship service each Sunday	10:30 A. M.
Joseph R. Holder	Pastor