

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Jesus' "Church" Has a Permanent Assignment

And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. (Matthew 16:18, KJV 1900)

The word "Church" or "Churches" appears a total of 115 times in the King James New Testament. Only three of those appearances are in the gospels in Jesus' words during His personal ministry. Our study passage uses the future tense, "*will build.*" Jesus' other use of the word appears in Matthew 18.

And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. (Matthew 18:17)

Most commentaries interpret this verse as requiring church discipline. However, a simple following of the grammatical structure of the sentence teaches a different lesson. "...*let him be unto thee.*..." "**Thee**" is singular and refers to one person, not to the collected body of believers in a church. Jesus taught the disciples how they should personally react to an unrepentant brother or sister who refuses or "neglects" to show godly and tender regard for the offended believer. Jesus' simple lesson reminds us. Not all believers shall always respond with loving grace when confronted and rebuked. However kindly you go to the person and try to resolve the tension, some folks simply will not change. When you, one or two other respected believers, and even the whole church rebuke the believer for the offense, at times the offender will remain stubborn and recalcitrant in his/her offensive words and actions. Jesus' lesson addresses you, the offended believer, not the whole church. In this lesson, the church functions as a respected and wise counsellor, not as a disciplinarian. At the end of the process, if the erring believer refuses to hear others and modify the offensive posture, what do you do? How do you deal with the situation? That is Jesus' lesson. "...*let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.*" First century Jews openly despised Gentiles and tax collectors. However, Jesus often touched those same people with His kind grace. How many lessons do we read in the four gospel records that show us Jesus and either a Gentile or tax collector in a warm and cordial interaction? Why do so many lessons of Jesus' miracles include special notation regarding the fact that the recipient of His miracle was either a Gentile or a tax collector? Jesus' lesson does not suggest that you or I are free to show contempt

toward the offending believer, similar to first century Jews' treatment of these people. I suggest that He rather taught the disciples to follow His personal example toward these people. You've done all that you can do to resolve the tension with this person. Put it to rest. Stop picking at it or dwelling on it obsessively. Put a bold period at the end of the episode and go on with your life. And make part of your life a goal to treat that person the same way Jesus treated those folks. Show kindness and grace toward them. No, you and that person may never regain intimate friendship, but you can—and should—take steps to avoid picking at the sore and keeping it fresh and vulnerable to "Infection" and spread.

This whole lesson builds on the fundamental fact of "the church" as something that exists and functions as a wise, respected component of the believer's life and discipleship. Jesus' use of the church in this lesson as an active force in the personal lives of His disciples sets the stage for the dominance of the church later in the New Testament letters.

While Matthew 16:18 uses the future tense verb "will build," Matthew 18: 17 uses the present tense. I do not suggest that the church per se came to exist within the likely brief time lapse covered by these two chapters. However, there can be no question that Jesus affirmed to the disciples that this "Thing" that He promised to build would be built and would fulfill an intimate and respected role in the life of His faithful followers in the future. Young, insecure, and unlearned believers will often loudly protest their self-claimed superiority over other believers and eagerly remind any who listen that they have no intention whatever of respecting, submitting to (Ephesians 5:21 as one of many similar passages) or otherwise hearing any other believer, including the collected body of believers in the local church. In this prideful novice attitude, they reveal just how out of step they are with Jesus and His New Testament teachings. Submission in the New Testament is an act of honor. Submission in sinful human pride is an act of humiliation. Which attitude rules our heart?

While Jesus' lesson in Matthew 18 requires active intervention by the church, the passage does not provide finite details regarding how the church would voice her judgment in the case of personal offenses between two members, only that she does

so. In the history of the Greek word *ekklesia* from our last study, we noted that the Greek city-state functioned as a democratic body in which all the citizens of the city-state were called together on occasions to hear matters of importance to them and to make decisions regarding how to deal with various issues by casting their votes. The actual vote process differed from city to city, but the active participation and vote by each member called to assemble and decide on matters was required. No decisions were made unless a predetermined degree of agreement was reached and made known in the vote taken.

If we survey the New Testament on this question as it relates to the Lord's church, we discover multiple occasions when the assembled church was asked to determine its mind in various matters and to make its mind known. While Robert's Rules of Parliamentary Order didn't exist at the time, clearly whatever process the church followed was an orderly one. (1 Corinthians 14:40. The context of this verse deals with the specific manner in which Paul taught the Corinthian Church to manage its public assembly, specifically related to various members who spoke in different languages. In the gathered assembly, a member might understand a preacher speaking in a different language than his own, a language generally known and understood by all the members, but this person was far more limited in his ability to speak that foreign language than in understanding it. If he spoke, he would necessarily speak in his native language, a language that few if any other members understood. Thus, while this believer might well have good and edifying things to say, he could not actually edify other members unless he spoke in a language that they could understand. Paul imposed the "*decently and in order*" rule to prevent the church from allowing chaos to prevail in the public gathering of the church. The principle might well apply to many situations in a contemporary church. The church should be united in its approach to public worship that edifying words prevail. Given the fact that the members of the Corinthian Church knew what languages they understood—and didn't understand—the manner of their governance of this element of their worship should be decided by the church, not dictated by anyone outside the church, even Paul).

Given that not a single New Testament letter was written to any kind of ruling board or body, but directly to the church or churches, the argument for any such group having rule over one of the Lord's churches is specious at best. When Paul directed the Corinthian Church to deal with the unrepentant sinning member, he wrote the church to take that action, not to any kind of ruling board or individual who claimed such usurped authority over the Lord's church. (1 Corinthians 5)

And the saying pleased the whole multitude: and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of

the Holy Ghost, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch: Whom they set before the apostles: and when they had prayed, they laid their hands on them. (Acts 6:5-6)

The complaint that promoted this action appears in Acts 6:1, neglect of certain "Grecian widows" in the daily ministrations. The complaint was taken up by "the twelve." We may presume that this "twelve" consisted of the eleven original disciples plus Matthias, appointed by the eleven in Acts 1 to replace Judas Iscariot. They were effectively serving as joint pastors of the Jerusalem Church in this role and time. Rather than appoint the seven men to a position of superiority over the church in Jerusalem, they outlined the structure that was to be followed by this newly appointed office, "...*whom we may appoint over this business.*" I believe this chapter documents the institution of the office of deacon. These men were not to be appointed over the church or the twelve, but to serve both. The twelve were not serving in that role as the instruments of inspiration, so the notion that a deacon holds a position accountable only to the Lord and to Scripture lacks any support from the lesson. The twelve taught the church that they would personally appoint the seven men over the work that was presently being neglected. They received the complaint, and they would personally ensure that it was resolved.

The posture of cooperation and mutual respectful harmony that this passage describes is always present when godly men who respect the Scriptures and seek Scriptural direction for their work as a deacon in the church interact with elders or pastors in a church. I have witnessed the rich blessings and peaceful harmony in a church when this is the case, and I have also witnessed the decline and chaos when men in either role ignored the Scriptures and sought to establish their own personal supremacy over a church. One culture reflects the Lord's wisdom and grace over His church, and the other equally reflects His chastening displeasure.

If we study the first five chapters of Acts leading up to this event, we see a church consisting of several thousand members, by no means a small "House church" like others that appear later in the New Testament record. The twelve guided the "*multitude of the disciples*" with instructions regarding what they were to do in addressing and resolving the problem. Luke doesn't indicate how the multitude of believers in the Jerusalem Church reached their decision regarding the seven men named. Nor does it suggest that these seven were the only men in the church who were so qualified. Given the deep history of the Greek word "*ekklesia*," it is likely that they manifested their agreement by some form of voting, exactly as the Greek city-state did in their business deliberations. Why didn't Luke go into copious details about the

precise method of the church's selection? If we accept that Scripture fully furnishes us with what we need to know, the absence of this information speaks loudly. The *"multitude of the disciples"* knew what they had been taught to do, and they followed their spiritual teachers' instructions. Does it matter if they voted with a rock, raised a hand of approval, or even cast a ballot? And the answer is no. They collectively made a decision, revealed their decision to the apostles, and the apostles "Ordained" the seven men and assigned them to the neglected duties.

To those wise deacons who strive to serve the church of their membership, not lord themselves over the church, I offer a very simple suggestion. In most cases in our day, the church will in one way or another give the deacons responsibility to take care of routine financial obligations. When any kind of unusual situation arises, realize that you are a servant of the church, not her lord. Instead of saying, "I think I have the authority to make this decision for the church," say, "I should take this matter to the church to be sure I do their will, not my own." And when you are unsure about a matter, talk to your pastor and seek his counsel. Do not consciously keep the matter from him. If you follow the Acts 6 example, the pastor is directed by the example to counsel you into wise judgment and action. The Lord established a united, harmonious, cooperative relationship between pastor and deacon that men in both offices are divinely charged to respect and to practice. If a church hopes ever to attain the peaceful unity that the New Testament constantly directs, that peaceful unity must begin, and must be consistently practiced by the men in both positions, the only worthy and godly example that members of the church should ever see in the men who occupy these offices.

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Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor