

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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New Testament Use of "Church" A Beloved Bride

Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. (Ephesians 5:25–27, KJV 1900)

As I study various passages in Scripture, I occasionally find myself wishing I could expand the meaning to include more than the passage reasonably defines. Then I recall an experience I had quite early in my ministry. I had not studied a passage nearly as thoroughly as I should have before using it in public from the pulpit, so I had to reveal naïve ambivalence in my message. We've heard the sound of ambivalent pulpit explanations, "It could be this, or it could be that." My uncle and father in the ministry quietly and gently took me aside after the service ended. His opening line got my attention, "Joe, don't ever leave a passage on its all-fours." His intent was clear. When the Holy Spirit directed men to write the words of Scripture, He seldom, if ever, intended an either-or meaning. Far more reasonable is that He intended a very specific meaning, but we must study, meditate, and pray, sometimes for long seasons, to gain His intended meaning. Before my uncle finished his first paragraph in his conversation with me, he clearly set forth the logical, reasonable, and, I believe, the correct meaning of the passage. The clearer he made the passage the more I rebuked myself for being so careless in my use of it.

Sadly for many preachers and more sadly for their congregations, a best seller in most Christian book stores is a book entitled *Treasure of Scripture Knowledge*. The book boasts of over five hundred thousand pairings of passages based purely on the appearance of common individual words. The lazy preacher who fails to study as he should can quickly scan one of his favorite words from "TSK," as it is often called, pull together a few passages where that word appears, and create a pathetic "TV Dinner" sermon, when God commands him to prepare a fresh gourmet spiritual meal for his congregation every time he enters the pulpit. There is a world of difference between gourmet cooking and TV dinners with natural food, so we should realize there is just as much difference between them in spiritual food. Most of the time, I can spot a "TSK," TV dinner sermon a mile away. Sadly, the people in the pew cannot, and they often eat the pathetic TV dinner and think they've had a solid, balanced spiritual meal.

The passage before us could entice us to play the "Either-Or" game with it. We could apply it to a local church and make many good and valid points, or we could apply it to the whole family of God, eternally loved and secured in their Surety's covenant grace. I suggest that this passage simply says too much and encompasses too many blessings for us to restrict it to the members of a local church. Let's study.

Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it.... In the passage, Paul defines the scope of God's love. Preachers, are you really prepared to apply this idea exclusively to the members of your local congregation, while excluding anyone in your Sunday attendance who has not been baptized into your church? No thank you, I am not about to go there. I think of about three godly men who regularly attend the church I pastor who have not been baptized, but who attend faithfully and support the church loyally. We also have a gracious Christian lady, wife of a member, who exudes delightful gracious godliness. I'd be the biggest phony in the world if I stood up on Sunday morning and told my congregation that Jesus loves all the baptized members, but He doesn't so love the unbaptized. Of course, I'd rejoice beyond measure if any or all of these dear people decided to take that Biblical step, but I have no doubt whatever that all of them are loved by their Lord no less than the most faithful member. By the Holy Spirit's direction, Paul defined the "Church" as equivalent to the scope of God's love. That scope clearly includes every child of God who shall praise God in glory.

...and gave himself for it.... Jesus gave Himself to the Father on behalf of every chosen heir of His eternal purpose. He gave Himself no less for the unbaptized elect as for the baptized. And every one of those for whom He gave Himself to the Father shall receive the full benefits of that gift. Scripture consistently defines this work as a gift, not an offer or a proposition that the individual may accept or reject.

That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word.... This clause leads many sincere and studious Bible students to ignore the prior language and to apply the lesson to the

local church. Without question, members of a local church should be faithful hearers of the gospel, and its influence should motivate and instruct them to live to God (Sanctification in Scripture refers to something or someone wholly dedicated to God, not to sinless perfection), and to cleans their lives of sinful habits, even their personal besetting sin. Though we gain this practical sanctification and cleansing by the leading and convicting of the Holy Spirit, as well as by our conscious faith-walk in obedience to His leading and convicting, the process of our timely sanctification and cleansing is a cooperative work that involves both Him and us. The language of our passage specifies His working, but not ours, so it focuses on a work of sanctification and cleansing that He performs apart from our work.

In every local church assembly since the first one at Jerusalem in the first century, some members conscientiously hear and strive to obey the gospel they hear, and some members hear less carefully. Some discover the joys of godly sanctification and cleansing in their faith-walk, and some fall short. Jesus prepared the disciples for this outcome with many of His teachings and parables, the parable of the sower and the seed as just one such example. Simply stated, if the Holy Spirit intended this passage for the members of a local church, He has failed to fully accomplish His stated objective in every single local church that has ever existed.

... *That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing...* What body of people shall be presented to the Lord? There is a contemporary trend, even among Christians who claim to believe in the Bible doctrines of grace, that concludes that only those who hear, believe, and obey the gospel are "...really..." children of God and securely heaven-bound. This belief unconscionably narrows the scope of God's election and the family of God to a small, almost microscopic number of people who manifest faithful and increasing devotion and service to God in the gospel from their conversion till their death. Such a narrow application of God's eternal election utterly fails the Biblical description of those who shall praise God in eternity for their redemption from sin and ruin. (Revelation 5:9 or God's often repeated description of Abraham's blessed seed, numbered as the stars of heaven and the sands of the seashore, as just two such examples) Biblical election is in fact surprisingly inclusive, not elite and narrowly exclusive. While we need not chase finite percentages, clearly the teaching of Scripture refutes and rejects such a narrow, elitist view of God's eternal election, and faithful Christians should likewise reject this false notion.

Whoever this "Church" is, we must conclude that it shall be kept from ruin and finally presented to the Lord, not as a piecemeal remnant, but as a "...glorious church." Further, He shall present this

church to Himself without "...spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing..." Let's assume for illustration that you think yourself to be reasonably faithful in your service to God in your local church. Are you honestly prepared to tell me that you believe your personal conduct in the church and in your faith-walk has risen to this degree of spiritual purity? Will you forgive me for not believing you, should you choose to make such a claim? However, I can comfortably—and Biblically—affirm that the whole family of God, when raised from the dead and glorified in the image of their risen, victorious, and glorified Savior, shall be so presented. Whatever we did with ourselves in this life shall be cleansed so that we may realize such a joyful and comfortable eternity in our glorious Redeemer's presence.

... *but that it should be holy and without blemish.* Paul adds one descriptive term onto another to emphasize the point of this lesson and the divinely accomplished and assured outcome of God's love for His people.

The immediate, moral lesson of our passage deals with marriage and specifically with the husband's obligation to his wife. Husbands, has your love for your bride reached this point of selfless and effective care for your wife? If not, this passage gives you your divine assignment. Should you look for an escape hatch to your obligation, I suggest that you set aside a block of time every day for the next month to read the whole Old Testament book of Hosea every single day. Until we learn the admittedly overwhelming lesson of "The Prophet and the Prostitute," we have not learned the lesson of God's love for His bride. And, like Hosea, until we learn that lesson fully, we are not qualified to preach God's message to God's people with the right emphasis and power. Hosea was indeed God's prophet before God directed him to marry the prostitute, but he didn't fully understand the nature of God's love for His people, or of the incredible character of God's message that God called Hosea to deliver to them.

Admittedly, in the case of husbands, every day we fall short and must strive to improve our God-directed love to our wives, but this passage holds the model constantly and clearly before us. While we may fall short, the Lord never fails or falls short with His bride. Husbands, the next time you get frustrated at your wife and feel inclined to remind her that she is to love you as this "Church" is commanded to love her Husband, pause and ask yourself the "Elephant in the room" question. "Am I loving her as Christ loved His bride?" If not, hold your tongue and put your feet to work.

In Scripture, "Love" refers to actions, not to sentimental feelings. Review 1 Corinthians, thirteenth chapter, to refresh your mind to the Biblical expression of love. Pay special attention to 1 Corinthians 13:4-7. Every verb in this list is an action verb, not a feeling or sentimental verb. ***The Lord could have felt any amount of love toward***

people imaginable, but His action toward them measures the true dimension of that love. The popular—and unbiblical—notion so common in our time that God loves all humanity, but He loves them just enough to give them an opportunity to save themselves, builds on this superficial notion of sentimental love, and it wholly ignores the Biblical principle of love, fully measured by action and outcome. If God loves all humanity, but still lets most of them slip out of His hands into eternal ruin, what is the point? Is that the quality of love that the Holy Spirit here directed Paul to describe? Never; thank the Lord for effective and victorious love that conquers all obstacles and secures eternal joy for every object so loved. That, my friends, is the “Church” that Paul here describes for our edification. The Lord loves them. He is calling them out one by one. And someday He shall bring them all together in one eternal and glorious assembly, the “...general assembly and church of the firstborn.” (Hebrews 12:23)

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Worship service each Sunday	10:30 A. M.
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