

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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A Time to Fight—A Time to Flee

But thou, O man of God, flee these things; and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness. (1 Timothy 6:11, KJV 1900)

A Moment for Serious Reflection

Let's pause in our study to refresh our minds. This study began with Paul's instructions to Timothy regarding proper behavior "...**in the house of God, which is the church of the living God...**" We have not wandered from this theme. Paul's brief, but full letter to this young preacher/pastor doesn't gloss over the requirement for proper church behavior with one generalization. He immediately builds the model for a church culture that pleases God, a church where God comfortably dwells. He develops the details of godly, acceptable behavior in a church through the remainder of the letter to Timothy. Much—most—of the New Testament builds on this theme.

By the number of people on my weekly distribution list and the people who tell me they share these writings with others, I estimate that three to five hundred people read this weekly Gospel Gleanings. I have no way of knowing how many churches these people represent. However, what Paul wrote to Timothy, and what we've been studying over several months applies to every one of these individual churches. Quite specifically, Paul's inspired message is directed to each of us, and to each of our churches, just as personally as he directed it to Timothy. Are we listening?

Our Western twenty-first century me-first-in-all-things culture has all but lost any sense of what the New Testament teaches regarding priorities that start with God, anchor to Him first in all things, and build on serving Him by serving others, not self. Given this cultural collapse, it is no wonder that many churches have embraced this culture as their guide far more faithfully (or **unfaithfully**) than they have embraced New Testament Christianity. We live in an age of "Seeker-sensitive" churches, of churches that make the music and doctrinal taste of a "Target audience" their top objective. What does Scripture say about all these things? Who cares? So say the leaders of this fallen-faith movement, a movement that invades many churches, not just the ones who trumpet their philosophy in bold headlines. We choose to ignore God, who, by the clear teaching of our beginning passage for the series, makes the church, an individual, local church (Scripture rarely uses the word "church" to refer to anything else, and when it does refer to something else, that "something else" is **never** a

collective culture or denomination of individual churches) God's dwelling place. If God makes our individual church His dwelling place, His "house," one might logically conclude that that house should make His preferences their top priority. Is this the case? No. Above all, our acculturated "Churches" don't want to offend one of our "Seeker sensitive" audience members, but **do we ever consider whether our conduct pleases or offends the owner and primary occupant of the house, God? Do we ever ask whose "House" the church is, ours or His?**

If we take our primary New Testament assignment seriously, our first objective in everything we consider or do in a church will first ask what God thinks of our conduct. And the one and only way we can discover what God thinks about anything is to go to Scripture. We can't find God's will in our confused and often conflicted emotions. We certainly can't find God's will by a "Seeker sensitive" survey of popular religious taste. **When will we see a serious movement in contemporary Christianity for a "God sensitive" church?** Does such a church exist in this culture? If so, you can rest assured; she is not a large or popular church.

Our individualistic culture loves—makes a hero out of—the "Rambo" rugged individual who ignores society, convention, and, breaking all the rules because he knows more about what is best than the whole combined culture, kills the bad guys, and becomes the hero. When was the last time you saw such a fantasy plot unfold in the world where we all live? How about never? Biblical Christianity is not about everyone doing their own thing. The whole book of Judges narrates precisely what occurs in such a God-rejecting, God-manipulating (They try to manipulate God, but they never succeed) society. It falls in ruin under God's fierce judgment, and the whole cheap plot starts over again, but it never succeeds, does it? Put a bold marker around Judges 21:25 as a reminder of what happens when we choose to do what is right in our own eyes, and ignore what is right in God's eyes, what Scripture clearly and repeatedly teaches us to do. This closing verse of the Book of Judges is a one-verse summary of the whole book. Is this verse and book the legacy you seek to leave for those who follow you in the faith?

On several occasions during this series, I have emphasized that God makes serving Him incredibly simple. We complicate matters when we choose to ignore what God teaches us in Scripture and seek to solve our problems and guide our lives by some other rule. Take a long, lingering look at the latest "Complicated" problem in your world. Then take that "Complicated" problem to Scripture and ask one simple question, ***"What does God teach me from Scripture alone to do in this situation?"*** Apply the answer to you personally, not to everyone else you know. You will find the answer if you look to Scripture alone with prayer and faith. What kind of "House" does God seek to dwell in? What kind of "House" will He claim and make that place His special dwelling? Do we measure up to that house as Scripture describes it? Oh yes, Scripture does describe it. We've been reading about all the specific details that tell us about the kind of "House" He will dwell in from the beginning of this particular study. God has a unique way of dealing with churches. When a church chooses to ignore Him and His rules for His "House," He simply moves to a different neighborhood, to a different people. Think about it. We can't negotiate a compromise with God to convince Him to remain despite our rejection of Him and of His teachings. At one time there was an amazing church in the ancient city of Ephesus, but a bare sixty years after its moment of greatness, God warned that same church that she was in danger of extinction because she had left her "...first love." (Revelation 2:5) Given such a clear and specific warning, you'd think this church would have snapped to attention and changed her course. Did she? Is there a church in Ephesus today? Any church's true "First love" must be the Lord Himself. And true love for Him manifests itself in doing what He teaches, not what we want.

The call to repent, the call to return to God, has never been a popular call, not even when the heroes of Scripture made the call. However, the only remedy for spiritual failure that we find from Genesis to Revelation always goes back to this word and to the transformed lifestyle that the word depicts. You can tell a lot about people by the way they decorate their house, the place where they live. If we truly and passionately want God to dwell with us in the place where we gather to worship, shouldn't we pause and ask Him how He would like us to decorate the house? And, no, I'm not here referring to the walls, ceilings, and floors of the building where we gather, but the lives of the people who belong to this group and who gather regularly there for worship and fellowship. Does our "décor" match up well with God's taste? Have we even considered His taste as we've decorated our lives, both individually and collectively? You and I can't "decorate" our friend's life; we can only decorate our own life according to Scripture's "Good taste." We influence others by our example, but we cannot coerce them to alter their personal life, their contribution to the church's spiritual "décor."

I often read English Christians from the past, men such as John Gill and Augustus Toplady who stood tall in their faith and who served their God with serious regard for Him and His house. Gill lived in an era when England was one of the leading political powers in the world. The country struggled with deep Christian issues, and they took their faith seriously. Take a look at Christianity in England today, even the supposed successors of Gill and those ancient Strict or Particular (referring to their view of God's election and His application of Jesus' sacrifice "particularly" to His elect) Baptists. The successors to the Gill kind of godly Baptists barely exist there today. The culture largely spurns any form of New Testament Christianity. I sincerely fear that our own country has chosen to follow those deadly footprints. Thinking Christians in our country today accurately describe our culture as "Post-Christian," meaning that it was at one time strongly Christian, but it is not so today. That title describes a past era, not the day in which we live. The solution to our problem does not lie in political movements to restore God to Washington, DC. It lies in a concerted and Biblically-informed effort to restore God to an exclusive and dominant role in our personal lives and in the local church where we go for regular worship and fellowship with God and with His people who gather there. Where will God "move" if we choose to continue the course we've chosen, of considering any and all interests for His "House" except the desires of the primary resident? That shall be His choice, not ours. Our "Behavior" (1 Timothy 3:15) at this point of our existence shall determine whether He remains in His "House" with us, or He vacates the "House" and moves to a better neighborhood, one that takes Him and His teachings to heart, that actually decorates His "House" to His taste. We have too long dismissed any idea of church being God's "House" in favor of claiming it as our own private, personal possession. Absent repentance and a return to New Testament church beliefs and practices, I fear that our days are numbered. We shall return the "House" to its rightful owner, and take our place as His gracious guests, or we shall find ourselves, like the Strict Baptists in England, with an increasingly empty "House," empty of God.

I am old enough that whatever I shall contribute to this cause increasingly stands on borrowed time. Relatively soon I shall move on to a better "House." If I could name my legacy, leave you with my strongest and deepest lingering conviction, it would be the grave matters that I have here discussed. If we examine all the churches represented by the weekly readers of Gospel Gleanings, what is our dominant attitude toward our church? Is it ours, or is it God's? Do we regard it as His or as ours? Do we make decisions that reflect the New Testament truth that it is His "House"? The church where I serve as pastor is not my church, nor anyone else's who attends there. It is God's "House." Our legacy should be simple and unmistakable. We must strive

to leave the next generation of people who worship in each of these churches more sensitive to the Owner and primary Occupant of the house than to anyone or anything else.

We serve a loving and gracious God, but we do not serve a pliable God who sits in the back seat and tells us to drive where ever we wish, He'll contentedly go along for the ride. As with a number of other issues that we've examined in our study, God makes it simple for us. We follow His roadmap and steer our course according to His direction, or we shall surely drive an empty car along our own private path to nowhere.

Back to the Passage—Back to His Church

I shall merely introduce a theme that we shall examine in more detail in the weeks to come. Rather than play the fantasy "Rambo" take-no-prisoners-full-speed-ahead strategy, Scripture at times warns us that the only proper course is to retreat, to flee. We shall not change some things that are so deeply entrenched in our fallen, broken world. The wise, Biblically-instructed Christian needs to know when to take the sword and move forward, just as he needs to know when to "Flee." Aside from a whole Bible full of instructions, this simple word in this concise verse forever rejects any form of individualistic "Rambo" Christianity as being Biblical. It is rather self-serving and self-defeating. Conduct your personal Bible study. When should a faithful Christian fight, and when should he flee? When should he follow? Ask each of these questions again by replacing "When" with "Whom," and yet again by replacing "When" with "What." We have more ground to cover on this vital question.

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