

# Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

Volume 27, Number 49

December 25, 2011



## God's Message to Seven Churches: Ephesus; Overcome

*Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write; These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks; I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars: And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted. Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent. But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God. (Revelation 2:1-7, KJV 1900)*

Most sermons need a balance of instruction, warning, rebuke, and comfort. Even when the preacher is not consciously aware that all of these—and other Biblical—instructions are going on, the Holy Spirit uses a sound, Biblical sermon to instruct each individual in the congregation who is prayerful and open to hear what the Lord is teaching in the sermon. The Holy Spirit's seven "mini-sermons" to the churches in Asia through John's pen serve as an instructive model for the wise preacher.

*But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.* We find one other reference to these people in John's letters. (Revelation 2:15) Here John focuses on their deeds; there on their doctrine or teaching. Clearly, neither John nor the Holy Spirit agreed with these folks. Who were these errant people? What was their problem? Commentaries usually go in two directions on these and related questions. 1) They leap into speculation. 2) They try to find a non-mystical answer from what they can find in other New Testament writings. Let's consider one of the more logical possibilities in the second category.

*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. (Acts 6:5 KJV)*

This verse names the seven men whom Jerusalem Church selected as qualified to be set aside for the neglected work of rightly distributing to the needs of the poor members of the church. Although some folks see a different function, I believe this lesson reveals the beginning of the office of deacon in the New Testament church. You will notice that the last man named is "...Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch." Given the similarity of the name to the people whom John mentions in our passage, "Nicolas" and "Nicolaitans," many commentaries suggest that

either Nicolas himself or some later folks who followed in his steps began to take on too much personal authority over the church. John doesn't associate these people with those whom he earlier mentions who claimed to be apostles, but were not, but there is a logical similarity between these two ideas.

We need to take any view of the Nicolaitans with reservation because John doesn't go into details regarding their specific deeds or doctrine. I confess that the similarity of the names captures my attention. Absent any other name in the New Testament that resembles "Nicolas," I suggest the distinct possibility that Nicolas and these troublesome people in the two churches before us are related.

Stories abound around tensions between preachers, deacons, and churches. However, the New Testament model consistently depicts harmony between the pastor of a church and the deacons in that church, each working with the other in grace and harmony for the spiritual health and welfare of the church. If something goes wrong, it can go wrong with anyone in the church. And anyone in a church who decides the church belongs to him, or to her (Consider "Sister Jezebel" in a later letter that John includes in this context), sets him/herself and the church on a destructive course that conflicts with the clear and consistent pattern of New Testament teachings. If Nicolas became carnal and started taking too much authority or ownership over the church onto himself, both the doctrine that rationalized that sinful action, and the deeds that logically grow out of the sinful attitude are something the Lord clearly reveals in Scripture that He hates.

Consider that the word "ministry" in various forms appears in the New Testament for preachers and deacons, as well as others in the church. If we do some research on the Greek word translated into these English words, the word originated in an agricultural setting. It first appears in Greek

literature to refer to someone who is plowing or working in a field. He works so hard and so consistently that he stirs up a dust, but he keeps right on working through the dust. He never takes his eye or mind off his work. Even aside from this background, a simple reading of our King James Bible will make the point undoubtedly clear. Men in both offices who fulfill their Biblical role and assignment are servants of God and of the church, not masters or manipulators over either God or the church. The moment any member of a church begins trying to control or to manipulate others in the church to his/her way of thinking and doing that person has left the New Testament model of serving the church, not lording himself over it. That person has equally forsaken the powerful New Testament model of leading by example, not by coercion, "Bully pulpit" sinful "Godfather" tactics, or by deceitful manipulation.

While the idea lacks sufficient clarity for a pointed assertion, this view of the "Nicolaitans" perfectly harmonizes with the spirit and role we find throughout the New Testament for all church members, especially the men who fill leadership offices as pastor or deacon. It shows us just how strongly the Lord dislikes any violation of His revealed—repeatedly revealed—model of behavior and leadership in His churches.

I have been unusually blessed throughout my ministry with gracious godly men in the office of deacon who worked hard to work with me for the church's interest. One example will emphasize my experience, as well as my belief regarding a wise and godly relationship between pastor and deacon. Some fifteen years ago a family moved to our area from another region of the country because of the husband's work. He was a deacon in the church they left, so we received him as a deacon in our church. We quickly and comfortably became acquainted and comfortable with each other. On one occasion rather early in his time with us, he, our other deacon, and I faced a need to sit down and discuss a minor challenge the church was facing. I invited them to come to our home one evening. When they arrived, we visited for a few minutes before we started our "Business" discussion. We quickly came to a united mind regarding the action that was both Biblical in our view, and in the church's best interest. I suggest that what is Biblical is always in a church's best interest, a no-brainer. After we concluded our discussion, this dear man looked squarely into my eyes and said, "Joe, is there anything that we as deacons can do to make your job as our pastor easier?" Wow! I was deeply touched—overwhelmed—by such a godly, caring question.

Put this personal experience into a vivid contrast with a man in any church office who seeks to gain control over others in the church to manipulate them to his way of thinking and doing. I offer that it is at least likely that just such a situation existed in Ephesus with the Nicolaitans and their sinful deeds,

deeds that the Lord specifically said He hated. Godly people in a New Testament church, including pastor and deacons, should likewise hate such deeds and the doctrines, teachings that attempt to justify and to rationalize such ungodly behaviors.

*He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches....* How does the Holy Spirit communicate the will of God to the people in a church? While the Lord may well communicate His will personally and directly, He most often does so through the teachings of Scripture and through the preaching of the gospel. That is the case in all seven of these letters that we are presently studying. All seven letters end with this comment, "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches...." John is writing to the churches, but he is writing what the Holy Spirit directed him to write. The godly pastor who serves the church seeks above all else the Lord's guiding presence in his choice of themes, Bible passages, and content for the sermons that he preaches. He seeks the Lord's will and direction in the things he preaches. The members of the church should pray with equally earnest prayers for the Lord to direct the pastor's heart to preach what they need.

*To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.* In similar form, the Lord ends each letter with an encouraging promise of healing grace and blessing. Think of all the problems the Holy Spirit uncovered in these seven brief letters. Think of how far some of these churches had so soon wandered away from the Lord's directed path of obedience. Yet in each case, the Lord promises this amazing blessing to those who take their faith, and Him, the only worthy object of their faith, seriously. While warning, at times with fearful severity, those who persisted in their sins, the Lord always counterbalances His stern warnings with the promise of amazing blessings. Only one thing stands between us and those blessings. Shall we allow the alluring enticements and the appealing detours that Satan constantly throws into our path to turn us aside from our New Testament faith-walk, or shall we keep our heart and mind focused on our Lord, the "...author and finisher..." of our faith? Shall we work to find the simple and gracious New Testament model of church and of church worship? Or shall we constantly look for the next appealing detour? Shall we seek New Testament direction for what we believe and do in our church and in our lives, or shall we ignore the teachings of Scripture and chase the phantom dream of "Isn't there something more? Why would the Lord object if I...?" Do we seek the blessings or the judgments?

Little Zion Primitive Baptist Church

16434 Woodruff

Bellflower, California

Worship service each Sunday  
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.  
Pastor