

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

Volume 26, Number 44

October 31, 2010



New Testament Church: Kingdom Conduct

These things write I unto thee, hoping to come unto thee shortly: But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth. (1 Timothy 3:14–15)

Our study of the two offices in a New Testament church served as the first step in a broader study of the New Testament's teaching regarding the church. Paul devoted the entire third chapter of First Timothy to this theme. After dealing with the two offices in the church, he immediately turned his attention to a rather specific definition of "church." He indicates that his entire letter was aimed at instructing Timothy regarding appropriate behavior in a New Testament church, be the individual a preacher such as Timothy or an individual member.

... *that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself....* A person's conduct as a church member is not merely an open-ended expression of that person's mood at the moment or of convenience based on other activities in the person's life. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' "Kingdom ethic" raised the bar for every person who belongs to a New Testament church.

But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. (Matthew 6:33)

In the context of this verse, Jesus specifically referred to the various physical needs of life, food, shelter, and clothing. Quite often even people in a New Testament church will primarily focus their life and energy on career, hoping that they have some residual time for church activities here and there. This pursuit will turn their life increasingly into an image that looks like the pet rat racing at full speed on a turning wheel in its cage. The poor rat runs at maximum speed, exerts his energy, but gets nowhere at all. Eventually the rat will stop and get off the wheel, but he will be right where he was when he got onto the wheel. Oh, so many lives imitate this poor rat. Jesus taught us a better way to live in this simply lesson, but the living of it requires profound faith in Him and in His faithful promises to direct and to provide.

Notice that Jesus did not direct the disciples to seek God and His righteousness. He rather taught them to seek "...**the kingdom** of God..." I do not lock-step the terms "Kingdom of God" and "church," but I do believe Scripture closely associates them. Consider this passage.

Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Corinthians 6:9–10)

Paul had just completed a full chapter dealing with a man whose sinful lifestyle had disgraced the Corinthian Church, directing the church to "...put away from yourselves that wicked person." (1 Corinthians 5:13b) He devotes the early verses of the sixth chapter to a prohibition against church members suing each other before civil judges. His context for the verse cited above is firmly associated with the church, not with going to heaven when we die. However, instead of saying that people guilty of the sins named have no inheritance in the church, Paul used the term "...kingdom of God" twice. A person may well commit such sins and remain a member of a church, but such a person shall not find the joys and richness of "Kingdom blessings" that the faithful in the Lord's churches enjoy. A local church may control the names on its membership register, but God controls the blessings.

Jesus' words in Matthew 6:33 emphasize that we seek God—and honor Him—only as we pursue His kingdom in this life. It is impossible for someone to be wholly devoted to God, but to live in open isolation from—or hostility toward—the people in his/her church. We demonstrate our faithfulness to God by our conduct toward the subjects of His kingdom in our lives. We ensure the blessings of the kingdom by serving our fellow-citizens in the kingdom. When we so live for others, the King smiles and adds the natural blessings to our lives as we need them. When we fail to live a "Kingdom first" life, God does not promise to supply our necessities.

Attitude lies at the heart of this "Kingdom service" that Jesus teaches. He did not suggest that we seek the Kingdom and God's righteousness with the primary objective or motive of gaining life's necessities. Our primary motive and focus must remain on the two stated objectives, God's kingdom and God's righteousness, acted out in our personal

conduct. If we practice godliness with the idea that we thereby obligate God to take care of our necessities, we cheapen our faith and turn God in our minds and motives into an entitlement ticket for our personal convenience. Such self-serving attitudes are as obnoxious to God as smoke is in our nostrils. It produces no blessings. God shall not bless conduct driven by such self-focused motives.

Paul's objective in writing is that we "know," that we perceive and understand how God directs us to behave as members of His New Testament Church. In this lesson, "oughtest" is translated from a word that indicates a compelling requirement, not merely an optional nicety. God does not leave us free to live any way we choose, confuse His will for godliness in our lives, and then pray for Him to "Bless this mess." If we follow this path, we'll continue to wallow in the "mess." In fact, our "mess" will become increasingly "messy."

Scripture strongly affirms a specific "Code of conduct" for children of God in a New Testament church. It does not teach that God "sovereignly, effectually, and irresistibly" causes us to live up to this code. It reveals the code in Scripture and commands us to comply, to actively pursue it in our daily lives. And, no, Scripture does not teach that we shall eventually reach the point of sinless, perfect compliance.

...For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.... (Ephesians 4:12)

Notice Paul did not indicate that the preacher's assignment is to serve as cheerleader to "perfect" saints, but to work at "perfecting" imperfect saints. Many years ago in one of my writings I observed that the New Testament presents the model of a perfect New Testament church, but that in the world where we live, there is no perfect church. Every church fails in one or another particular of Scripture's teachings. Paul makes that point by describing the work of ministry as "...perfecting" the saints. After that writing I heard about someone who read this piece and strongly disagreed with my observations. Folks, we should live in consistent respect for our home church, because of its Biblical role as the hub of our lives and Christian conduct, but Scripture calls us to worship our God, not our church. If there were such a thing as a perfect New Testament church, the minute I walked through the door, they'd lose their status. The same applies to every member.

While Scripture repeatedly teaches that individual New Testament churches should communicate with each other, associate with each other, support, and encourage each other, Scripture never uses the term "church" to refer to a collective of churches or to a denomination of like-minded churches. When the New Testament refers to more than one church, it consistently uses the word in its

plural form. Each of us who belong to a local New Testament church should study Scripture's teachings faithfully to learn—as Paul here writes, to "know"—how to conduct ourselves toward our home church. Whether we are dealing with our daily living ethics, giving, attendance, or any of the various New Testament teachings regarding faithfulness, our first obligation is to the church of our membership, not to a vacuous institutional entity that is never mentioned in Scripture. My wife and I give to various charitable organizations, but our primary giving is to our home church. No giving to any other church or charitable cause can replace or satisfy Scripture's teachings regarding our duty to give to our home church. On occasion I accept invitations to preach meetings at sister churches, so I must miss a service at my home church. However, Scripture never legitimizes the rather popular notion of social visitation that takes us away from our home church's regular schedule of public gatherings. When Paul exhorted his readers to not forsake "...the assembling of ourselves together..." (Hebrews 10:25) he was referring quite specifically to the church of our membership. The idea that I can travel at will and miss frequent services at my home church, but, so long as I attend a sister church on Sunday morning, I have fulfilled my duty to assemble is not Biblical. We live in a time when many modern churches frown on the "old fashioned" idea of formal membership in an individual, local church. According to the modernist's idea, by showing up at a particular church gathering—for that Sunday you are a member of that church—has no support whatever from the New Testament. If it did, Paul would have had no grounds to direct the Corinthian Church to excommunicate the sinful member in First Corinthians the fifth chapter. The man could have simply stopped attending at Corinth and started attending some other church, and the Corinthian Church would have had no authority whatever over him or over his sinful conduct. Paul's instructions to Timothy specifically address what we "ought" to do, what Scripture's teachings compel us to do if we intend to obey Scripture and to honor our God.

When I first became a member of a little church in north Mississippi, the pastor often used an expression that I never understood. In fact, as I have pondered that expression over the years, I believe it was an errant expression. When announcing upcoming church meetings, he would always qualify the announced meeting with the words, "Unless providentially hindered." I simply couldn't wrap my mind around his idea. God commands us to faithfully gather for worship, instruction in godliness, and fellowship. If God commands our gathering, why would He "providentially" hinder us from doing what He has commanded us to do? Scripture teaches us to anticipate future activities with "If the Lord will," (James 4:15). However, in that context our future conduct refers to travel and business activities, not

to faithful obedience to the Lord's commandments. I cannot fathom God commanding specific conduct that He requires us to obey, but then He interferes with our doing it. Such a notion smacks more of fatalism than of New Testament faithfulness.

We shall visit this question of Biblical behavior in the Lord's church more fully.

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