

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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New Testament Use of "Church"

Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. (Acts 20:28–29, KJV 1900)

The word "Church" appears seventy nine times in our King James Bible. By far, the majority of these passages refers to a local assembly of believers. It is never used in the singular to refer to a collection of churches, such as a denomination, or to a single super-church hierarchy ruled by one man or by a group of men. Most of the exceptions, those passages that do not deal with a local assembly, deal with a future gathering of all God's children in heaven.

...to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers.... Paul spoke these words to the elders in the church at Ephesus. The Holy Ghost didn't make them overseers of the Philippian Church, the Corinthian Church, only the Ephesian Church. To this extent, Paul focused his lesson on this single, local church.

In a particular way, we might say that the apostles were "Super-pastors" over all the churches. For example, Paul wrote authoritative letters to various churches that he had taught, though he did not remain as their permanent pastor. He also wrote an authoritative letter to the Roman Church, though we have no New Testament record of his having visited that church prior to his writing the Roman letter.

Aside from a somewhat qualified sense relative to the apostles, we find no New Testament authority for any preacher to usurp¹ authority of to try to

¹ From "Usury," Although the word is occasionally used to refer to legal interest on a debt, its common use in Scripture refers to the illegal imposition of interest. Example; if you went to a bank to borrow money, the bank would charge you a legally acceptable interest rate on your loan. In our culture, many laws govern precisely how that interest rate is to be calculated and stated to the borrower. However, if you went to a "Loan shark," a criminal who makes his illegal income from exorbitant interest charges, his charge would be considered usury. Let's say you ask for \$500 on a short term, perhaps two weeks, and the criminal tells you that he'll loan you the money for 50% interest. At the end of two weeks, you will owe him \$750, not \$500 and some change. That is usury. Likewise, a preacher who imposes his authority onto people outside the church that he serves

impose his influence on any church outside the single church that he serves. And every appearance in the history of the Christian Church of such imposed and usurped authority affirms the grave error of the action. Such presumption of unbiblical authority always ends in spiritual disaster for both the man and for the churches who submit to his despotic, self-imposed lordship over them. A New Testament church has one, and only one, Lord, and that Lord tells us that He is a jealous (in the good sense of protective and tender love and care for those whom He loves) God. He doesn't take lightly any mortal man's self-imposed and unethical lordship over His people.

The Biblical mandate for pastoral leadership appears in First Peter 5:1-4. Rather than coercive or "Bully pulpit" influence peddling, the godly pastor confines his influence to the church he serves, and, within that church, his primary weight of leadership is by example, not by other forms of coercion or political pressures.

...to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. Here Paul clearly expands his admonition to the Ephesian elders beyond the members of the "flock," the local church that they served. Why do I expand this clause beyond the members of the "flock"? Simple. On a given Sunday when the church gathers, hopefully the members of the local church are faithful in their attendance, but the congregation will also include any number of people who are not members of the church. Often these people faithfully attend and listen with sincere spiritual interest to the preaching of the gospel. Since they are not formal members of the local church, should the pastor tell them to leave before he preaches, lest he "feed" someone who is not a member of that local church? Of course, the idea is so absurd as to need no explanation. Heaven help any local church whose pastor is so narrow and unbiblical in his attitude as to consider such an idea.

When I walk into the pulpit, any pulpit where I have opportunity to preach the gospel, I consider it my Biblical obligation to strive to feed every blood-

commits ethical usury against the people he seeks to control by his sinful and unbiblical influence.

bought person in the congregation. Such is the New Testament example.

Men and brethren, children of the stock of Abraham, and whosoever among you feareth God, to you is the word of this salvation sent. (Acts 13:26)

A faithful New Testament sermon addresses God's people where they are, though it should call all of them to move into God's blessings through faithful obedience to the commands they hear in the gospel and read in the New Testament. When I see someone under my preaching, regular attendant or first-time visitor, who gives evidence of God's grace, I am obligated to feed that person gospel food. If I have any indication that they are one of His "Purchased possession" bought by the price of His blood, He commands me to feed them.

I cannot imagine the narrowness of mind that would conclude that the only people bought by the blood of Christ are members of a church, any church. When I was growing up in the Deep South, I became aware of a particular denomination that effectively held this view. Based on their belief, repeatedly and emphatically preached, if you didn't believe what they preached, and if you were not baptized by one of their preachers, and if you did not remain faithful to their teachings to the end of your life, you would not see heaven—period. In the neighborhood where I was born, a member of this denomination was talking to one of our family friends who was not a member of their church. He went through all the steps that he believed were necessary for our friend to take to be saved and go to heaven when he died. Our friend listened quietly to the whole story. After the man completed his presentation, our friend, asked the man to confirm his meaning, and he readily did so. Then our family friend, who knew every person in the community, started naming some folks in this man's church who were not the best of citizens, much less the best of Christians. He then named several community members who attended different churches, but who were godly, gracious Christian people. He finally concluded his conversation with this man, "If only people who are members of your church are going to heaven, I think I'll take my chances and go to hell with all the really good people." Of course, our friend responded with intentional irony, but he made his point quite well.

God did not send His gospel to a narrow elite group of people inside the walls of any church. The promised blessings in the gospel are to all the children of God, born of His Spirit and kept by His preserving grace to the end.

Therefore it is of faith, that it might be by grace; to the end the promise might be sure to all the seed; not to that only which is of the law, but to that also which is of the faith of Abraham; who is the father of us all.... (Romans 4:16)

The context of Romans fourth chapter does not deal with who goes to heaven when they die and who doesn't. It rather deals with God's faithful promise of blessings on His children who obey Him and walk in the same faith as faithful Abraham. The promise of blessings stands securely on God's grace, His loving and gracious disposition toward all of His beloved children. The blessings, provided in grace, are also contingent on our faith-walk, and that promise of blessings in the faith-walk is sure to "...all the seed," to all children of God. Thus, I categorically reject the idea that God sovereignly restricts His special faith-walk blessings to an elite class within His chosen people, an election within His eternal election, making the Abrahamic promise sure only to an elite few. Interestingly, every person I've ever engaged in conversation who held to this view emphatically believes that he is one of the elite chosen, and has grave doubts that anyone who does not agree with him is so blessed. I cannot imagine more arrogant and unbiblical pride.

I occasionally remind myself, and other preachers, that, despite our position of spiritual responsibility to feed all of God's children whom we encounter, we are no less "Sheep" than the people whom we are to feed. We are indeed "Sheep feeding sheep." We are sinners encouraging other sinners, albeit blood-bought sinners, to turn from their own ways into the "Faith-walk" way with faithful Abraham. In this role of feeding the blood-bought "Church," we must first of all preach the New Testament gospel and the New Testament Jesus, not another gospel or another Jesus. (Galatians 1:6-7)

While I strongly believe what I preach to be the truth of Scripture, I also strongly believe that God has not consigned me, or anyone else, to be His exclusive agent on earth. I rejoice to see the gracious evidences of His grace in people from various religious experiences and beliefs. Occasionally I enjoy thumbing through our hymnal and taking note of various authors whose hymns appear in the hymnal, but who were not part of our religious belief. Why do we include their hymns in the hymnal? We include them because their words express a legitimate and godly account of God's grace in their lives. We celebrate the glorious truth of "Rock of Ages," written by Augustus Toplady, an Anglican/Church of England preacher, who was also a close friend of John Gill. We celebrate the heart-felt truths of Charles Wesley, also Church of England before starting the Methodist Church. Though Wesley believed a very different theology, his poems often powerfully express the authentic heart of a sinner, saved by grace. Consider just a few lines from one of Wesley's poems.

And let this feeble body fail,
And let it droop and die;
My soul shall quit the mournful vale,
And soar to worlds on high;

Shall join the disembodied saints,
And find its long sought rest,
That only bliss for which it pants,
In my Redeemer's breast.
In hope of that immortal crown
I now the cross sustain,
And gladly wander up and down,
And smile at toil and pain:
I suffer out my threescore years,
Till my Deliverer come,
And wipe away His servant's tears,
And take His exile home.

I do not at all agree with Wesley's Arminian beliefs regarding salvation, but I rejoice at his honest and touching expressions of a profound experience of grace with God, so I gladly sing his hymns that give voice to the work of God in all of His chosen children. And I rejoice that I can sing praises to my God that were written by God's children from many walks of life, and even from many quite different beliefs. When God's children truly speak from the heart, they transcend their finite and often (we included) errant beliefs.

God help us to stay busy feeding His sheep.

Little Zion Primitive Baptist Church
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Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor