

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

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## Only Two Alternatives: Truth or Profanity

*But refuse profane and old wives' fables, and exercise thyself rather unto godliness. For bodily exercise profiteth little: but godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come. This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptation. For therefore we both labour and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, specially of those that believe. These things command and teach. (1 Timothy 4:7-11, KJV 1900)*

We often protest that we live in a complicated world. Christians often complain that contemporary societal expectations impose complex demands onto their Christian obligations. And almost as frequently they complain that the Bible says little or nothing about their particular problem or complexity. Based on well over fifty years of studying my King James Bible, as well as pursuing a secular career in the business world, I must disagree with the complexity argument. We may read our Bibles with a blindfold and conclude that it says little or nothing about how we are to live in our modern world, but, when we take the blindfold off our eyes, we will discover that the Bible deals with life's issues quite directly and clearly. What we blindly and falsely viewed as complex and never addressed in the Bible becomes simple and thoroughly explained in Scripture.

A simple story will illustrate the question of complexity versus simplicity. A Christian university was hosting a social gathering at the beginning of a new school year for all the new faculty members. Among the new professors were a seminary professor and an astronomy professor. When they were introduced to each other, the astronomy professor tried to be polite, but at the same time to voice his disdain for Christianity, "How do you find enough about Christianity to teach a college curriculum dealing with it? After all, isn't Christianity simply about treating other people the way you want them to treat you?" A good thinker and a robust Christian, the seminary professor immediately responded, "You know, that is a fascinating question. I've had similar thoughts about astronomy. After all, isn't astronomy all about 'Twinkle, twinkle, little star; how I wonder what you are?'"

While we may impose complexity on any number of topics, we honor our New Testament faith by seeking and applying the "...simplicity that is in Christ" to our lives. (2 Corinthians 11:3)

In few areas more than the various theories and false ideas regarding the Incarnation and God's eternal purpose and work to "...save his people from their sins..." (Matthew 1:21) do we see more complexities and less simplicity. In First Timothy 3:16, Paul sets forth a sequence of truth that in

every point associates God's truth to this foundational doctrine of Incarnation and salvation. In the fourth chapter, Paul explains that we face two simple choices; 1) We may actively participate in our church's New Testament, divinely-assigned function to serve as the pillar and ground of that truth, or 2) we may embrace spiritual profanity and fables. Paul sees no other options, nor should he.

During a secular career that focused largely on accounting and business practices, often viewed by business professionals as highly complex, I discovered a simple realization. Until I could so fully understand a principle or business system that I could explain it in simple terms to people not familiar with it, I likely didn't fully understand it myself. This business realization quickly translated into my Bible studies and ministry. If I tried to explain a Biblical concept to someone, realizing in the process that I had to resort to complex and difficult ideas or analogies to make my point, I probably didn't adequately understand it myself. I needed to invest more time and study of the Bible's teachings on the doctrine until I could simplify the principle to those who asked for an explanation of it. "This is complex, so listen carefully..." is often a red flag indicator that the preacher who is trying to explain something doesn't understand it fully himself. Rather than trying to explain what he doesn't fully understand, he needs to quietly spend more time with the Bible to gain a simple understanding of it himself.

Sad example; a few years ago, I was talking with a preacher about some basic doctrines taught in Scripture. To my surprise, this man said, "I used to think I understood the doctrine of justification, but I no longer think I understand it at all." Despite his confession of not understanding this basic Bible doctrine, this particular man frequently preached on it as if he had the doctrine fully and clearly worked out in his mind. The results, no surprise, were that the man's preaching on this doctrine was confusing and contradictory. How could he preach on something that he didn't understand? When the man made this comment to me, the thought occurred to me, "If you don't understand it, you need to stay very quiet about it and start an intense study of the Bible to gain an understanding of it.

You should avoid ever preaching on it in any way till you can both understand it and preach it simply to hungry sheep.”

My library contains a significant number of very large textbooks, that all contain in one way or another, a reference to the book's claim to systematize and to simplify the core doctrines of the Bible, all with a title that includes “Systematic theology.” Interestingly, every one of these books complicates, rather than simplifies, the Bible's teachings on those doctrines. A wise preacher once quipped, “When in doubt, throw the commentaries out.” Good advice. Spend more time in the Bible and less in books that complicate God's revelation. My advice to young Christians and to young preachers is to invest a minimum of five years of intense study of the Bible, with only a good dictionary by its side. If the believer “graduates” from this school, he'll be prepared to read and evaluate just about any book that presents the author's ideas on Christian doctrine. If he drifts through this five years and fails to ingrain the Bible alone into his mind, he'll inevitably see Bible doctrine as too complex to be helpful to anyone unless it is augmented and explained by an endless inventory of supplemental books.

*...exercise thyself rather unto godliness.* After directing Timothy to avoid the complexity of errors so profound as to be the equivalent to theological profanity and fables in his preaching, Paul shifts his exhortation to the young preacher with these words. By simple and repetitive exercise, we develop and strengthen our body's muscles. No muscle will ever become strong and skilled if left in a resting, no-effort state. Paul required Timothy to apply some spiritual sweat and effort to his high charge of godliness, both in his personal conduct and in his pulpit preaching. The word here translated as “godliness” was translated from a word that means...

...appropriate beliefs and devout practice of obligations relating to supernatural persons and powers—‘religion, piety.’<sup>1</sup>

Paul makes it quite clear to Timothy, and to us, that the truth of the doctrine that the church is charged to preserve and to promote requires—demands—“...appropriate beliefs and devout practice of obligations...” New Testament Christian ethics and doctrine were never framed as an open system in which every man can “Do his own thing.”

*In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes.*  
(Judges 21:25, KJV 1900)

<sup>1</sup> Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, vol. 1, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament : Based on Semantic Domains*, electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., 530 (New York: United Bible societies, 1996).

In one simple verse that closes the Old Testament Book of Judges, we see a sad commentary on the “Do your own thing” lifestyle. Would you like to see the outcome of this attitude in a profession of the Christian faith? Take the time to read the whole Book of Judges. The entire book reports a repetitive cycle. People “Did their own thing,” and God consistently judged it as sin and sent His judgments against them. The people fell into disarray, spiritual and cultural shambles. Eventually, they realized that their own “thing” didn't please God, so they repented, and a gracious God restored and healed them. However, they failed to learn from their sins. Failing to learn, they repeated the same errant attitude. Again, they turned from God's way and chose to “Do their own thing.” No surprise, God frowned and judged them. The sad outcome at the end of Judges tells us the predictable and inevitable outcome of people trying to “Do Christianity their own way.” What was right in their own eyes was not right in God's eyes. Godliness, as Paul uses that term in our study passage, refers to believing and doing what is right and appropriate in God's eyes, not ours.

*For bodily exercise profiteth little: but godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come.* Some of us, especially as our bodies grow older, and physical exertion becomes more challenging, would like to ignore this verse. Sorry, God put it in the Bible to remind us of a basic truth of our existence. Adequate exercise of the physical body is the best antidote available to slow down the aging, degenerative process that eventually claims our physical health. I spent too many years in my career behind a desk and neglected my physical health. A couple of years ago, I faced the consequences of that neglect. After a surgeon successfully fused three joints in my lower back, his final advice to me when he dismissed me some six weeks after surgery was, “You can walk as much as you want.” He was politely telling me that walking would be healthy for my body, even after my surgery. He also prescribed an extended season of physical therapy to rebuild my body's muscle support for my back. At the end of physical therapy, I asked my therapist to give me a series of exercises that I could continue at home. Two things have contributed to my remarkable recovery from that surgery, fully as much a fact as the surgeon's skill, maintaining those exercises and regular walking. When I neglect these two activities, my back stiffens up and begins to hurt. When I regularly do both of them, my back is more flexible and far more comfortable. What physical exercise does for the body, spiritual exercise in godliness, in “...appropriate beliefs and devout practice of obligations...” does for one's spiritual health.

We have more ground to cover with this passage. Now let's go out and “exercise” our spirits.

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

10:30 A. M.  
Pastor