

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Why This Thing Called Church?

Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen. (Ephesians 3:20-21, KJV 1900)

The thought occurred to me recently that, in today's confused culture, some readers might be asking, "You started writing about the New Testament church, but you've wandered into all of these doctrinal teachings. Haven't you left the topic?" Since we've been following Paul in his letter to Timothy, beginning with the benchmark passage regarding the importance of Timothy "Behaving" himself in the church, my first response is "No, we haven't left the topic at all. We are very much on topic." The problem lies with our modern me-first, do-your-own-thing, and then try to negotiate with God for a blessing attitude. In such a non-Biblical—in fact, anti-Biblical—culture, "church" is rather irrelevant and optional. If we accept the generally framed ideas regarding the four gospels being written to Christians of varying background in the first generation, every letter in the New Testament was written either to individuals in a New Testament church, or to New Testament churches directly. "Church" then lies at the very heart of the whole New Testament revelation of God, and of God's instructions to His people from the Lord's ascension till the Second Coming.

Unto him be glory in the church.... How simply and clearly this statement comes to us. According to Paul's inspired words, the Lord Jesus Christ is to receive glory **in the church**. If that glory appears and goes up to Him "in the church," we are bound to conclude that we cannot give Him that same degree or quality of glory in any way or activity **"outside the church."** Aside from many other passages, this single verse forever explodes the sadly common idea that "I can worship God just as well outside the church as I can inside it." I do not question that God can and does work outside His churches. Now do I question that a child of God outside a New Testament church can do some things that honor God. However, I do firmly believe that this passage makes the powerful point that God reserves a special place of glory for Himself that we can only realize, experience, and far more importantly, give to Him inside the church.

Think about a major theme in the Book of Ephesians. In the first century, Jews were fiercely proud and critical of any non-Jew. They frequently referred to all such people as Gentile "Dogs." That is precisely the point of the Gentile woman's plea to Jesus. (Matthew 15:27 and context) Prior to John

the baptist and Jesus, first century Jews permitted non-Jews to go through an intense retraining process and become a Jewish proselyte, though they remained perpetually in the position of "Second class citizens" in the Jewish culture. A final step in a proselyte's transition was a ritual baptism in which the proselyte was immersed in water to symbolize his washing away all of his old lifestyle and taking on a new one as a Jew. Thus, anything related to that former lifestyle was considered dirty and inferior. Despite this fierce polarized cultural divide, "...in the church..." the Lord Jesus Christ broke down the dividing wall, not only between pedigreed Jews and Gentile proselytes, but between Jews and any Gentile whom He had cleansed by His own blood. (Ephesians 2:10-20)

No one could have imagined that Jews and Gentiles would gather under one roof and view each other as unworthy equals, all depending on divine grace and the sacrificial sufferings of the Lord Jesus Christ for their blessings. No one could have imagined these people loving each other, serving each other, even viewing the other as his superior to themselves (second chapter of Philipians), and thereby truly worshipping God as one people. Could those Jews and Gentiles have worshipped God and given Him as much glory isolated in their own lives and world as they did together in the Ephesian Church? The question answers itself.

Let me give you a personal observation. When my wife and I were first married and moved to southern California, I preached for several years to a small group of people in the Beaumont, California area. One of the men in this group was in his seventies at the time, meaning that he was born in the late nineteenth century. Once after an unusually blessed Sunday morning, he told me about a childhood experience. He grew up in the delta region of Mississippi. Put the pieces together. He was born in the 1890s, less than forty years after the end of the Civil War in this country. He told about going with his parents to a local Primitive Baptist church where blacks and whites worshipped together as one people. Sadly, at some point that practice ceased in favor of separate worship based on race, and the people lost some of the glory that they then had. The man talking to me recalled a

day when he was a young child in the 1890s after a church service. An old black man who had been a slave in his youth, but who now worshipped his Lord with these people walked up to the pastor who had preached that morning, tears of joy streaming down his cheeks. The little boy who grew up and told me the story observed this event firsthand. He said the old man spoke to the pastor through joyful tears, "Brother, the Jesus you preached today is the same Jesus who appeared to me when I was a child in Africa." Glory to the Lord, glory that could not have occurred had each man ignored church that day and said, "Oh, I can worship God just as well alone as I can in church."

We read a similar experience in the tenth chapter of Acts. Peter, the apostle specifically sent to preach to the Jews, is directed by the Lord to preach to a house full of Gentiles. And the head of that Gentile house is specifically directed to send for Peter. When Peter entered the house and witnessed God's grace already abounding in the hearts of His children in that place, he exclaimed:

Then Peter opened his mouth, and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him. (Acts 10:34–35, KJV 1900)

How often do we hear one small clause of this passage ("...God is no respecter of persons...") quoted by folks who prefer to defend a non-Biblical doctrine than to see the beauty—the glory to God—that we find in the whole passage? Peter, a devoted Jew who likely still struggled with some anti-Gentile attitudes, melts when he sees firsthand how God's grace has been just as merciful to Gentiles as He has been to Jews. Peter didn't say that people in every nation would gain acceptance with God *if* they would fear God and work righteousness. He said such a person "...*is accepted* with him." You see in the way this passage is ignored and wrested, many people today who require that the sinner do something to gain his eternal salvation, his new birth, will not accept simply fearing God and working righteousness. They add requirement upon requirement to these two **fruits of grace** (not causes of grace, or "instruments" of grace), turning the fruits of grace into the seed of weeds that dishonor God. What about requiring sinners to do something, supposedly to gain what God has already procured for them—and given to them ("...is accepted..."), gives any glory whatever to God?

Based on Peter's simple observation, we must conclude that Cornelius and those who heard Peter preach and were baptized were already born again, "...accepted with him." This point is further corroborated by God's response to Peter in the vision He gave to Peter prior to the beginning of this whole experience.

And the voice spake unto him again the second time, What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common. (Acts 10:15)

Notice the existing fact, "What God **hath cleansed**...." Cornelius and his house had already been cleansed by God's grace at the time of Peter's vision and long before Peter preached to them.

Why then did they need to hear Peter's message and be baptized? This action had nothing to do with gaining entitlement to heaven for them. That was already secured and bestowed on them. The reason for a rather long chapter in God's invaluable New Testament on this episode has to do with giving God glory, not with increasing heaven's population.

Glorifying God lies at the heart of every passage in the Bible related to the way God commands us to live and to treat each other. And Paul's point in our study passage underscores a truth sadly neglected in our time and culture. How can anyone who has any sense of divine grace think that such a central obligation is so insignificant to God? And, based on Paul's simple declaration in that passage, how can anyone think they can give God just as much glory apart from the Lord's church as in it?

Good, godly people often offer endless excuses for not being baptized, for not joining and actively living their lives in a New Testament church, but they have no sound reasons, for Scripture does not provide such. The sad thing is that they would experience so much greater joy in their lives toward God by faithfully living their lives in a New Testament church. But far more important; they would be able to give God more glory "...in the church..." than they can give Him outside it. Isn't that the point of our study verse?

Every group of people who gather together under the name of church is not necessarily a New Testament church. I have developed extensive attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs in this series to underscore that all of these things relate to a true New Testament church. People can love each other while believing the worst of theological error, but they cannot support such error and glorify God as Paul described in our study passage. They can do many good things, but they cannot glorify God in so doing apart from this body of people that Paul described as the "...pillar and ground of the truth." (1 Timothy 3:16) An organization that fails to serve its primary role, "pillar and ground," supporter and foundation for God's truth (**God's truth**, not everyone's private, personal opinion), cannot claim the privilege of a New Testament church, nor can it so glorify God, regardless of how much it does. When Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman at the well, He framed future New Testament worship with two qualities; worship that glorifies God must be in both "Spirit" and "Truth," not one or the other. (John 4:23 and context)

What do we gather from this study? A faithful New Testament church—and faithful people in such a church—does not focus its life and energy on “What is in it for me?” They realize that their full-time obligation relates to giving God glory for His work, not about how much self-satisfaction they can gain out of the situation.

Are you a member of a New Testament church? Have you been baptized under the banner of both “Spirit” and “Truth”? ***Have you made the top priority of your life giving glory to God?*** If not, you have missed an incredible blessing—and an equally incredible opportunity to give Him His deserved glory? No better time ever existed than the very next time you attend that church.

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Worship service each Sunday 10:30 A. M.
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