

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"



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A Christian "Salute"

Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas, greet you. Salute the brethren which are in Laodicea, and Nymphas, and the church which is in his house. And when this epistle is read among you, cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and that ye likewise read the epistle from Laodicea. (Colossians 4:14-16)

The theme of interchurch fellowship and respectful, loving communication dominates several New Testament letters. On this point, Colossians shines. In many ways, we live in a schizophrenic culture. On one side we are told "It takes a village" to do anything productive. On this side of the culture, no individual is considered personally capable or responsible for that matter to do anything productive and worthwhile. On the other side of the great divide, our culture tends to cultivate fierce isolation and paranoia. If the paranoia were not so destructive, sometimes it would be humorous. A wise student of human nature told me many years ago, "Be careful choosing your enemies. You will predictably become just like the enemy you choose to hate." Think about it. You hate paranoia, so you become more paranoid than the paranoid ideas and people you hate. And here we sit as Bible-believing Christians, caught in the middle of this broken and torn culture that grows more broken and torn by the day. I believe the Lord instituted the New Testament church as a vehicle to help each of us guard ourselves against our own selves and against our individual inclinations to drift into extreme and untenable, unbiblical attitudes and behaviors.

Last week I was unable to attend church because of a bad cold and bronchitis, a dreadful problem for a preacher. For a good part of Sunday, I reflected on this point. As members of a local New Testament church, Scripture obligates us to avoid "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching." (Hebrews 10:25) If we adopt a reasonable, contextual interpretation, the following verses that deal with wilful sin and the frightening words, "...no more sacrifice for sins..." and a "...certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation..." refer to the conscious decision by members of a local church to forsake their obligation to faithful assembly with other believers in the church of their membership. My lonely Sunday reflection emphasized how much I personally missed the individual people in our little church, and how much I need them in my life. I believe this need lies at the heart of the New Testament institution of "church." In few instances do Jesus' words regarding the servant's sin, either of ignorance or despite knowing his master's will, apply more directly than in this particular sin. (Luke 12:47-48)

In ways we cannot fully comprehend, God made us to be socially interactive beings, a designed "need" that God created in us. We cannot maintain spiritual balance and health alone. We need other believers who share our common faith, and who know us more deeply than anyone else, to exhort us (call us alongside them, follow their example) and to nudge us by their example. Notice Paul's point in the Hebrews passage, "...but exhorting one another..." By our presence in the assembly, we exhort others who are present. If we are not present, we cannot exhort anyone, can we?

In addition to handicapping themselves by personal absence from the assembly, "sick sheep" often attend, but carefully keep a tight barrier in place between them and other folks in the assembly. They are present, but they carefully avoid interaction and true "fellowship" with their brothers and sisters, making themselves conspicuously absent in fact if not in body. In both cases, the isolation that Hebrews 10:25 forbids invades the individual's life and slowly destroys spiritual health and godly, balanced perspective.

Our modern culture has rejected the New Testament concept of a truly Biblical church as fully as it has rejected any single New Testament teaching. Specific membership in a local assembly is viewed as "old fashioned" and unnecessary. You "belong" to any and every church you attend on any given day. Such an idea is wholly alien to New Testament teaching. Try this bizarre notion with Paul's very specific disciplinary teachings to the Corinthian Church in First Corinthians the fifth chapter. If no formal membership in a local church exists, how, first of all, would the church know about this man's sin, and, secondly, how could they "...put away from among yourselves that wicked person"? And, on the likely basis that the admonition in Second Corinthians the second chapter for the church to restore the individual who has shown evidence of repentance, "...lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow," (2 Corinthians 2:7) refers to the same person, how in this isolationist culture so popular in our day would a church even know about the man's repentance to have a basis for restoration?

The New Testament description of this thing we call "church" is clear and consistent. The Lord intended it to be an institution of respected authority. In Matthew 18:17, Jesus' command, "...tell it to the church..." builds on the core belief that the church is a wise and respected authority figure that both parties of a personal dispute will

respect—and will submit their case to its judgment. Our schizophrenic culture despises any authority figure, often favoring a non-Biblical rugged individualism in which “...every man did that which was right in his own eyes.” (Judges 21:25b) This single sentence sums up the chaos and repeated turning from God that characterizes the whole book of Judges, and much of our own era’s church culture in all conservative denominations that try to follow a New Testament authoritative paradigm.

At the same time the New Testament defines a Biblical church as wise and authoritative, it also describes the Bible church as essentially benevolent, not despotic. The mutual role of Jesus’ supreme authority over us, and over the church, and of the church’s willing and joyful submission to Him, Paul uses as the prime example of the Biblical role of husbands and wives. (Ephesians 5:21-33) The husband should never treat his wife with despotic coercion, and the wife should never seek to dishonor or manipulate her husband. In this passage, Paul never directs the husband to demand that his wife “submit,” and it never directs the wife to hypocritically act as if she respects her husband, while in fact deceitfully manipulating him to do what she wishes rather than submitting to him. While both husband and wife are commanded to submit to each other, as are all members of the church (Ephesians 5:21), neither is ever directed to coerce or to force the other. Joyful and willing obedience forms the essential foundation of all New Testament Christian ethics, particularly as it defines the church’s role with its members. This transparent, willing lifestyle thus forms the proper New Testament example for a godly church, and for a godly marriage.

I have occasionally observed heavy-handed churches attempt strong-arm tactics to coerce their members into submission, but in over fifty years as a member of the church, I have never, even once, seen such coercion work. A member who refuses to willingly and joyfully submit to his/her brothers and sisters will eventually separate himself/herself from the church body, along with the joys, blessings, and God’s preserving, enriching blessings that the New Testament associates with a faithful believer in a New Testament church. I am aware of at least one failed example in which a local pastor, discouraged at the steady exit of members out the “back door” of the church, altered his beliefs and teaching in an effort to coerce and to frighten members into staying by telling them, “If you do not remain faithful in the church, I can’t give you any assurance that you are really a child of God.” The effort failed miserably, and more members, not fewer, left his church. No wonder; he failed to teach his church that the obvious authority and submission that Scripture associates with a local church must always be willing and joyful, or the whole exercise fails, both practically and in terms of modelling the New Testament’s teachings regarding the character of a New Testament church.

The schizophrenia that I mentioned earlier appears in other features of our present culture. On one side of the issue, “church” becomes a generic term suitably applied to any and all religious groups, regardless of their beliefs about God and Scripture, and, on the other extreme, “church” can only apply to a local, and well-isolated individual assembly. Both schizophrenic views contradict New Testament teaching. While no church—or a pastor of another church—has any New Testament authority to invade the membership of a local church in what I have termed “clandestine proselyting,” our study passage, as well as the consistent teachings of the New Testament, describes a compassionate, and rather intimate relationship between churches of common faith. “Clandestine proselyting” occurs when a preacher or member of one church attempts privately to influence members of another church to embrace their often errant views that the local church and her pastor do not believe. Unless those who practice this reckless invasion of a local church’s autonomy can offer evidence that God called them to be apostles, they have no New Testament authority outside the church of their membership and/or pastorate.

Many of Paul’s present associates in Rome, Paul’s believed location when he wrote the Colossian letter, knew and loved the Colossians, as well as other believers and churches in the area. Colosse was located around a hundred miles east of Ephesus, and eleven miles east of Laodicea. Thus we must appreciate the significant distance between Paul and his associates, presently in Rome, and the Colossian Church, located in what is modern Turkey. Despite this distance, Paul and his brothers were concerned for the Colossians and wrote under the Holy Spirit’s direction to instruct them in the faith. Their communication was not of the schismatic “clandestine proselyting” style, but a public letter to the church’s pastor and membership, one that stood on Paul’s apostolic office and authority.

In addition to the Colossian Church, we see specific mention in the passage of a “house church” that met in Nymphas’ home, as well as the Laodicean Church. Although Paul wrote the letter to the Colossian Church, he requests that the letter be shared with these other churches, and that his letter to Laodicea be shared with the Colossian Church. Clearly there was intimate interchurch fellowship and dialogue between these local churches. A “house church” cannot be a large mega-church, but Paul shows high regard for this band and includes them in his encouragement and greetings.

I have been richly blessed to live for most of my life in a region that has seen local churches grow beyond schism into a deep, loving respect for each other. In this setting, I can hardly imagine one church or her pastor, trying to invade another church or to unduly influence her members. Yet both the pastors and churches in the region love and respect each other deeply. I believe this attitude mirrors the New Testament’s depiction of the loving, respectful interchurch fellowship that we see in our study passage, as well as in so many other New Testament letters. For example, Paul’s Roman letter devotes the whole, and rather lengthy, final chapter to greetings and encouraging words to other believers in the Roman Church. As an over-zealous youth in ministry, I viewed these closings with confusion. Since they didn’t deal with some essential theological issue, I almost

viewed them as an unnecessary waste of space and ink. Why would the Holy Spirit direct the writers of these inspired New Testament letters to invest so much time, and ink, in these personal greetings? As I've grown more into the "senior citizen" season of my ministry, I have come to view these passages as highly descriptive of a spiritual, healthy, and respectfully loving interchurch culture, a necessity for local churches' survival and spiritual health and balance.

We might find Paul's use of the term "Salute" a bit unusual. Actually the word is quite fitting. From our contemporary perspective, a "salute" refers to a formal gesture that is required of soldiers toward their senior or fellow officers. Often the New Testament uses the analogy of soldiers to depict both individual discipleship and the larger church culture. For example, Paul extensively employs the soldier-in-battle analogy in the sixth chapters of Romans and Ephesians. A respected New Testament Greek dictionary defines the word as, "...to employ certain set phrases as a part of the process of greeting, whether communicated directly or indirectly—to greet, to send greetings."¹ In any given culture, certain gestures or words are accepted as appropriate and respectful greetings. I once knew a very sincere Christian who believed that Paul's "Greet ye one another with an holy kiss," (1 Corinthians 16:20) required a literal application. She thus routinely hugged and kissed her brothers and sisters on the cheek, whether they believed as she did or not, and whether they were comfortable with her "holy kiss" or not. Often I would observe the recipients of her "holy kiss" submit, but quietly cringe at their dislike of her uninvited and unnecessary intimacy. In the first century Mediterranean culture, this form of greeting was quite normal. In our twenty-first century Western culture, it is not. In its place the hand shake or a shake and respectful hug serve a similar purpose. The word "Salute," as defined, refers to words, a gracious and sincere greeting. Whatever the form of expression, Paul requires that we show respectful acknowledgement of our brothers and sisters. I often find it amusing to observe church people arriving at church. Some will make a point of shaking hands and/or hugging every person they see. Others will rather selectively "Greet" their friends and politely pretend not to see the folks they do not consider their close friends. Paul nudges us to avoid any appearance of favoritism or of cliquishness and to show godly grace toward other believers, all other believers in our assembly.

To "Salute" requires "...certain set phrases..." so Paul's emphasis intends to establish a gracious verbal interaction between believers. Personal words, despite our increasingly electronic world where increasing amounts of communication occur by telephone or by e-mail, remain the safest and best way to communicate with others. Facial gestures, voice inflections, and so many other non-verbal factors flavor the words. Any time we need to communicate significant information to another, I believe we should consistently do so in person, not by any of these modern convenience-communication methods. And to "Salute" requires us to show godly love and respect toward each other. Interestingly, in our modern military culture, one soldier normally "Salutes" a superior. In the New Testament's "cultural" paradigm, we are commanded to regard our brothers and sisters in Christ as our superiors (Philippians 2:1-4; exemplified in the verses following by Jesus' personal example). My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, whether you attend our church in Bellflower, California or not, I "Salute" you in the Lord.

Little Zion Primitive Baptist Church
16434 Woodruff
Bellflower, California

Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor

1 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., 391 (New York: United Bible societies, 1996).