

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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What Does a New Testament Church Do?

To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God. (Ephesians 3:10, KJV 1900)

As we set the stage to study the Bible's teaching on the Lord's church, we've examined her supernatural origin and her supernatural preservation briefly, though we should visit that point more fully. In the beginning, I left no doubt regarding my objection to "Para-church" functions. We shall examine that question more fully in this study. What do people mean by the term "Para"? A "Para-legal" is a person who supports and supplements an attorney in his/her legal practice. The literal term means to stand beside, as to assist and to support. If we accept this generic meaning of the word, what then does "Para-Church" mean? Based on the model of the church in New Testament Scripture, what specific activities did the Lord **not** vest in His church that would support His people in their walk of faith? And I offer that New Testament teachings mention nothing, not one thing, that the Lord didn't put in His church and direct her to use for the spiritual health and growth of His people and of His gospel. Perhaps when folks become too inventive (Ecclesiastes 7:29), they imagine activities that the Lord presumably didn't design into His church and her function, things that they'd rather control or manage than trust the Lord and His church to administer them. Based on the body-members analogy that Paul used in 1 Corinthians 12, every legitimate function is part of the body, the church, and is to be administered so as to benefit the whole body, the church. The Lord set every spiritual gift that He intends to use "*in the church.*" (1 Corinthians 12:28) In this whole chapter—in fact in the whole three-chapter thesis on spiritual gifts, 1 Corinthians 12-14, the whole function of spiritual gifts occurs within the one "Body," the church, not beside or apart from that church.

If in fact the Lord designed an activity for the benefit of His people and incorporated it into His church, that activity should be administered by the church according to Scripture, not preempted by any person or subculture other than the church. And if we imagine an activity that the Lord didn't name in Scripture and incorporate into His church, we might be far wiser to avoid it than create an artificial structure to promote it. Example. In recent years, I have become aware of several evangelistic organizations that were formed as non-profit IRS tax exempt organizations or businesses. They are operated by either individual people or by a closed

board of directors who decide how to use funds collected in various evangelistic works. Invariably, these "Businesses" take on an existence and life of their own. Surely, of all the spiritual activities that we find in the New Testament, evangelism belongs in the Lord's church and should be fully administered by the church according to New Testament teachings. (Acts 13:1-3 provides a specific example of this work)

Now there were in the church that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers; as Barnabas, and Simeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen, which had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate -- me -- Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away. (Acts 13:1-3)

The Holy Spirit directed the Church at Antioch to set Paul and Barnabas apart for the work. The church obeyed and sent these godly men on their way, fully involved in their work. Rather than provide grounds for a "Para-church" evangelistic work, this lesson affirms that the Lord's church is to be intimately involved with both the Holy Spirit and with the evangelists who preach the word abroad.

Thus, perhaps due to ignorance of the Scriptures or the evangelistic organizations' "Owners'" desire to maintain personal control instead of relinquishing that administration to the church, a "Para-church" organization intrudes into the very work that the Lord in Scripture assigns to His church and thereby confuses and hinders the church's role in a right and Biblical work. In this case, the actual work that should be accomplished is a right and Biblical work, but the "Para" groups' leaders are either ignorant or confused regarding New Testament teaching and the church's New Testament work.

In one case, a "Para-church" organization may take on a pet project of its owners or administrators that Scripture does not assign to the church. Based on the Scriptures, many "Ministries" are wholly right and good, but Scripture assigns them to the personal interaction that should occur between individual believers. In this case, a "Group" effort

cannot take on the intimate personal touch of one believer caring for and touching another believer. In this case, we may rightly respect the “Para” group’s tender heart and good intentions, though their wisdom in the Scriptures is lacking. In other cases, a “Para” group may intrude into the work that the Lord assigned to His church, thereby confusing the local church where the “Para” group operates instead of promoting the New Testament model of the Lord’s church and her activities. And in some cases, sadly, the “Para” group’s owners may invest too much personal ego and devote the group more to the unbiblical exaltation of the owner than the work that the Lord directs. We may not always know such details. Scripture reminds us that we cannot know the heart, the motive, of other people.

What should a believer who wants to actively serve the Lord by serving His people do? Increasingly, I advise giving to and in every way supporting the church of our membership. Through that church and her work, encourage the work that the New Testament assigns to the Lord’s church.

Our study passage identifies “*the manifold wisdom of God*” as something that might be known “*by the church.*” Think of all the essential variables that must be at work for this dynamic manifestation of God’s wisdom.

1. **It involves a supernatural element,** “*...now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places.*” This is not merely a nice beneficial activity that a group of caring people decide to support, fund, or administer. Like Acts 13:1-3, there is a spiritual, supernatural factor that no human can control, and no human should ever attempt to control.
2. **It is something that needs to occur “now.”** It is not a nice historic thing of the past, a beautiful archive to be displayed in a museum and admired. It needs to be active in the church right now.
3. **Whatever this unique knowledge may be, the body that is to know it is “the church.”** It is not “Para-Church.” Its primary arena of administration and knowledge is the church. The source of knowledge that recognizes it and wisely administers it is the Lord’s church, not an individual or group apart from the church.
4. **The core element of this knowledge is “the manifold wisdom of God.”** It is not one individual’s genius or vision, or even the individual’s admirable devotion or tender heart. It is the Lord’s wisdom that encompasses many different facets of the gospel. It is “manifold,” not overly specialized or myopically focused. And it is this “manifold” wisdom wisely (Translate “Biblically”) put to work in and by the Lord’s church for the service and building up of the Lord’s people.

This whole lesson tightly links to Paul’s words to Timothy.

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)

If we conduct a thorough search of Paul’s letters to the two young preachers, Timothy and Titus, we shall not find a word about how they should behave apart from, “Para” or beside, or outside the church, but Paul thought it quite important to remind Timothy that certain behavior was appropriate for the Lord’s church, and he intended to fully apprise Timothy of that conduct. Obviously, if there is a prescribed Biblical behavior that is appropriate to the church, we should not naively presume that any behavior that we personally favor in the church is appropriate.

In this lesson to Timothy, Paul defines the church by her role, by her divine assignment. She is to be the “***pillar and ground of the truth.***” Whether we are dealing with the foundation of truth or with the high corridors and benevolent outcroppings or coverings of it, Paul’s analogy vests the church with the custody and care of both.

Occasionally over the years I have encountered a few men here and there who try to make a case for the idea that the New Testament says little to nothing about what a church should do or how a church should carry on her activities. Invariably, these men always took their willful ignorance down the same path. If the New Testament says next to nothing about what a church should do or how she should go about doing it, we are effectively free to do just about anything we wish and pretend that the Lord doesn’t really object at all. This argument from silence is a major logical fallacy, an empty false argument that people fabricate when they have no real Biblical argument for their idea.

Please read again the verses cited above, 1 Timothy 3:14-15. Pay close attention to Paul’s words, “*...that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God.*” What about the words “***that thou mayst know***” in any remote way suggest that Paul argued from either silence or from ignorance? Nothing! In fact, these words affirm quite strongly that Paul held the mirror opposite view to this modern idea of conscious, willful ignorance. Paul knew how to behave himself in the Lord’s church, and he refused to leave Timothy or us in ignorance regarding right behavior in the Lord’s church.

In both this passage and in our study passage, I find specific inspired language that reminds us that the Lord’s church thrives on a foundation of thorough knowledge, but I read not a word about the church being left in abysmal ignorance.

There is a logical—and Biblical—disconnect in this whole fantasy that, since Scripture supposedly doesn't say anything about how the church should conduct herself, we are wholly free to do whatever we wish. This idea contradicts Paul's inspired words.

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

This lesson corroborates the earlier passages cited, affirming Biblical enlightenment. I read the words "...that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works," but not one word about "...that the man of God, left in ignorance, may choose to do whatever he wishes." The recorded premise of Scripture affirms truth taught and informed, godly conduct directed, but it never hints at the idea of ignorance rationalizing anyone choosing to do as they wish.

In our study passage, Paul refers to knowledge of the manifold wisdom of God. Our study of Scripture affirms that God always operates from His wisdom in every aspect of His providence, His gracious involvement and interaction with His children. He may manifest His wisdom to the child of grace suffering under the ravages of disease. He may intervene in the life of the child of God who is teetering on the edge of enticing temptation. He may manifest His wisdom to the pastor who is praying for wisdom above himself to guide the church that he serves through a precarious course of action or through difficult decisions. He may manifest His wisdom to a young member of a church who struggles with career decisions and who sincerely seeks to steer the course of his career so that he can serve the Lord and the Lord's people as his first priority in his life. He may manifest His wisdom to the newly married (Or old married, for that matter) couple who seek the Lord's guiding wisdom as they build their relationship and family into a Biblical family based on Biblical teachings, not based on who can argue the best or shout the loudest. And, regardless of God's manifold wisdom in any matter of life, our study passage sends us to the Lord's church as the vehicle in which and by which His manifold wisdom may be known by the children of grace who serve in that church. Take note. If the Lord makes His wisdom known through the vehicle of His church, we shall not find that wisdom apart from or in rebellion to His church.

If we follow Scripture's teaching regarding right behavior in the Lord's church, no authentic "Ministry" or need shall be neglected, and the Lord shall reside at the heart of the work rather than on the confused perimeters of the invented and unnecessary "Para" concept.

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Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor