



Editor's Note

We often refer to the Lord's promise that His Word will not return void, or come back empty. It's a wonderful promise to encourage all those who have any part in making the Scriptures available or better understood. Missionary work at home and abroad is all about that.

Just as encouraging: testimonies continue to increase that, in a world where borders are closed, flights cancelled, and travel restricted, the Word is freely passing electronically into

"closed" and remote areas of the globe. I love to picture this small ESN/APA ministry as an unseen hand sprinkling the Word of truth, with its Good News of hope and encouragement, like seed being sown in places most of us will never visit. Jesus said, "The field is the world..." (Matt. 13:38), and true to His promise, little patches of spiritual fruit spring up, or are nourished: points of light here and there in a dark world. Who needs more encouragement to press on than that? 

Practical Ministry

Elders and "Quality Control" *by Jack Spender*

Christian assemblies are not perfect, but for the most part, they make a serious attempt to follow the Scriptures, and that includes the guidelines for church gatherings. God has graciously given freedom to pursue what edifies, but some necessary controls are supplied. Two notable ones found in 1 Cor. 14 are: "Let all things be done unto edifying" (v. 26) and, "Let all things be done decently and in order" (v. 40). These provide a help to believers and a safeguard to the future of the church. Without them, the flesh unregulated can do much damage.

This warning should not surprise us. Most successful businesses have what they call a Quality Control department. Simply stated, poor quality will not be tolerated, and there are people whose job it is to keep watch over products and services.

Someone will object, "Oh, but the church is not a business, it's a living organism." True enough. But undeniably, there is an organizational side to its activities at the local level, or why did the Lord provide "overseers" as referred to in the NT? He could have said that as a living organism, things would go as they should automatically. We all know that wouldn't work. And besides, even in our bodies there are cells designed to identify and stop processes that bring disease.

So, one of the functions of church elders or overseers is to work at what we might call "quality control." They must be watchful to make sure that, in spite of the great variety of ministries and participation in the teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayers of the church (Acts 2:42), everything contributes to the building up of the saints, and displays an orderliness that commends itself as fitting to the Lord's name and work.

An Example from 1 Corinthians 14

Since these two instructions both come from 1 Corinthians 14, it may be profitable to look at a couple of practical guidelines from the same chapter. Before we proceed, let's be sure we mean it when we say that, "All Scripture is profitable for doctrine ..." (2 Tim. 3:16, emphasis added). Some Christians dismiss 1 Cor. 14 with a wave of the hand: "Oh that's all been done away." Righteous principles never expire!

Now compare the controls given in 14:27 and 14:29. They regulate the public exercise of two different spiritual gifts. We need not take up the question as to whether certain spiritual gifts have passed away or are still around. Good Christians can be found on both sides. Suffice it to say that they were both valid gifts at the time of writing, and some controls apparently were needed. Our attention is on any timeless principles that have a message for all churches regarding order in their gatherings.

Consider the historical background of the passage. In the early church, the Lord was pleased to work through believers who spoke with "tongues" (languages they had not learned), and prophets who brought messages directly from the Lord. Much of the chapter makes it plain that in some ways, these gifts were very different...almost opposites. But, as utterance- or speaking-gifts, they had some things in common. They must edify the hearers, and they must respect the proper order. And how was that to be done? When exercised within a given church meeting, those who spoke with tongues were limited to "two or at the most three" (v. 27), and prophets could prophesy "two or three" (v. 29).

Diverse participation to be sure, yet both

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Biblical Foundations

Introducing the Prophets: Seventh-Century Prophets of Israel *by Robert Spender*

The seventh-century prophets provide the Lord's final warnings to Judah. Already Jeremiah's prediction of a 70-year-long captivity affirmed the surety of the exile. Nahum's focus on the demise of Assyria provided only short-lived comfort for Judah due to Babylon's success, and ultimate defeat of Jerusalem was an issue central to Habakkuk's struggles. Finally, Zephaniah used this crisis to warn about the greater eschatological reckoning of the Day of the Lord.

Jeremiah: Prophet of Endurance

Jeremiah was known as the weeping prophet, and rightly so. He was ostracized, beaten, and imprisoned for preaching God's word. After opening with graphic pictures of Judah's unfaithfulness he preached a poignant message condemning their false trust in the temple soon to be destroyed—like Shiloh's collapse after Eli's wayward priesthood (7:12-14). Jeremiah illustrates how empty "religion" is without the Lord. Similarly, in Jesus' day Israel again elevated the temple above God even to the rejection of His Son (Matt. 26:60-61).

Jeremiah's insight warns us against promoting our religious efforts above the Lord Himself. Signs characterize much of Jeremiah's preaching, with the symbol of the potter being one of the better-known illustrations. After observing the careful molding of a lump of clay, Jeremiah watched as the potter crushed it to remove impurities and then reshaped it into a usable vessel. The action symbolized God's plan to remove idolatry from Israel and purify her (18:4).

Under growing persecution Jeremiah complained bitterly of being frustrated by the Lord's seeming lack of support, but eventually he understood that the Lord was strengthening him for the agonizing events surrounding Israel's captivity (15:18-20, 19:7). For Jeremiah, the immediate future comprised the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon and the exile of the Jews. However, the return of a remnant would initiate a new beginning for Israel since Jeremiah predicted the coming of the Messiah or Branch (23:5) and the Lord's provision of a new covenant.

As recipients of the new covenant, believers can rejoice in our intimate relationship with the Lord and the fact that He no longer remembers our sin (31:34; cp. Heb. 8:12), but Israel has yet to experience the blessing of God's new covenant (Rom. 11:25). The Lord did strengthen His prophet and he lived through the destruction of Jerusalem, even opting to stay with his people. Unfortunately, the potential remnant refused the Lord's counsel and left Israel. They migrated to Egypt and took Jeremiah with them where he apparently died (43:1-7).

Jeremiah's witness provides a clear example of our need to be faithful witnesses for the Lord during days of global confusion.

The Lamentations of Jeremiah: Sovereignty over Sorrows

A series of bitter laments ascribed to Jeremiah describe the turmoil Jews suffered as everything fell apart. Having watched the destruction of the city, the temple, and the exile of Judah, Jeremiah's personal sufferings enabled him to speak for his people (3:1). Yet Jeremiah's close walk with the Lord allowed him to appreciate the ways of the Lord so that in the midst of great tribulation he affirmed, "His compassions never fail" (3:22).

This short book, especially sensitive to the plight of children, speaks clearly about the ravages of sin and its bitter outcome. Lamentations testifies to the Lord's ultimate sovereign control over every situation in life, a lesson the Jews learned in exile and we need to remember each day.

Nahum: Prophet of Accountability

Nahum is a hot book, fraught with God's anger and judgment directed at Nineveh, Assyria's capital. Nahum's message begins by describing the Lord's position as global Judge. Oddly, in a book that describes the anger, vengeance and jealousy of the Lord, one key point is that the Lord is good (1:7). Citing Exodus 34:6-7, Nahum reminded his audience that the anger of the Lord, slow to be aroused, meant that He held all people accountable (Nah. 1:3). Driven by His holiness, the vengeance of the Lord moves in fairness to set all things right.

Indeed, God's jealousy encapsulates His single-mindedness for good toward those who take refuge in Him (Rom. 8:28).

Earlier, Jonah visited Nineveh with a message of grace. Assyria eventually rejected God's grace and marched destructively against Israel, arousing God's anger and marking out their destruction. Relief for Israel came as good news (Nah. 1:15), which hints at the greater good news of the gospel (Isa. 52:7, Rom. 10:15) as well as Israel's still future restoration.

Nahum concluded by concentrating on the final destruction of Nineveh. Nineveh's aggression symbolized by a lion would be cut off (2:11-13) while their shameless seduction of other nations would be exposed like a guilty harlot (3:4-7). Nahum's inclusion of other nations reveals both the interest of the Lord in all peoples and His absolute justice toward all of humanity, which is entirely consistent with His being both "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:26). When one considers how the Lord provided His own Son as a Savior for the world, the goodness of God comes into harmony with His anger against sin and ungodliness.

Habakkuk: Prophet of Growing Faith

Habakkuk must have been an interesting individual. Beginning with a hard question for God about violence among his people he asked why God was so silent. The Lord's response that He was raising up the Babylonians spurred his prophet to ask another tough question. Habakkuk wanted to know how a holy God could send such a corrupt nation against His own people (1:13). Emphasis followed—through a fishing allegory illustrating the unceasing success of the Babylonians, who attributed victories to their gods. But once again the Lord surprised Habakkuk. He replied that Habakkuk had to wait and trust Him! Or better put, "The just will live by faith" (2:4).

This is a great lesson from this book. The phrase is cited three times in the New Testament in relationship to faith, each with a slightly different emphasis. Romans, dealing with justification, places emphasis on "the just"; Galatians,
(Continued on next page)

Prophets (continued from page 2)

concerned with faith and law, emphasizes “by faith,” whereas Hebrews stresses “will live.” What an amazingly relevant truth for today! In the face of uncertainty we too must learn to live by faith.

Five woes follow Habakkuk’s dialog with God, providing specific illustrations of Babylon’s sins while affirming God’s requirement of their accountability. Chapter three then reveals Habakkuk’s growing faith. His prayer testifies that waiting on the Lord is the only way (3:16). Difficult as that can be, it will always produce a better outcome. Asking hard questions of the Lord will increase your faith, but you must be prepared to accept His answers. Habakkuk learned to wait upon the Lord even if it meant facing tough times ahead.

Zephaniah: Prophet of the Day of the Lord

Opening with powerful imagery that

describes the decimation of humanity, Zephaniah’s book ends with reminders of the Lord’s providential care for His people (3:17). Zephaniah’s images stem from warriors fighting an enemy to provide deliverance for people. We do well to remember that the Lord has fully defeated the power and forces of the enemy (Col. 2:15) against whom we still struggle (Eph. 6:12).

Zephaniah next launched into one of the most descriptive statements about the Day of the Lord recorded by the prophets. Commanded silence before the coming Day portends the greater heavenly silence preceding Revelation’s trumpet judgments (cp. 1:7, Rev. 8:1). Initially, judgment fell upon Jerusalem, unexpected by those who had become ambivalent to the Lord’s work (Zeph. 1:12). Such a description of apathy might well reflect our culture’s attitude regarding Jesus

Christ and underscore how unprepared people will be for His return.

Zephaniah closed with a woe oracle against Jerusalem suggesting that they had become like a foreign nation in God’s sight. Even after generations of grace the Lord’s chosen leaders failed to represent Him correctly (3:3-4). In His timing, the Lord will cleanse and restore Israel, beginning with a righteous remnant (3:12-13). They will exalt Him as King in their midst and recognize Christ as their Messiah and the rightful Davidic King (cp. Zech. 12:10, Rev. 1:7).

Zephaniah, like many prophets, centers on one’s relationship with the Lord. Such strong encouragement to “seek the Lord” (2:3) makes his message applicable to modern believers who should follow God’s way, for there is only one way to the Lord and that is His Way (John 14:6).

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Quality Control (continued from page 1)

carefully controlled. Thus no one might argue that because his gift was legitimate, he had unlimited access to the ears of the saints! This is clearly a point of “decently and in order,” which leads us to ask next why such limits were placed upon them. Is there a principle that applies today?

An Application for Today

Often, the Lord does not explain why certain instructions are given. Saints obey, not because they understand the full meaning, but because they know Who gave the command! But of course, we are always free to ponder what need might be met that required such limits. Now in both of these “manifestations of the Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:7), there would be information conveyed from the Lord, the Head of the church, to the people. The content would differ, but the source would be the same: the Lord speaking. Might one principle be that the Lord is more interested in quality than quantity? The goal is not a flood of truth, but an amount that could be taken in for understanding or to produce a suitable response. It is the nature of meditating that time is required. There is no such thing as “speed meditation.”

This, then, leads to an application question for our day. Are there situa-

tions where a smaller amount of material carefully taken in and pondered might be more edifying than a large amount of material that is probably good, but by sheer volume hinders thoughtfulness or a fitting response? Or to put it another way, can an overabundance actually become

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an obstacle to edification and order?

Recently I was sitting in a breaking of bread meeting, and counted 11 different meditations from Scripture offered by the brethren. Most were appropriate to the meeting, and by themselves edifying, but the overall impression was disturbing. One brother had given a brief and heartwarming thought from the book of Hebrews. We seemed to be lifted into the presence of the Lord. A response seemed fitting. Who would lead the congregation in worship by saying audibly (in prayer) what all were thinking? Or who would suggest a hymn through which all might

join in expressing their love and adoration for the Lord?

But there was no time, for as soon as the one brother was seated, another was on his feet expounding a different passage. This went on for the better part of an hour, and in retrospect, I began to think of the situation back in Corinth! Was the Holy Spirit really leading so many Bible readings and hardly any worship? In the early church, two messages from the Lord, at the most three, were, sufficient to warm the heart, challenge the mind and produce a response.

Yes, we value the liberty we have in the free exercise of the priesthood of the believer. And no, we do not want to go back under law by making rules and setting limits in the meetings of the church. So what can we do? Well, for one thing, we can pray for—and when appropriate—appeal to the overseers, the “quality control” people. They themselves set a good example and, when necessary, offer some personal instruction to young believers privately, and sound doctrine through good Bible teaching publicly to keep things orderly and edifying.

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Wives' Corner

Humility by Maria Forcucci

“He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?”

—Micah 6:8 (NKJV)

I have always loved this verse because it gives clear instruction on how we can please God. Simple instructions are usually easy to follow, so if our goal is to please God, this verse is the perfect guideline. And for the most part, we Assembly women have done well to follow this simple formula, right?

Of course we do justly! We do not cheat on our taxes. If the store gives us too much change, we are quick to point it out; we go to *all* the meetings; we put on smiles and wave to our lost neighbors, trying to think of ways to reach out to them; we kindly admonish our children when they transgress.... The list of our “doing justly” is a long one!

Which one of us doesn't love mercy (especially when it is extended to us)? How many cold cups of water in Jesus' name can be cited from among this readership of godly women? Do we not put our arms around each other when an unknown fault is exposed? Do we not pray earnestly for our enemies and forgive our husbands' transgressions immediately? Do we not prefer others better than ourselves on the kitchen committee and at the ladies' fellowship planning

meetings?

Don't throw tomatoes, please! I fail at these too, every day.

However, if we could show ourselves some kindness, I believe we could say that at least in theory we agree with and strive for the standard for justice and mercy God has set.

So where does the rub lie? Oh, sisters, I am speaking to myself before anyone else when I say, “walking humbly with my God.” The Lord shows me my heart many times when I don't want to see it, but I am thankful He does not condemn me for it. It is in humility that flesh seems to falter. I remember on

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more than one occasion during a hearty disagreement with my husband that he added insult to injury by being the first to apologize! I remember actually thinking, *But I wanted to be the humble one.*

You see the point here? Our striving to do justly and love mercy can actually be occasion for the sin of pride to rear its ugly head. God can meet us in our failures because they work to keep us humble. In contrast, our obedience, although more pleasing to God than sacrifice (1 Samuel 15:22) has the potential to give

way to pride. Does my obedience cause me to elevate myself above others with whom I share the same sinful boat? Do

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I expect others to “perform” as well as I perceive myself to have performed? Do I even have the assignment to hold anyone besides myself to God's standards?

So, what does walking humbly with my God mean? May I suggest it means to:

1. Be real. *He knows I am dust.*
2. Be honest. *I cannot keep His righteous commands or extend His mercy.*
3. Allow Him to lead in my devotion and ministry. *I get many great ideas. Maybe one is from my Creator.*
4. Allow others to be real, honest, and seeking, without trying to conform them to my image.
5. Admit the difficulty I have obeying with a pure heart.
6. Speak to the Lord often about it.
7. Enjoy God and His people. 

THE SMALL PRINT

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Specific Bible versions used are indicated at the first quotation in each article.

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