




Editor's Note

“My Mom is with Jesus!” That’s the brief text I received the other night from the daughter of a beloved saint in our assembly. If you have ever sent a gift in support of the ESN ministry, you probably received a cheerful card of thanks from Marianne Fusco, affectionately referred to as “SS Marianne” (Super Secretary). Now with the Lord, she’s free forever from that old wheelchair!

We’ll miss her infectious smile, and praise to God for His love and goodness. We’ll miss her often-heard words: “Thank you for letting me share in this ministry.” I once sent her a fellowship gift from ESN which she quickly returned with a note, “I’m doing this for Him.” Pray for her family, especially the ones who still need the Lord, and pray that the Lord will provide a joyful replacement.

In the May issue of ESN, I related our

intention to begin the survey of the New Testament books in September. A question has been raised (we love questions from readers!): “What about the period between the Testaments?” During those 400 silent years, often called the “Intertestamental Period,” no inspired writings were given, but many works of historical interest have survived.

Because some believers come to Christ from a Roman Catholic background and have questions about the “Apocrypha” in the Bibles they were used to, we have thought it wise to insert a brief explanation of this period so that they can understand that these writings have historical interest but are not inspired as Scripture. Brother Warren Henderson has written an overview to show the connection between the Testaments. Lord willing in the January issue, we’ll get started with the survey of the Gospels. 

Biblical Foundations

The Intertestamental Period

by Warren Henderson

The Old Testament concludes with the book of Malachi. Because of Israel’s stubborn rebellion against Jehovah, He chose not to speak to His covenant people for four centuries (400 BC to 4 BC). This period of silence was ended by God’s final message to Israel, the coming of His Son—the Lord Jesus Christ. God’s incarnate Son was both God’s message and Messenger to the lost sheep of Israel and ultimately to the entire world.


There is a collection of fifteen Intertestament books called the Apocrypha (i.e., “hidden books”) which were added to the canon of Scripture by the Council of Trent in AD 1545. These books were subsequently included in the AD 1611 King James Version of the Bible. The inspiration of these books has been widely contested and most Protestants removed the apocrypha from their Bibles by the nineteenth century. Because of erroneous content, the early church did not recognize the inspiration of the apocryphal books. Apparently, even some of the Apocrypha authors knew that their writings were not divinely inspired (1 Mac. 9:27, 14; 2 Mac. 15:38). Regardless, the Apocrypha is valuable in the sense that it provides important historical information concerning Israel during the Inter-testament period.

Four centuries after the completion of the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit inspired and preserved twenty-seven books to form the New Testament. These books vary in authorship, length, style, emphasis, and content, and were written from about AD 45 to 95. These accounts are not arranged in chronological order, but rather follow the Old Testament’s organization: God’s Righteousness Revealed (the Law books and the Gospels); the History of God’s People (Joshua–Esther and Acts), God’s Wisdom Revealed (Job–Ecclesiastes and the Epistles) and the Future of God’s People or Prophecy (Isaiah–Malachi and Revelation).

In the Gospels, the Father reveals His Son to us in the way He wants Him to be appreciated. The Acts records the birth of the church

and its expansion by the preaching of the gospel throughout the world. The Epistles expound sound doctrine and behavior for the church to exhibit to properly represent Christ to the lost. The book of

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Revelation is a fitting conclusion of the New Testament: God judges human wickedness, Christ vindicates His name and establishes His kingdom on the earth, and ultimately all that opposes God is destroyed. The redeemed then enjoy eternal peace and bliss with their God in paradise. 

Having completed two of the four subjects before us, leadership in the church and the priesthood of all believers, we now turn to our third subject, the nature of the church. This is an important topic because local churches are intended to be a reflection of the church universal, and in keeping with the focus of this series, we must be sure that we are upholding and defending Biblical truths, not our private traditions.

The dictionary defines the “nature” of something as the fundamental qualities that together define its identity. Note that in speaking about the nature of a thing, we are thinking more about what it is, than about what it does, although we can tell something about its nature by observing its fruit (Matt. 7:20).

Fundamental Qualities

Instead of a list, let’s construct a statement of some fundamental qualities of the church, and then comment on its various parts. Our study will neither be flawless nor authoritative but will hopefully help us understand what’s really important about the church, and thus correctly design and evaluate church activities and functions at the local level. To be healthy, a local assembly must be submitting to Christ and reflecting the nature of the larger or universal church. It cannot just “do its own thing.”

We may say that: The church is a living organism, linked to Christ the Head which, empowered by the Spirit of life, links believers to one another, working to make them holy and fruitful, set apart from sin and the world; not as robots, but gratefully responding in worship, praise, and thanksgiving; not passive but having an order to guide them in serving and a mission to fulfill as they await the Lord’s return. That’s pretty long, but we’ll work with it.

Studying the Tree by Observing the Fruit

Students of the book of Acts know that Acts is not simply a history book! It was given both to inform and to guide. Of course one must be careful to rightly divide the Word of truth, seeking underlying principles where express commands are not given.

One timeless example is the much-loved statement in Acts 2:42, “And they

continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine, and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.” A superficial reading might suggest that this is simply a brief list of how the early believers spent their time. But actually, these things were done “steadfastly” because they expressed the nature of the church. They were its normal practice or fruit.

To say it another way, we can learn about what was important to the earliest Christians by seeing how they conducted themselves. Accordingly, their continual actions can be a valuable resource in understanding the nature of the church.

Thinking of Acts 2:42, look again at our long sentence above, noting that all four parts find expression. The Head as supreme authority speaks to His people; the Spirit creates a living relationship among them; in remembering Him they respond in thanksgiving; and they seek His help to go forth make disciples. Here are fundamental qualities that express the identity of the church; not exhaustively, but useful in painting “the big picture.”

Upholding and Defending Truth

If the foregoing observations about the nature of the church are valid, our next question would be: How can elders be equipped and encouraged to ensure that its meetings, programs, and policies at the local level do not discredit but rather uphold these great truths? Longtime readers of ESN will know that our aim is to support elders as they lead the church, always respecting both autonomy and interdependence. This means Bible-based articles that may challenge or convict, but never control. How can we do that in this matter?

As we look at the sub-points of our descriptive sentence, it may be helpful to provide some questions along with comments to clarify, that elders can use among themselves or with the believers in their own assemblies. The strength of this approach is plurality; hearing the Scripture passages, testimonies, and perspectives important to one another. Rightly done, this can strengthen fellowship.

Certainly, in-depth studies on each of these subjects could become extended, presenting numerous Scriptures and valu-

able quotes from gifted thinkers. That is well beyond the scope of the present series. (We always welcome requests from readers that any of the sub-points referred to briefly be taken up in greater depth in future ESN articles). So let’s list a few questions that might be useful for open-hearted and open-minded elders as they guard against present day tendencies to “drift away” from healthy doctrines (Heb. 2:1 NKJV).

Questions for Discussion

The church as a living organism linked to Christ the Head

- Are the saints receiving clear teaching on the Headship of Christ and its implications including different roles for men and women?

- Is Bible teaching done by the elders and/or gifted men who are well prepared with both milk for babes and meat for maturing believers?

- Is there an attempt (over time) to present the whole counsel of God including ministry from both Old and New Testaments, expounding major Bible doctrines?

- Do the elders safeguard the feeding of the flock, ensuring that announcements and entertainments (even music!) do not “swallow up” Bible teaching time?

- Are elders watchful and willing to confront those who undermine the faith of believers through false teaching, both in public and privately? (Titus 1:10-11)

The church empowered by the Spirit of life to unity, holiness, and fruitfulness.

- Do believers understand that fellowship is both vertical and horizontal? (I John 3:17)

- That fellowship is not just social times but involves partnership based on healthy relationships?

- How can we prevent the order and structure of the local church (which is necessary) from hardening like cement and thus losing the flexibility and freedoms of normal body life?

- Are the saints resolving personal conflicts using the principles of Matt. 5 and 18?

- Are there informal opportunities such as small home groups where believers can ask questions, share insights, care

(Continued on next page)

for one another, and learn to pray, etc.?

- Are there opportunities for the exercise of valid spiritual gifts?

- Do the elders visit the saints in their homes and talk about matters of unity, holiness and fruitfulness?

- Is there a reception policy that explains the privileges and responsibilities of fellowship?

The church remembering and responding in worship

- Is there clear teaching about worship and praise as response as we remember the Lord?

- Are such responses the overflow of grateful hearts or dull and lifeless repetitions?

- Do the elders occasionally explain why we meet as we do? (e.g., weekly; emphasizing Christ in the midst; why no human “worship leader,” openness to the

leading of the Holy Spirit, the woman’s head covering, why sisters are silent in the gathered assembly, etc.)?

- Are matters of simple courtesy encouraged (being on time, standing up and speaking up when leading, refraining from lengthy teachings, etc.)?

- Are believers being taught to appreciate Christ-centered hymns in contrast to the world’s “all-about-me” mentality?

- Would it be helpful to have a brief open time for ministry or exhortation?

The church as thankful and dependent, seeking the Lord’s help in serving and missions

- Does prayer have a vital place in the assembly?

- Is there a good balance between requests and thanksgiving for answers received?

- Between personal requests and re-

quests for assembly works and workers?

- Are saints praying for spiritual growth (Eph. 1 & 3 prayers) as well as temporal needs?

- Are there opportunities (like home fellowship groups) where young believers can learn to share requests and pray?

- Is the church equipping the saints both for serving within the assembly and for mission to the lost, and then supporting servants and missionaries in prayer?

In conclusion, we see that what we believe about the nature of the church as expressed, not in our traditions, but in the fundamental principles of its identity, will guide our setup of meetings, schedules, programs and much else. In so doing, we know that God is displaying His wisdom “by the church,” to unseen heavenly beings! (Eph. 3:10)

ESM

Practical Ministry

Care of our Commended Workers by Daniel Masuello

The current pandemic has created situations generating singular challenges to the normal operations in support of our workers, particularly to those called to regions outside the borders of the country where they originated. Though communication has greatly improved since past times in history, abrupt changes taking place such as restrictions to transportation, health problems, family and financial responsibilities of those workers, mainly created by local conditions, represent a fast-changing scenario in which support needs to be provided. As such, it may be difficult for elders to maintain their desired expressions of fellowship in the work of the Lord. This can affect communication channels, as well as support for spiritual, emotional and practical needs for those serving away from the homeland.

Some of the workers may feel intimidated of expressing the real conditions in which they operate, fearing misinterpretation of their openness, or increased danger to their lives, compromising the ministry they are conducting. It is perhaps up to the elders of the assembly to interpret such conditions and provide adequate channels of support to those affected, including the tools, if required, for

this to take place. Perhaps we can learn from the Scriptures, particularly from the book of Acts, ways to understand and respond to these challenges.

Distance and different local conditions may cloud the understanding of the issues and problems faced by those ambassadors. While there are organizations supporting the logistics of pioneer work, the personal and familiar touch seems best maintained by the local assembly. Deacons may assist in the practical aspects by getting personally involved; the welfare of those workers as they are conducting their activities must be one of the deacons’ main concerns.

Some are burdened with excessive workloads, leading to declining physical and emotional health, burnout, or other consequences, which, in spite of much preparation to serve, impair them from carrying on their ministry. This becomes a significant loss which could be averted by timely addressing of the issues as they have been presented. An active engagement with them in their needs may bring back or increase the needed efficacy to their work. When appropriate, some may even be encouraged to consider going to assist alongside those workers already in the field.

Scripture gives us many examples of such encouragers. Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:25-30, 4:18) became a superlative example of one commissioned by the assembly to communicate their love to Paul. He took the task to heart, searching for him and not stopping until he ministered to Paul in his imprisonment. Timothy (Acts 16:1), in relation to the Apostle Paul, remains a vivid example of committed support, eventually being called to serve in the Apostle’s place as he matured in his experience of serving. Onesimus (Phm. 1:10), saved through Paul’s ministry, became his devoted servant, perhaps representing those reached locally, and providing assistance to the distressed worker. Onesiphorus (1 Tim 1:17), used his travels to diligently seek and comfort the Apostle in his trials.

It would be a worthwhile exercise to search for alternatives and ways to strengthen our communication and assistance, both spiritual and physical, particularly as this situation continues to unfold. May the current crisis become stepping stones to a deeper care for and fellowship with those connected with us, as an extension of the work by a local assembly of believers.

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Wives' Corner

The God Who Accomplishes *by Rachel Kichar*

“*I will cry to God Most High, to God who accomplishes all things for me.*”
—Psalm 57:2

Isn't that a good thought? Each of my days is a race to accomplish everything needful before I collapse into bed at night—and often one of my final tasks is to make a list of everything I need to do tomorrow. We all know that life is not really about tasks, but about the relationships we form, first with God and then with the people around us. And yet every one of those relationships entails certain tasks—and each one is holy and significant in God's eyes when we do it for Him.

It's easy to forget that those tasks are part of the “all things” that God wants to accomplish for us.

He wants to help us figure out what to cook for supper, and find a way to fit the shoes of one more child on the entryway shelves, and conquer the piles of dishes and laundry. There have been times that I prayed before breakfast for His help with the mundane things, and looked back on my list at supper-time, wondering how all those tasks got crossed off! There are many unsaved people who accomplish the same tasks—but how He loves to accomplish for us even the things that we could do without Him. I once read that George Müller

would ask God to help him find the pages in his dictionary faster, so that he might study more efficiently. When our God is in the yoke with us, our burden is light and we can do our work with joy.

But He also loves to accomplish for us the things that are far beyond our power. He is the only One who can awaken spiritual interest in the neighbor that we try to befriend. He is the only One who can touch the hearts of our own children and draw them to Himself. He is the only One who

can truly encourage our husbands and give them wisdom. He's also the only One who can change them into what He wants them to be—and He doesn't need our nagging words to help Him along! All the big things that weigh on our hearts and minds—things that will matter for all of eternity and are infinitely beyond our power—He loves to accomplish them for us.

Perhaps better than both of these facts, however, is that God is the only One in the universe who actually accomplishes—who really completes anything at all. Solomon, after his extensive philosophical experiments, came to the conclu-

sion that labor under the sun is all vanity. “What advantage does man have in all his work which he does under the sun?... That which has been done is that which will be done” (Ecc. 1:3, 9b). If Solomon

had been a housewife, he would probably have discovered that fact a little earlier in life. Nothing that we do “under the sun” is really permanent.

But God? “Everything God does will remain forever; there is nothing to add to it and there is nothing to take from it...” (Ecc.

3:14). When He does a thing, He does it perfectly and completely. He spoke, and the universe was built to completion (Ps. 33:9). He accomplished salvation, and Christ Himself testified that, “it is finished” (John 19:30). He is building His church, and nothing shall prevail against it (Matt. 16:18). He has begun a good work in us, and He will complete it (Phil. 1:6). We can surely do no better than David and “cry to God Most High, to God who accomplishes all things for me.” Why would we ever try to accomplish anything on our own, when all the resources of the infinite God await our cry?

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THE SMALL PRINT

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

Note: All words referring to God have the initial letter capitalized. While the original languages of the Bible do not use capitalization, this is the convention in some translations but not in others. So at times there may be inconsistencies in usage in ESN articles.

“Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers” 1 Peter 5:2a NKJV