

It Is Written

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The Purpose of the Local Church

By Bill Hall

What is the purpose of the Lord's church? Is it to eradicate poverty, disease, social injustice, illiteracy from among men? Is it to bring about a cessation of war and conflict? Is it to campaign for a temptation-free society for Christians to live in?

If the church had as one of its great goals the eradication of disease, the Lord could have easily equipped it to accomplish that goal. Could not the same power that enabled one blind man to see have enabled all blind men to see; that enabled one lame man to walk have enabled all lame people to walk; that cured many people of varied diseases have cured all people of all diseases? And could not this same power have been given to the church in all generations?

If the church has as one of its great goals the eradication of poverty, the Lord could have easily equipped it to accomplish this purpose. After all, He fed the five thousand with five loaves and two fishes. He similarly fed four thousand on another occasion. Could not He who did these marvelous works have enabled His church in all generations to feed, clothe, and shelter the impoverished masses of the world through miraculous powers?

If the Lord had wanted His church to become a lobbyist group to apply political pressure toward a temptation and persecution-free society in which to live, He would have given instructions in that direction. He did not even lead His church into a direct effort to destroy slavery, but taught the Christian slave to be a better slave and the Christian master to treat his slaves as he would have his heavenly Master treat him (Col. 3:22-4:1).

The church's purpose is to save souls and prepare people for eternity. It holds out to the impoverished the hope of someday walking a street of gold; to the suffering a time when there will be no pain; to the sorrowing a moment when "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes." It tells the tempted and persecuted that there is value in these afflictions, that the testing of their faith is "more precious than of gold," and to rejoice. It tells all to live godly lives in whatever environment they find themselves. It seeks to change people through the power of the gospel, not society through the coercion of legislators. Its weapons "are not carnal, but are mighty through God." Its motivating theme: "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?"

When local churches become involved in hospital and health clinic work, or when they build schools for the education of their children, or when they see as one of their great missions to provide for the world's poverty, or when they feel obligated to create social upheaval and campaign for human rights, or when they feel called upon to express their views on the government's use of nuclear armaments or whatever, they have a distorted view of the purpose of the church.

Gossip: Enjoyable Sinning

By Greg Gwin

"Did you hear the one about? . . ." Thus begins the stand-up comic into his humorous routine. Too often our own conversations begin the same way. But the end result is not nearly so funny. In the process we have gossiped about our brethren, our neighbors, perhaps our co-workers, maybe even

our own family. Gossip, defined as idle talk about the affairs of others, is a genuine problem for God's people. Think about gossip. . .

IT IS EASY: You won't have to work hard to become an accomplished gossip. No, in fact, the practice is rather like catching the common cold. It takes very little planning, intention, or effort -- it just seems to happen.

The ease with which we may be affected by this spiritual malady is the basis of a clear warning: "A gossip betrays a confidence; so avoid a man who talks too much" (Proverbs 20:18). Association with the gossip is a dangerous practice. The first threat is that he may reveal some secret of ours. But also, our company with him can influence us to join in his sinful practice (1 Cor. 15:33). His disease is contagious. Beware!

We are all susceptible. In Romans chapter one, Paul wrote of the heathens who had chosen to ignore God. They had engaged in gratifying every carnal desire. Among their faults was the sin of being "whisperers" (vs. 28). Other versions translate this as "gossips." What we see here is that men, when following the desires of the flesh rather than the will of God, will be prone to gossip.

IT IS ENJOYABLE: The ease with which folks can be made to gossip must surely be connected with the perverted kind of enjoyment it brings to those who participate in it. There is a strange sense of reward that comes from being the first to know -- and tell -- something on another person. Some people get such a charge out of this that they are not above manufacturing some tale. It may not be a complete fabrication. There may be shreds of truth blended together with lots of imagination -- anything to arrive at a good 'juicy' bit of gossip. This, most assuredly, is a sin that brings "pleasure for a season" (Hebrews 11:25).

Christians of the first century, like us all, demonstrated a propensity for this activity. Paul was concerned that he would find "whisperings" (translated "gossip" in the NIV) when he returned to Corinth (2 Corinthians 12:20). James bemoaned certain sins of the tongue that "ought not so to be" (James 3:10). Self control in such matters is, he said, the ultimate sign of spiritual maturity: "if any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body" (vs. 3).

This is, we have learned, the kind of thing that everyone can 'enjoy.' It is truly everyone's malady. We all like to be 'in the know,' and we love for people to know that we know! So, we gossip; we betray confidences; we spread rumors.

IT IS SIN: Here is the bottom line! Jesus warned, "Every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned" (Matthew 12:36,37).

Remember the definition of gossip? It is "idle talk about the affairs of others," and it clearly falls within the realm of things that we will answer for in the judgment. In the Proverbs we are warned: "He that keepeth his mouth keepeth his life; but he that openeth wide his lips shall have destruction" (13:3). And again, "Whoso keepeth his mouth and his tongue, keepeth his soul from troubles" (21:23).

Recall that we've included this as one of the maladies that affects everyone. This is not just a problem of irreligious folk. A lot of regular 'church-goers' have the problem, too. Of these James says: "If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain" (James 1:26).

THERE IS A CURE: Take heart! There is a solution for the sin of gossiping. We are promised forgiveness of this sin, just like any other sin, as we comply with the conditions of God's will. And furthermore, we have the confidence that our Father will help us withstand future temptations to commit this common sin. "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it" (1 Cor. 10:13). Our task is to look for that "way to escape," and to avoid this terrible sin of gossip.

"Did you hear the one about? . . ." No! And please don't tell me!