

AN OPUSCULUM ON CHURCH ETIQUETTE

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March 27, 2014

24 And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works:

25 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 10:24, 25

With nearly thirty years of church service and preaching for the Lord, I have seen and experienced many things from God's people. Most was good; but there has been some bad. In my early days I expected higher thoughts and actions from believers who claimed to love God and obey his word. But because I have been exposed to things that are not fit to write, my expectation has been somewhat jaded. Most fundamental pastors and preachers would agree that the stuff we see today by a few so-called "Christians" would make the most liberal soul blush. The bad behavior of believers gives more of a bad name to the work of God than anything else.

One can accuse me of getting disillusioned or cynical as I grow older – and I shall not protest too much – but I will say I have a very high opinion of the younger folks who are seeking after God. The past couple generations did not impress me too much, but today I see a great awakening and fervor among God's youth. My hopes and prayers lie with this current generation. I pray it continues. I am greatly encouraged.

Writing a literary work on the subject of church etiquette cannot be done using only the scriptures. We also need some common sense to make sense of the application of the scriptures in this new millennium. We have learned over the years what things "work," and what things don't. Scripture supports the things I have mentioned. An honest person when searching the scriptures will see how the word indeed does apply. I hope every reader searches the Bible to see whether the things I say are true.

I should say that I was saved in 1985, and not in the glory days of "Baptist Fundamentalism." I am not coming from a time when the American culture was conservative as a whole. I was raised and served God *after* the days when people on the street wore suits and hats, and moms wore aprons at home and took care of their babies. In my short lifetime we had the introduction of modernist mega-churches, prescription drugs being imposed on the masses, electronic devices stealing the focus of people at every second, government schools teaching humanistic values to little children, and an overall "Laodicean" spirit among the churches of our Saviour.

Regardless, there is a certain respect and courtesy that works in the kingdom of heaven. God's earthly kingdom has protocols and good etiquette that we should be mindful to follow, if we are to be good stewards of the manifold grace of God.

So, as I write this paper, these are things I believe will help every church and every church member. Please consider these things.

1. Preachers are salesmen, not managers. Their duty is to preach the word (Matthew 28:18-20) and to be ensamples to the flock (1 Peter 5). They lead by example and those who want to serve God

have the preacher to follow. The personal life testimony of the preacher is many times more important and powerful than what he preaches. Actions speak louder than words. The testimony of a preacher or pastor should be held to the highest expectation.

Preachers make known the benefits of following Jesus Christ as their lives reflect those blessings. Their preaching is a persuasion towards the Gospel of salvation. As the Saviour preached, he showed the benefits of obeying commandments, and the recompense for not doing his will.

In seminary, our counselling class was pretty simple, taught by the chancellor himself (Jimmy Gid Tharpe, who had 18 doctorates). He said that in counselling, we show the person the options he can take, with the resulting expectation. It is the individual's choice as to what he determines to do. You can this, and this is what God says will happen, or you can do this other, and this is what God says will happen. I take this method as reflective of the preaching and prophets.

In personal experience, I rarely counsel, or I counsel all the time – depending how you look at things. My counselling hours are 11:00 Sunday, but I am on-call 24/7 with my life as an ensample to the believers.

Additionally, it is not the pastor's duty to meddle in the personal lives of people. If asked a question by a person in his flock, he renders an answer as God has shown him. However, if a wife has a question, she should be directed to ask her husband. If a child has a question, unless the preacher has express permission, the child should be directed to his parents.

If he asked advice from a member of another church, he should direct that person to their own pastor (or husband). It is not right for one man to undermine the teaching of another man's student. Too many times preachers love the esteem of being asked their opinion. However, their opinion should be respectful of the "chain of command" God has established.

Next, the preacher needs to allow the Holy Ghost to work in the lives of his flock. He preaches the word – Amen! He is not the enforcer or judge. He is not the accountant. He should be careful to allow God to work in the lives of his people. His duty is to take care of (or oversee) *the church*, disciplining as needed according to the word of God (Matthew 18, 1 Corinthians 5, etc.) – which amounts to offending brethren either repenting are being cut off. He should preach, warn, admonish, teach, encourage, exhort, reprove, rebuke, and exhort – all these are done through words. It is the duty of fathers to run their families, of husbands their wives, of owners to run their businesses.

If this applies to the preacher, it applies in similar respect to brethren. Make sure you take the beam out of your own eye before trying to take the mote out of your brother's eye. We are to encourage, edify, highly esteem, serve, and provoke others to love and good works. We are not God's police force.

As a final thought, I believe pastors should allow their people to work in the church even if they might make mistakes. Every pastor has made mistakes, and God still uses him. To not allow this grace with others is hypocritical. It is not the end of the world when someone fails a task. And, usually, "we learn by doing, we learn by messing up." Be the kind of believer who gives people chances to serve. Encourage them. Allow them to follow the Holy Ghost.

2. Church members ought to read and respect their church's Covenant. As a church member, you are duty-bound to observe the things written by your church in respect to proper Christian conduct. If you have not read your church's covenant and by-laws, you should. If you are not fulfilling the things expected of you, you need to change your life accordingly.

Most church covenants have certain expectations of their members, including:

- Having good behavior among both the saved and the lost.
- Supporting the work.
- Abstaining from worldly influences.
- Adhering to the statement of faith

When you join a church, that action is to be received as God's will, and there is an expectation that you are a member in good standing. A member in good standing is one who fulfills the church's membership requirements for character and faith. You should know what is expected of you.

3. Don't flaunt your carnality. Church members with bad habits or poor testimonies should be careful not to let those bad things disgrace the church. Of course, true holiness is to be preferred, but too many times believers have not realized their freedom from sin. They remain bound to sin of their own will or fears, not because they have to. They will reap the effects of their choices as we all do. If you have a bad habit, you should confess it and forsake it. If you are struggling, then keep it in the closet. Don't show your lack of holiness for others to see – especially on the church grounds. If you are too weak to stop smoking, do it at home, not outside the church's front door. If you have a filthy mouth, don't be inviting people to your church. If you can't control your music, keep it low where others do not have to hear.

We understand holiness is a progressive work and that we are all a work in progress. We all fail and have infirmities. We all sin. But sin is to be recognized as such and avoided. We do give grace to the lost, so they will hear. We do give grace to the newly saved, so they learn to grow. But this grace is not a license to continue in sin and by evil works encourage others to follow. Believers should strive at all times to maintain a clean testimony – for be ye well-assured, people are watching, and will talk when the opportunity arises.

The true churches of Jesus Christ have enough work trying to win souls and maintain a good presence in their community – they do not need your sin adding to the load. Whether you agree or not, people will judge your church by you. So, it is better to keep silent about your church rather than allowing your sin to give it a bad name.

Furthermore, you do not want to cause other brethren to stumble. Weaker brethren or newer Christians may think your sin is acceptable if they see you do it. Younger believers look up to church members and will emulate them. Be an example to follow. Be careful to maintain a pattern of good works.

4. Pastors need to respect other churches and pastors. Thou shalt not steal, the Bible says. From the beginning of my ministry training I was taught that a church should never receive a member from another church without first getting a letter of recommendation from the pastor. We want the membership of our church to be blessed. We want any transfer of membership to be blessed of God. Too often, a member gets annoyed at their church and is readily received by another church – without even the common courtesy of asking that sheep's shepherd what the matter is.

By God's grace I have made it a habit not to receive any person into our membership from another church without first getting that church's blessing. Also, if a member of another church visits our church, if I know who is who, I contact that member's pastor promptly and explain we had that person visit, and that

I have no interest in receiving that sheep. Furthermore, I inform that visitor, that if he expresses a notion to come to our church, that we cannot receive him without his pastor's blessing. That usually is that. In all my years of ministry I have not had a person like that return. Ask me if I am sorry. I am not.

Furthermore, if you as a member have an issue with your pastor, you should go to him *alone* and discuss it. Don't share it with someone else (unless as a wife it is your husband; or as a child it is your parent). No member should leave his church without first talking to his pastor so he understands the reasons. Most pastors I know want what is best for their members. If a pastor cannot reconcile, he will gladly recommend an alternative.

You will not always like what you hear preached. But instead of getting offended, you ought to pray. Pray for yourself, pray for your pastor, pray for your growth and proper response. Remember: the church is **not** about you – it is about Jesus Christ and what his will is.

What every church member should know is that it is NOT *your choice* where you are a member – God decides that. You are to be faithful to the church God set you in, and do not change churches until God leads elsewhere. And if this is the case, the separation from your church and addition to the other will be a blessing on all parts – the churches, you, the pastor, and the Holy Ghost (I Corinthians 12, Acts 2).

And if you think by leaving you can avoid problems, understand you are the problem most of the time, and when you leave on other than good terms, you are taking the problem with you.

5. Church members should strive to be supportive of the work. They should support their pastor, look for opportunities to serve, and be faithful to the things they have agreed to do. I remember an old saying: if you see something that needs to be done, it is probably God showing you to do it. Do not just tell the pastor the problem and expect him to take care of it. Word your statement like this: "Pastor, I noticed such-and-such needed to be fixed (or cleaned, or moved, or replaced, or whatever). Do you have a problem if I take care of that?"

The pastor has to rely on people for the good operation of the church and her facilities. Faithfulness is more appreciated than intelligence or opinions. I have seen many times over, that if a church does not take good care of their pastor, God will send that man elsewhere, and the church he leaves will usually struggle in their carnality – whether it be people or issues – until that is taken care of.

It is not the pastor's job (or his wife's job) to do all the work of the church. He is to take care of the church as an overseer (i.e., bishop). So, if you see your pastor doing something you know you can do, ask to do it for him.

If someone asks you to do something, say, "yes." Whether helping, singing, teaching, participating in an effort; be willing to be a part of the effort. "I don't want to" should not be in your list of responses.

Barring the fact that your pastor is a perfectionist and will not give up control over areas, you can always find things to do to help around the church.

6. Church members should put forth effort to always have good and joyful spirit. No one likes to be around a negative, unhappy, critical person. People are attracted to joy and a positive spirit. And if you are the pastor, learn to smile and laugh. Be friendly, be yourself, be approachable.

We should enter the house of God with joy in our hearts. Sometimes people are burdened, or discouraged, or fearful. The best way to help them is to have a joyful, encouraging spirit. Do not commiserate. Do not further discourage. Do not say dumb things that are not helpful. Think of how you can be a blessing. Lord knows we all have said stuff we regret. But Christian maturity is evidenced by a good control of the tongue – thinking before speaking. Or, sometimes, not speaking at all – just a nod and smile might do.

Pastors have a lot of burdens: he tends to bear the problems of his flock, the burdens of the finances, of the facilities, of his own family, and usually a lot of other things. Most people do not realize how great the care of a church is on the heart of its leadership. But one thing make is worthwhile: souls being saved and members being joyful. I think they work together (Luke 15). Be a blessing to all who meet you by showing forth an unselfishly happy spirit.

7. Church members should be on time to the services and not leave the auditorium during the service. Why should something like this have to be said? You should think it was common courtesy. However, many people are in “me-only” mode: all that matters is what I want and what I need. So, whatever simple thought comes into their heads, they do without consideration of others – like leaving an auditorium during the preaching of God’s word. And, do you not notice it is usually the same people who always have to leave for some reason. They have no focus or self-control. This disrespect of whoever is singing or preaching is not Christian-like or courteous. Jesus taught us to do unto others as we would have them do unto us. If you are speaking or singing, do you want others to talk, laugh, leave the auditorium, distract the audience, make faces, etc.?

Barring emergencies, people should stay put in the service and support it with enthusiasm, without being a distraction.

If you know you have to leave early, inform the pastor so he is aware of what you are doing. Leave quietly and do not make a fuss.

Along with staying in the sanctuary, good attention should be directed toward the preacher. Do not check your cell phone for messages – in fact, turn off your cell phone out of respect for God!

Turn to scripture when the preacher asks you to. Say “amen” at the appropriate times. Shake hands with the preacher after the service, thanking him for the message. Be in your place before the service starts so you do not have to be called.

All these things are conducive to respect and courtesy.

8. Church members should be regular, faithful, and generous in their giving. It is an age-old struggle of many churches that meeting the budget is a week-to-week effort. Some members give more to the restaurants or movies than they do to the work of Jesus Christ. The church building does not operate on the grace of the electric and heating companies. The pastor alone cannot bear the burden of the finances. There is a widespread lack of consistent and regular support of the church. Most people are not *purposed* to give – and they will suffer accordingly. To me, the tithe is not optional. After that, if an off week from payday, you should still have some decent amount to give to the church. Then, if a midweek or special service, you should have something to give back to God.

I learned to not let an offering go by without putting something in the plate. The regular giving of tithes and offering is a plan that works. All parties are blessed: the church, the family, the business, and the Saviour. If every person truly gave their tithes and were generous with offerings, most churches would not have a financial concern.

And note this: just because you gave your tithes, this does not mean you can refrain from giving generously at other times during the week. I know most members (as do I) get paid every two weeks. What do you give that off week at church? I try to give a good amount (about half the tithes I gave the week previously), knowing giving will be low. Now Jesus honored the widow who gave her mite because it was all she had (so we do not judge the *amount* given) – but look at the *portion* you give. If God has blessed you with abundance, why not give a good amount above the tithes?

I was shown in seminary how the tithes is a debt you owe, offerings are a gift you show, and alms are a blessing you bestow. And normally, the offerings are larger than that tithes.

God made it so we can all give something. It is “portion giving.” A portion of what God gives you is returned to him. In the long run, this “heavenly insurance and investment” pays out well. You will enjoy God’s financial blessings as you are faithful and regular in your giving.

9. Don’t bring up problems right before the preacher is scheduled to preach. Call him on a Tuesday or later in the week. The preacher does not need be distracted with problems when his focus should be on the message God has given him for the people. In Acts 6 there were problems with non-Jewish widows being neglected. The Apostles responded to the problems by having the church appoint deacons. The reason: they were to give themselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.

Secondly, do not leave people hanging saying, “I need to talk to you about something important,” and then put it off. Most people will spend too much time imagining what this is about, and likely imagine wrongly. If you need to say something, choose the right time and then tell them outright, speaking the truth in love.

If you have to warn someone, then tell them what it is about: “I need to talk to you about someone covering my class while I am on vacation....”

What is a big help is if you are in your place praying for the service. Most problems can wait till another day. Be respectful of people’s thoughts.

10. Be courteous to and honor other church members. Be friendly, listen more than talk, smile, watch your words, have a spirit of love and charity. Be this way towards all people, regardless of position. James said respect of persons is sin. So, contrariwise, God wants us to serve one another in love and good esteem. If someone in the church offends you, Jesus supplied the steps to take in Matthew 18. Do not retaliate, feed envy, cause strife, murmur, backbite, gossip, etc.

God hates when discord is sown among brethren (Proverbs 6). You should suffer wrong and take whatever comes patiently. If there is trouble, you should be the one who is blameless and not be part of the contention.

Be a person who encourages, not discourages. Edify – do not tear down. Speak evil of no man.

11. Clean up after yourself and be willing to be a helper when you see the need. In fact, look for the need and try to be the first one to it.

Being observant and quiet makes are marks of a wise person. Most people do not know half of what is going on and talk way too much. If you are observant, you can see what needs to be done, and many times you can anticipate what is needed before the need is becomes obvious. For example, if there is an effort in the church to clean, prepare for dinner, move equipment, etc., you should be where you can be of help.

Most people have to be pulled and told what to do. Some will only do what they are told and no more. But a real helper is one who takes the initiative to get a job done.

Have you ever noticed that leaders are those persons who see what needs to be done and then organizes the effort to get that thing done? I believe God wants us all to be good leaders as well as good followers.

12. Dress modestly when going to the house of God. Women and men both should be careful to be easily entreated in this matter. If the pastor prefers ties be worn, then wear one. If there is a cowboy (or whatever) special service, dress up as you know you should. If a woman, keep the skirts long and loose, and the front high and loose. I can tell you it is a grief to your pastor when he is ashamed of your clothing choices. Dress as your pastor would want and expect you to dress. Your dress is a reflection of the spirituality (or carnality) of the church. The word here is modesty – meaning not to grab attention or cause the opposite sex to lust.

Everyone tends to lust regardless, but allow me to say sweetly that you are naïve if you think your dress has no influence on the opposite sex. You can encourage or discourage others to lust by how you dress and behave yourself.

Now, I am not saying you have to overdress or underdress. As mentioned already, dress to fit the character of the church. I have been to many kinds of services. Sometimes, casual clothes are fine – other times, a suit is expected. Either way, dress appropriately, and dress modestly.

13. At church, call your pastor, “pastor” or “brother,” but not by his first or last name only. How you refer to you pastor shows respect or disrespect. Using his first name only is disrespectful and appeals to pride and personal rebellion whether you receive it or not. Even when I am visiting another church, regardless of the age of the pastor, I refer to him as “pastor” or “brother.” Only rarely and under certain instances would I call him by his first name only. And that goes for all church members. In order to set the standard, I call the men in the church “brother,” the women “sister” (or “miss”), and even younger people I try to instill in them that courtesy. Even when referring to my own children I call them “brother” or “sister.”

If your pastor doesn't care, then call him brother. Unless he asks a certain way, brother always works.

Now, there are very informal times where using a first name only is appropriate. My wife uses my first name only many times – but at church she says refers to me as pastor.

14. Don't be judgmental or negative toward the things happening at church. This is similar to number 6 above, but goes further as it applies to the overall work. Try to be supportive. If you can't, then keep the mouth shut, or find a positive way to voice your thoughts and opinions. Do not bring your bad attitude to church. Be happy, joyful, and content. Count your blessing and be ready to hear the word of God.

The church is a work of God and one sinner can destroy much good. God has put the pastor as overseer. He wants what is best for the work. I am confident most pastors carefully evaluate how things operate at the church. If the pastor proposes a different or new way, he probably gave the idea a lot of consideration. Your job is to follow unless it is obviously a wrong thing to do.

15. Strive to love everybody, as that is what the Saviour commanded. Few people like coming to a place with conflict and drama. The church should be a place of love and peace and unity before God. The church belongs to Jesus, not you. He is the preeminent one, not you.

No one should enter the doors of the house of God with ought against his neighbor. God expects you to settle all differences quickly with a spirit of forgiveness. God forgave you much – you should be willing to forgive others.

This means, make an effort to talk to every person, help every person, care for every person, be a blessing to every person.

16. Keep quiet when people are praying. This understanding should be basic – if someone is praying – especially when at the altar – be respectful enough to not be a distraction to the work of the Holy Ghost. If people are working with others to deal with sin or salvation, be exceptionally quiet as you do not want to be used to disrupt that work.

17. Fundraisers should be avoided. God's plan for the support of the church is through tithes and offerings, not a table out in front of the building – or car washes, rummage sales, bake sales, haircuts, tattoos, face painting, asking local businesses for donations, etc.

These things are indicative of a lack of faith and also a bad testimony to the community. A church's outreach should not be to charge or raise money. If someone wants to have a yard sale at their house and give the proceeds, there is nothing wrong with that – just do not connect the sale to the church.

The world has all sorts of ideas it uses to raise money, influence the community, gain respect, etc. But the church that Jesus built belongs to him, he is the head, he is the one who nourishes. He adds to the church and takes away. If we have a need, we go to him – he will supply all our need according to his riches (Philippians 4).

In the Old Testament God's house was supported by the tithes and offerings of God's people. We do not want non-believers to have a part in the building of the Lord's church – the church is not a beggar or a retail outlet looking to compete with worldly organizations.

18. Don't give junk to the church. I have seen this many times: a family gets a new vacuum cleaner or other thing, and rather than dump the old one, they think they are blessing the church by giving

God less than their best. After time, the Lord's house has all used up stuff. Here is an idea: buy a new one for the church and you keep the junk. God would bless that!

I think the Lord deserves the best. And if the church has a definite need, we should try to fill that need the best we are able. New equipment is nice. New carpets are nice. New furniture is nice. New roofs are nice. I am fully persuaded that God is honored with what we give him if it is the best – whether an unblemished lamb or an unblemished vacuum.

19. Be friendly to visitors. Try to make a conversation. Try to make them comfortable. Let them know where the bathrooms are. If a special event is occurring, inform them who is who, etc. Make the effort to approach them and welcome them. Even if you are not the friendly type, you can force yourself to say hi and smile.

20. Avoid the Nicolaitane doctrine – separating the rulers from the laity. We should have the same respect for all. Avoid special treatment of certain individuals. We should not say to the well-dressed, “sit up front,” and tell the poorly dressed to “sit in the back.” Jesus hates this doctrine.

Pastors and ruling elders are worthy of double honor, but they are still just people. Respect of persons is sin. Honoring persons for their works' sake is different than respect of persons – for there is no respect of persons with God.

So, at dinner or at services, there should be no special seating, unless people have to be positioned for a certain function (like at a wedding). All church members are precious to the body, and should be treated with esteem.

21. If you offend your brother, be ready to apologize. Your pride should not hinder you from trying to restore relationships. Even if what you did was justified, you probably should have handled it differently or qualified what you said or did. A meaningful and sincere apology is what a humble, caring brother or sister has no problem doing. We are to seek peace whenever we can. It is the old nature who has to insist on being right or justified.

Here is a bit of wisdom: it is not you that decides whether an offence has occurred, it is the one offended who determines that. Whether or not you think the offence is justified, what matters is what the injured party feels.

Jesus supplied the process for treating a brother who offends in Matthew 18. However, you should never be found needing witnesses. It is enough that the offence happened. If you are at fault, admit and seek forgiveness. That is the easiest and simplest way to handle these things.

Even as a pastor I say and do things that offend others. I should be ready to apologize and seek the forgiveness of those I offend.

22. Be careful of being too physical or of touching the opposite sex in an inappropriate manner. 1 Corinthians 7 says it is not good for a man to touch a woman.

In the church we are as brothers and sisters. The church is not a place for carnal motives. Men and women should be treated with honor and carefulness. God sees all that happens – he knows our thoughts – so we need to make sure they are pure towards every person. The Bible says to make no provision for the flesh, so never allow yourself to be found in any situation that appears compromising. Abstain from the appearance of evil, we are told.

23. Learn to follow the Holy Ghost in liberty. God, by the Holy Ghost, authored the Bible, and that same Holy Ghost is sealed in the believer. Consequently, the word of God and the leading of the Holy Ghost will never contradict. God is not the author of confusion and he is not double minded. God will always honor his word.

So, as you grow as a Christian, you first show God your obedience to the scriptures, then you press on to follow the Holy Ghost in liberty. Obedience to the scriptures is never to be ignored, but God’s Spirit teaches us and leads us in certain specific ways. We need to obey that leading also.

Now, I have seen people who are disobedient to what “thus saith the Lord,” go on and try to convince me they know the leading of the Holy Ghost. This to me is an insult to God. If you have not been faithful in that which is least, why would God give you much? People who think they can ignore the word and still be God-led are deceiving themselves. Furthermore, they do not have the discernment to know when it is God or some other spirit, or maybe self-will that is leading them.

Pastors have good discernment to know when a member is obedient to God or not. Sometimes you may fool them, but you can’t fool God. He knows all. We pray, “lead us not into temptation,” basically praying God’s will be done, not ours.

Be diligent to obey what is written; then be praying for God’s leadership. Refer to Romans 12.

24. Don’t let others “bad-mouth” the church, the pastor, (or any pastor) a brother or sister, or the Lord. You should stop people from gossip and murmuring on the spot. Walk away if you have to, or say you do not want to talk about others.

A good principle to follow is to not say anything about anyone that you would not say if they were listening.

25. Don’t let issues between other brethren affect your feelings toward them. Do not take sides in disputes. People have disagreements and their positions appear to be right unto them. We are all sinners and we all do things that offend others. We have to live according to the choices we make. It is inevitable that people will have differences. You should not be one who meddles in the affairs of others. Our duty is to love our fellow man. We pray for them. We encourage them to do right. And most of the time we do not have all the facts at hand. We have what we are told, and every way of man is right in his own eyes.

Most of the time what is thought to be the issue at hand is not really the issue at hand. The issue at hand should be to discover what is the right response for each person. These responses include apologies, repentance, forgiveness, grace, mercy, longsuffering, love, meekness, and such things.

In conclusion, God wants unity and love in his churches. These are the marks of mature believers. Being a person of faith and virtue will make life more of a blessing to all concerned. May God give us this grace.