

THE WORK OF THE CHURCH

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About the author...

Perry Cotham was born to Christian parents January 5, 1912. He was baptized at an early age began preaching soon after in 1929 at the age of 17. He entered Freed-Hardeman College (then a junior college) in September, 1929 and graduated in June, 1931. He then entered college at his hometown of Murray, Kentucky and graduated from Murray State University in June of 1934. While attending college he preached for several of the area churches and conducted meetings. October 1934 Perry began full time local work with the church in Shawnee, Oklahoma. He had a prosperous work, with a new congregation being established. While there he did much radio preaching and conducted meetings in the area. This he did in other places later in local work.

Perry was married to Teresa Overby (the daughter of a well known gospel preacher) in Muskogee, Oklahoma on June 25, 1936. The Overby family was formerly from Murray. (Teresa passed away January 7, 1998). Brother Cotham has two sons and one daughter, eight grandchildren and four great grandchildren.

After moving from Shawnee, Perry did local work in Oklahoma City and Wewoka, Oklahoma, Paris, Texas, Nashville, Tennessee, Duncan, Oklahoma and Grand Prairie and Big Spring, Texas, in that order. In 1972 he and his wife moved back to Grand Prairie so he could be engaged in full time, word-wide evangelistic work. Perry has preached in all of the fifty states of America and in all the inhabited continents of the world, including about 70 nations. He has held several debates, two of which are in print. He has written sixteen gospel tracts which have been widely distributed throughout the world. He has also helped to buy and distribute thousands of Bibles in different dialects, besides distributing his debate books on the Holy Spirit and miracles today. Perry continues to make his home in Grand Prairie and to do much preaching. He at times assists Brown Trail School of Preaching in teaching some special classes, but his main work is to preach and distribute tracts and Bibles in all parts of the world. Many thousands have been baptized during his many years of ministry.

The Lord's church is the greatest institution on earth today, and the Holy Scriptures plainly declare there is a *work* for the church to do. The apostle Paul, writing to the young evangelist Titus, who was on the island of Crete, to instruct him of his duties as a preacher of the gospel, spoke of Christ *"who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people [a people for his own possession, ASV], zealous of good works"* (Titus 2:14, emp. supplied). Hence, Christians are Christ's own possession; they belong to Him; they form His spiritual body, which is the church, and over which He is the only head (Ephesians 1:22-23). They are to be zealous of good works. They are *"to maintain good works"* for *"necessary uses"* (Titus 3:8,14).

Furthermore, Peter said the children of God are a purchased people and are to *"show forth the praises [excellencies, ASV] of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light"* (1 Peter 2:9). Thus, the church of the Lord is that body of saved people, who have been added by the Lord to His church (Acts 2:47), and they are to do the works of God. These works are good works because they bring good to mankind. The things done by Christians, from the right motive, as authorized by the Lord, will help others. This comes as a necessary result of Christians having been redeemed. Their influence on mankind is great. It means the eternal salvation of souls.

So when people ask: "What is the work of the church; what purpose does it serve in the world?" we are happy to give an answer, as Peter asked us to do (1 Peter 3:15), to this all-important question. Many do not really know either what the church of Christ is or of the work of the church here

on earth. The church— Christians—are to *“shine as lights in the world; holding forth the word of life”* (Philippians 2:15-16), in the midst of a dark and sinful world (cf. Acts 26:18; 1 John 5:16). Christ’s disciples, in living the Christian life, show forth the virtues (by word and by good deeds) of the glory of the Lord.

In the language of the New Testament that Christians are the Lord’s choice, care, and delight, there is perhaps an illusion to the Hebrew people of the Old Testament period as their being the chosen people of God. Moses said to his people: *“For thou art an holy people unto the Lord thy God: the Lord thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth”* (Deuteronomy 7:6; cf. Exodus 19:5).

Thus, each congregation of Christians is an independent group of believers. With Christ as its head, they work and worship together in the church under the oversight of elders (Acts 14:23; 20:28). Each congregation is composed of baptized believers who are commanded to do the work of the church in the world no matter whether the congregation be large or small in number of its members (Acts 2:37-38, 41-42, 47).

THE WORK OF INDEPENDENT CHURCHES

The mission of the church is to “do all to the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31; Ephesians 5:25-27). The plan to accomplish this mission that the Lord has given to the church is five-fold: (1) *evangelism*, (2) *benevolence*, (3) *edification*, (4) *worship*, and (5) *right living*. In summary, the work of the church is to teach the gospel of Christ and live the Christian life that souls may be saved at last in heaven.

Evangelism

Christ charged His disciples to go into all the world and *“preach the gospel to every creature,”* to *“teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost”* (Mark 16:15; Matthew 28:18-20). We call this evangelism. The church is declared by Paul to be *“the pillar and ground of the truth”* (1 Timothy 3:15).

If the pure gospel of Christ is preached to the world, unmixed with the doctrines of men, the Lord’s faithful disciples must do it. The pagan and idolatrous world will not do it; religious cults and man-made denominations will not do it (although they may claim to do it). Religious sects (denominations) teach a perverted gospel (cf. Galatians 1:6-9). The truth of God which has been divinely given and recorded has been entrusted to the church. The church is to teach it, to defend it, and to proclaim it in every right way possible from age to age to the end of time, just as God gave it. The Bible has not changed (cf. 1 Timothy 6:20-21).

Every congregation should, therefore, feel its responsibility in this work with deep conviction. The church is the support of the truth just like a pillar is to a building. The truth is upheld in the world by the church. The church is the ground of the truth; the truth rests on the church just like a house does on its foundation. The church is to proclaim this truth to the whole world. The gospel *“is the power of God unto salvation”* (Romans 1:16). The world needs to hear the gospel, the good news, because *“all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God”* (Romans 3:23).

Paul’s expression that the church is *“the pillar and ground of the truth”* does not mean,

however, that the authority of the Scriptures depends upon the church, as some teach. But, nevertheless, Christians should be careful to keep and preserve the truth. *“Buy the truth and sell it not”* (Proverbs 23:23) means do not part with the truth under any consideration. Christians must proclaim the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, and likewise train *“faithful men”* to teach this truth to future generations (2 Timothy 2:2).

The world now has over six billion people. The vast majority of them have never once heard the name of Christ. There are untold millions who are yet untold. What are we doing to reach the lost before time runs out for them—and for us? The early disciples of Christ were faithful to the charge that the Lord gave, for within about thirty-five years the gospel had been *“preached to every creature which is under heaven”* (Colossians 1:23).

Although this great work of evangelism rests upon all the churches of Christ in the world, this does not imply that all the churches are faithfully doing it. Many congregations are not using their money as they should to do this work, and many individuals are not actively engaged in trying to teach others (Acts 8:4-5). Too, there seems to have been a change within the last few years of works being done not authorized in God’s Word. The church is not authorized to provide physical recreation, entertainment, or pleasure for its members or for other people. This work belongs to the families and institutions of the world. However, not wrong within themselves, this is not the work of the church. The word of God is to be preached to the whole world, in all of its purity, for the salvation of souls (James 1:18). The power to convert and to edify the saints is not in entertainment and “gimmicks.” Why should a church spend a huge amount of money to build a large gymnasium while there are thousands dying every day in this world without the knowledge of the Savior who died for them? It is the whole duty of the whole church to preach the whole gospel to the whole world (cf. Acts 8:4,12; 11:14; 7; 3 John 5-8).

One elder expressed his concern over the entertainment craze that seems to be sweeping among some congregations in these words:

When the church goes into the entertainment business, it is a sign that spirituality is very low. Some congregations have eased over into the softball business, the basketball business, the entertainment business, and other such like things, thinking this is the work God has assigned them to do. We all need some entertainment, but it is the duty of the church to stick to spiritual affairs and not to entertainment. The church is the pillar and support of the truth and not entertainment (Turner 4).

Entertainment, however, and getting the crowds, seem to be the popular thing to do today among the large denominational “megachurches” in America. But gospel preachers have often stressed the point that if we are not preaching the gospel and converting souls to Christ, then we are missing the work of the preacher; that our primary goal is to make disciples and change people; that we change the culture one heart and one mind at a time, and that this can only be done by the power of the word of God, preached and taught *“in love”* (Ephesians 4:15).

The Christian Dispensation began on the day of Pentecost following the resurrection and ascension of Christ (Acts 2). It is world-wide in scope and age-lasting in duration. However; there are two parts to the spreading of the gospel: the going and the sending. Some go and preach, and others help them go and spread the word. God expects Christians to give their earthly treasures to enrich heaven with the souls of men. One soul saved is worth more than the whole world (Matthew 16:26).

I thank God that more people are now going to more places than in all of my eighty-eight years

on earth. My plea is: let preachers go, and let churches send! Let us do all that we can! *“Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end”* (Ephesians 3:20-21; cf. Philippians 4:16).

Benevolence

Every churches commanded to help care for those in need. The church in Jerusalem helped provide for the widows. Seven men were selected to “serve tables” (Acts 6:1-4). Later, Paul in his missionary travels urged the churches to help those in need. In the Roman letter he stated: *“For it hath pleased them of Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor saints which are at Jerusalem”* (Romans 15:26). He also said that Christians are to give to the *“necessity of saints”* (Romans 12:13).

Concerning this collection being made for the poor, Paul wrote in his first letter to the church at Corinth: *“Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given order to the churches of Galatia, even so do ye. Upon the first day of the week (every week, NASB; every Sunday, McCord; every week, Macknight) let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come”* (1 Corinthians 16:1-2). This money was being given by Gentile Christians for the relief of the poor Jewish Christians of Palestine who were in great distress. (See 2 Corinthians 8-9 for Paul's teaching on the need of and the blessings of liberal giving.)

Of course, brethren must use extreme wisdom in determining those who are truly worthy of help. There are those who will *“provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house”* (1 Timothy 5:8). Laziness is condemned in the Scriptures (1 Thessalonians 4:11; Ephesians 4:28). But helping those in need at times can lead to the salvation of souls and the strengthening of Christians. The Lord's Parable of the Good Samaritan has led many to have a heart of love and compassion to those in need (Luke 10:25-37). This is certainly what the Lord wants His church to do (Matthew 25:31-46). We are to visit the sick, and *“weep with them that weep”* (Romans 12:15). We are to show love and kindness unto others (Matthew 5:7; James 2:13).

Edification

That it is the duty of the church to provide for the edification of all its members is evident from several passages of Scripture. Paul admonished the Christians at Rome: *“Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another”* (Romans 14:19); *“Let every one of us please his neighbor for his good to edification”* (Romans 15:2; cf. 1 Corinthians 14:3; Ephesians 4:16).

To *edify* means to build, to build up, to confirm, as to building a house on a good foundation. In a general sense, when applied to the church, it includes everything which in any way serves to enlighten and improve spiritually the members that compose the temple (Ephesians 2:20), the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:20), for the eternal salvation of their souls. The church is to provide such help which will benefit them in their Christian life. This will include association, advice and counsel, both publicly and privately, as needed—all for the edification of every child of God (cf. Galatians 6:1-2;

James 5:19-20). For such edification surely each member in every congregation needs to be regularly and systematically instructed in the Holy Scriptures. Without this there can be no building up of the body of Christ. The word of God is the food for the soul. Jesus stated: *“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God”* (Matthew 4:4). Paul told the elders of the church at Ephesus that God’s word *“is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified”* (Acts 20:32). Thus, the early Christians, as Luke records, *“continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine [or, teaching, ASV]”* (Acts 2:42; cf. 2 Peter 3:18; Jude 17).

Peter urged young converts *“as newborn babes, to earnestly desire the sincere [spiritual, ASV] milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby”* (1 Peter 2:2). The word of God, however, will not nourish the soul if it is adulterated with various human doctrines of men. Hence, one needs to be fed on the pure word of God, in both private study and in public teaching, for proper edification. Peter told the Christians in the previous chapter that they had been *“born again”* by the word of God (1 Peter 1:23-25), and now he tells them that the word is also able to provide for them food by which they can grow to spiritual maturity. The word, therefore, is both that which spiritual life is produced and the food by which it is nourished.

Gospel preaching is necessary for religious edification. But this is not all that is necessary to this end. Unless the members of the church are induced to study the Scriptures for themselves, the most eloquent preaching from the pulpit, or teaching in the class room, will accomplish very little. Each member should diligently and regularly study the Bible for himself (cf. Psalms 1:2; 119:11, 28, 47, 97, 105; 73:24; 2 Timothy 2:15). Then after learning God’s will, the members should be like Zacharias and Elizabeth, *“walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless”* (Luke 1:6). Christ must be seen in them (1 Peter 2:21-22).

In edifying a congregation every one of its members should be actively engaged in some way in doing good. It is a mistake to suppose that the preacher, along with the elders and deacons, are to do all the work themselves. Most every member can, and should, do something. God wants all of His children to grow, and to remain faithful to the end of life’s journey (Revelation 2:10). Proper exercise is necessary for growth. Spiritual growth cannot come without the proper food and exercise.

Worship

It is likewise the duty of the church to provide places and times for public worship for the spiritual growth of the church. The early Christians, under the direct guidance of the inspired apostles, met *“upon the first day of the week...to break bread”* (Acts 20:7). This example of the church at Troas meeting to worship on *“the Lord’s day”* (Revelation 1:10) is to be followed by all congregations everywhere. This, too, is for the ultimate salvation of souls in heaven.

Members should attend these worship periods for their own spiritual good and to also set a proper example before other members and the people in the community. To the Hebrew Christians the writer admonished them in these words about their forsaking the assembly: *“And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: 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). Although it was a time of persecution for many disciples, the Lord designed these services to be for the good of all the members. No wonder, then, that the

writer exhorted them not to *forsake* the meeting with their brethren for public worship.

On “the first day of the week” Christ arose from the dead and thus *“brought life and immortality to light through the gospel”* (2 Timothy 1:10). On this great event are suspended man’s hopes of happiness for time and for eternity (1 Corinthians 15:12-28). On the “Lord’s day” the “Lord’s people” assemble and eat the “Lord’s Supper” (1 Corinthians 11:23-29). They also engage in other acts of worship as singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Colossians 3:16), praying (Acts 2:42), giving of their material wealth (1 Corinthians 16:1-2), and preaching God’s truths (Acts 2:42; 20:7). The early Christians not only assembled together on each first day of the week but they also celebrated the Lord’s Supper on every first day of the week and engaged in these other acts of worship.

It is the duty of every Christian, therefore, to assemble with the saints to worship God *“in spirit and in truth”* (John 4:24). For one to fail to do this for any selfish purpose, when he has it within his power to thus obey the Lord, is sinful (Hebrews 10:26).

Christianity is a *spiritual* system. One of the objects for which the Corinthians came together was to eat the Lord’s Supper, but, nevertheless, it seems that they had so far perverted the original design of this institution that their manner of eating was virtually not to eat it at all. So Paul said to them: *“When ye come together therefore into one place, this is not to eat the Lord’s supper* (it is not possible to eat the Lord’s supper, ASV)” (1 Corinthians 11:20). It should be done in a reverent way.

Formalism today can easily become one of our besetting sins. Thus at all times our worship to God, if it is to benefit our souls, must be in reverence, with godly fear and awe. *“God is greatly to be feared in the assembly of the saints, and to be had in reverence of all them that are about him”* (Psalm 89:7). Paul told the Corinthians that their worship service should *“be done decently and in order”* (1 Corinthians 14:40). This rule is still applicable in guiding us in regard to our worship of God. May the Lord help us to never be guilty of profaning the Lord’s Supper or neglecting to worship as prescribed by Him and cause us to lose our souls in eternity (cf. Hebrews 12:28-29).

Moreover, faithful churches of Christ reject the use of mechanical instruments of music in their worship because God’s law of exclusion excludes their use. Singing is authorized (Ephesians 5:18-19). Hence, instrumental music is sinful in worship for the same reason that it was sinful for Nadab and Abihu to offer *“strange fire before the Lord”* He had not commanded them (Leviticus 10:1-2).

Right Living

Finally, for this present study, it is the work of the church to provide teaching and encouragement to all members to live good, upright, righteous lives all of the time, and thereby glorify God. We must always keep in mind that the work of the church is to save souls. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said to His disciples, *“Ye are the salt of the earth... Ye are the light of the world”* (Matthew 5:13-14).

Writing from his prison cell in Rome, Paul admonished the Philippians: *“only let your conversation [your manner of life, ASV] be as it becometh the gospel of Christ”* (Philippians 1:27). That is, live as good citizens of the Lord’s kingdom, and set a good example before others. Peter, in his first epistle, urged Christians to live a good life: *“As obedient children, not fashioning yourselves according to the former lusts in your ignorance: but as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conservation (living, ASV); because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am*

holy" (1 Peter 1:14-16; cf. Leviticus 11:44). Then in his second letter he wrote admonishing them to add to their faith virtue, knowledge, temperance [*self-control*, ASV], patience, godliness, brotherly kindness, and charity [*love*, ASV] (2 Peter 1:5-7). These good qualities were necessary then, and now, for faithful children of God to be granted an entrance into "everlasting kingdom" of our Lord, heaven (vs. 8-11), and are taught in the New Testament from the beginning of Acts to the end of Revelation. However, let us note briefly a few things about each one of these seven so-called "Christian graces":

1. *Virtue*. This means heroism, courage, manliness, moral excellence.
2. *Knowledge*. This refers to the knowledge of God's Word. Hosea told the Israelites they were "destroyed for lack of knowledge" (Hosea 4:6). The Lord has given to us in His Word "all things that pertain unto life and godliness" (2 Peter 1:3). The great need in the church today is Bible training.
3. *Temperance*. Solomon wrote: "He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city" (Proverbs 16:32). To rule one's passions is greater than being able to conquer a city (cf. Ephesians 4:25-32; Colossians 3: 12-15).
4. *Patience*. This means endurance, standing up under trials. If trials are properly endured, they can develop stronger Christians.
"Blessed is the man that endureth temptation [i.e., trials, hardships]: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him" (James 1:12; cf. Revelation 21:7).
"Behold, we count them happy which endure. Ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy" (James 5:11; cf. Job 23:10; 13:15).
5. *Godliness*. This refers to piety, with love, reverence, and gratitude to God, and a desire to be godlike.
6. *Brotherly kindness*. The Lord's church is a family, and all of its members are related to each other as brothers and sisters in Christ and thus should cherish each other in tender love and affection (cf. Romans 8:16-17; 12:10, 17-1; John 13:34-35; 1 John 3:11-18; 4:7, 11, 20-21; Hebrews 13:1-2).
7. *Charity*. This means love for all men. A Christian wants to do good to all men as he has the opportunity and the ability (cf. Matt. 5:43-48). Love is the crown and jewel of all graces (1 Corinthians 13:13; Colossians 3:14).

Christians are to give "*all diligence*" to add these graces to their lives knowing that God helps those who help themselves. Paul said to the Philippians: "... *work out your own salvation with fear and trembling*" (Philippians 2:12)

Conclusion

What a grand and glorious work the Lord has given for His church on earth to do—evangelism, benevolence, edification, worship, and right living! Christianity, as revealed in the Scriptures, is the only divine religion, and it offers to the world the only hope of eternal life to all who will obey the Lord

(Hebrews 5:9; Revelation 22:14). May the Lord help us to so live that one day we may, by the grace of God, walk the golden streets of the New Jerusalem. This our plea to the world. How beautiful heaven must be! Let us *do*, therefore, the Lord's works!

Christ has no hands but our hands
 To do His work today;
He has no feet but our feet
 To lead men in His way;
He has no tongue but our tongues
 To tell men how He died;
He has no help but our help
 To bring them to His side.
 Author unknown

Works Cited

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