

Preaching the Gospel

A monthly magazine for preachers and those who want to preach.

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A Word or Two on Behalf of Simplicity

by Edward O. Bragwell, Sr.

Brother Robert Turner, when asked by a good friend to critique his preaching, was reported to have replied, "Did you ever notice how few adjectives the Lord used in the Sermon on the Mount?" I suspect that all of us at times may find ourselves overly enhancing our preaching and worship rather than just keeping it simple. We justify it by telling ourselves that we do it to make the sermon or some other act of worship more impressive and meaningful to those in attendance. As a result many of our worship services have turned from simple straight-forward worship directed to God that also edifies the participants to elaborately enhanced productions bordering on pomp and ceremony to impress the audience.

It was said of Jesus, that "common people heard him gladly." One reason for this may very well have been the simple and direct approach that he took toward teaching and worshiping and serving God. He surrounded himself, for the most part, with untrained and uneducated men (Acts 4:13). He chose from these men those who would go out and take his message to the world. When one reads the recorded discourses of any of these men he is impressed with the simplicity and directness with which they spoke. Even the most educated of all the apostles, Paul, described his own preaching: "And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God." (1 Cor. 2:1).

It was not until the seeds of apostasy began to take hold and the control of the congregations passed from the hands of those common men who had been with Jesus, and those, who under their leadership had been given places of leadership, that the affairs of the church turned from the simple to the more complex. As time passed, the leadership of the church fell into the hands of men who were more worldly and more sophisticated than the earlier leadership. The simple congregational form of organization gave way to the more complex diocesan form. The simple New Testament worship gradually gave way to more ornate ritual with all of its pomp and ceremony. One only has to look at the workings of the modern Catholic Church to see the ultimate results of this evolution.

For a little more than 200 years there have been those in this country who have been calling upon those who profess to be Christians to return to the simplicity of the New Testament church. Generally speaking, this effort has been successful. There are many congregations, not only in this country but around the world, who worship God according to the New Testament order. This effort has not been without its problems. There have been those who have apparently believed that the simple New Testament order is inadequate to the needs of this modern world. When their innovations have been opposed, divisions have occurred. It has been a constant battle to maintain our simplicity.

In view of all this I would like to put in a word or two on behalf of trying to maintain simplicity in our worship. It seems to me that in the past few years that there has been a tendency in the church to try to "dress-up" our worship to make it "meaningful" and "exciting" to the modern worshiper. The doing of the "five items" in a simple and straightforward manner seems to have lost its appeal to our contemporary members who think of themselves as being better educated and sophisticated than past generations. The facts of the business are that some of the "enhancements" distract from the worship rather than enhance it. They tend to turn a simple act of worship and devotion unto God into a performance that shifts the attention from the meaning and purpose of the act to the quality of the performance of those leading the worship. It reminds me of two sisters talking as they were leaving the worship services one Sunday morning. One asked the other, "Did you understand what the preacher said this morning?" "No," came the reply, "but wasn't it just marvelous the way that he said it."

Preaching

When it comes to the act of preaching in our worship services, we have no objection to the use of aids that may not have been available to the first century preachers, or even to preachers just a few short years ago - especially visual aids. When I first began preaching the only visual aids we had were the old bed sheet charts, flannel boards and chalk boards. These eventually gave way to overhead projectors, which in turn gave way to PowerPoint presentations. These all have served preachers well in presenting and illustrating the simple gospel story. As visual aids have become more sophisticated, I believe a word of caution might be in order. It is possible, and in some cases I think I've actually seen these visual presentations become the focus of attention rather than the simple message they are supposed to be aiding. The presentation is so jazzed up with animation and other gimmicks that real communication of the message from the preacher to the person in the pew is lost to a fascination with the "special effects" of the presentation.

Visual aids are not the only things that can be abused in the presentation of a sermon. Illustrations and anecdotes (humorous or otherwise) can be useful in clarifying biblical truth. But when they dominate the presentation to the point that little or no direct reading or quoting from the Scriptures is included, it is time to reassess their use by the preacher. Often these can tear at the heartstrings and tickle the funnybones of the audience and leave them well entertained and asking for more - and evoking their praise. The occasional use of humor and touching stories can be effectively used to illustrate a vital scriptural truth, but when they are used to the point that they become the core of the presentation they have little real spiritual value. They often leave one wondering what biblical text is supposed to be illustrated. There is no substitute for a simple and straightforward "book-chapter-verse" preaching with appropriate application by "reproving, rebuking and exhorting with long-suffering and teaching" (2 Tim. 4:1-4) with only a sprinkling of illustrative material as needed. Brethren, we need to take the Scriptures in hand, as did Ezra of old, and read them and "give sense to the reading." Let us strive to preach so that our audience will stand in awe of the God and his word that we are supposed to be preaching rather than our ingenuity in presenting it.

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What Does It Mean to Die to Sin?

Last month Linda Maydell gave us an excellent article on how she teaches the gospel to African women. One of her points is that she is careful to teach them to repent, and to teach them what repentance means. She uses Romans 6 to emphasize that we must “die” to sin.

I want to point out that although Romans 6 tells us we must live apart from sin, it does not say that we die to sin by repenting. Here is what it says:

How shall we who died to sin still live in it? Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with *Him* in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be *in the likeness* of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with *Him*, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin. – Romans 6:2-7.

When we repent, we decide to stop sinning. But we do not die to sin until we are baptized with Christ into death. This is when we are separated from the guilt of our sins (separation is death). Paul wrote:

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.—Galatians 2:20

When was Paul crucified with Christ? It was when he was baptized into His death.

“Flies In The Ointment”

James W. Adams

From earliest childhood, most of us have been familiar with the expression: “Flies in the ointment.” Probably, most of us did not learn until we were grown that this saying had its origin in the Bible. We normally employ the expression to suggest that something otherwise good has been made bad by the introduction of an alien element.

The Bible reference is as follows: “Dead flies cause the ointment of the apothecary to send forth the stinking savour: so doth a little folly him that is in reputation for wisdom and honour” (Eccl. 10:1, KJV). In ancient times, pharmaceutical science was not the precise, highly developed, and legally regulated practice that it is today. Screens were unknown, pathogenic bacteriology was not even a speck on the horizon of scientific knowledge, and pasteurization and sterilization were millennia away. Medicinal ointments were kept in open jars exposed to the ever-present fly. Their greasy consistency and sweet odor became a fatal trap to curious and hungry flies that buzzed too near their sticky surfaces. The dead flies putrefying in the ointment caused it to send forth a foul odor.

Inspiration utilized this homely fact of life to illustrate a profound truth. Simply and plainly stated it is this: the least aberration (improper behaviour) of a man of reputation for wisdom and honor is unusually offensive and ruinously destructive. The truth of this observation is particularly noteworthy in the realm of the spiritual. Many covet places of influence and honor in the kingdom of God who are, at the same time, unwilling to assume and fulfill the grave responsibilities inherent in such positions (Mark 10:40). (To be continued)



Online With Joel

e-Sword Live

(In this article, by "online" I mean "on the internet" and by "offline" I mean installed on your own computer.)

I have previously written in this column about the free Bible study software, e-Sword. One small problem with the e-Sword program is that it is not a mobile application. In other words, you cannot take it with you on a flash drive or something like that and use it on another computer. When you do not have access to a computer with e-Sword or other Bible study software installed, but you can still access the internet, there are several sites that do much the same as e-Sword. Here I am going to talk about one.

e-Sword actually offers an online version, called e-Sword Live. You can find it at <http://live.e-sword.net>. It is designed to closely resemble the offline e-Sword program, so if you like the way the offline program works, you can use the same system online. Without registering, you only have access to one Bible translation (ESV), one commentary, etc. Registration is free. Just click on the "Join e-Sword Live" link and fill in your information. A password will immediately be sent to your email address and you can log in. After you log in, you must click on the "Profile" link to add other Bibles, commentaries, dictionaries, etc. Simply hold down your Ctrl key while you select additional options from each of the listboxes. Then click the "Save Resources" button at the bottom and then select the "e-Sword" tab at the top to go back to the Bible. The KJV with Strong's Numbers still works the same as in the offline version - hover over the number to get a popup of the Greek definition. The site offers the NASB and ESV as well as quite a number of others.

Unfortunately, the dictionary does not sync with the word that is clicked in the Bible. The commentaries do sync with the verse. The search functionality is not quite as advanced as in the offline version, but does a good job. All in all, the interface could be polished a bit and the functionality (especially syncing with the dictionary) can be improved, but it is better than most of the online Bible study tools I have come across.

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