



The Reflector

Published and edited monthly in the interest of calling people back to the Bible
by Edward O. Bragwell, Sr.

April 2011

What! No Special Programs?

Bobby Witherington

Visitors to our assemblies are sometimes amazed (and maybe disappointed) to learn that this congregation does not have a special youth program. Nor a kitchen. Not even a bus ministry.

Do we have something against young people? Or kitchens? Or busses? Not at all. We have several young people, each of whom we appreciate greatly. Beside, that, every member of this church either is, or used to be young. Obviously we have nothing against kitchens. In fact, I do not know of a family among us who does not have access to a kitchen. In view of the fact that several of our children ride busses every day, it is apparent that we do not have anything against busses.

Nevertheless, this congregation has never hired a youth minister, built a kitchen, nor owned a bus. In view of the fact that the private life of each individual member of this church is living proof that not one of us opposes young people, kitchens, or busses, why is it that we as a collective unit, each acting in concert with the rest, have never developed a special youth program, built a fellowship hall, or bought a bus?

The answer is partially and indirectly given in the preceding paragraph. You see, we recognize a difference between the individual Christian and the local church. Scripture recognizes this difference also, for in 1 Cor. 12:14 Paul said, "the body is not one member, but many." If the body is the church, and it is (Eph. 1:22,23), and "the body is not one member," then no individual member is the church. In fact, the difference between the individual member and the church is illustrated in Matthew

18:15-17. In these verses we observe individual action, the action of a plurality of members, and church or group action. Regarding the first, Jesus said "if thy brother shall trespass against **thee** and him **alone**: if he shall hear thee, **thou** hast gained thy brother" (v. 15). The expression, "thou hast gained thy brother," "does not mean the **church** has done it for you. Concerning the action of a plurality of members, Jesus said: But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more that in the mouth (if **two** or **three** witnesses every word may be established." (v. 16). This still does not constitute church action any more than two or three separate links of a chain constitute a chain. However, group or collective action is implied in verse 17 wherein Jesus said: "And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the **church**: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican."

There are other references which also clearly imply a difference between the individual and the church. Like 1 Timothy 5:16 which reads: "If any man or woman that believeth have widows, let them relieve them, and let not the **church** be charged; that **it** may relieve them that are widows indeed." In the context of this verse we learn that the "widow indeed" is "desolate" (v.5); she has no children to care for her. The church is to "honour widows that are widows indeed" (v.3) by caring for them. But the widow that has children (v.4) is not a "widow indeed". Hence, Paul said, "if any man or woman that believe have widows, let **them** relieve them..." In this case the church is not to be "charged" with my

responsibility – which proves that there is a difference between the **church** and **me**.

But what does that have to do with this congregation not having a special program for youth, a kitchen, and a bus ministry? Everything! You see, Christ is “head over all things to the church” (Eph. 1:22). The church, being His body, must function as the head directs. In no area can the church afford to function apart from the proper directive from her head, Christ. In Colossians 3:17 the apostle Paul expressed it this way: “And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him.” Inasmuch as Christ is “the mediator of the new testament” (Heb. 9:15), if we cannot find any directive in the new covenant for what we are doing, then it should be apparent that what we are doing is not in His “name” or by His authority.

Christ, through His word, revealed the three-fold mission of His church, it being evangelism, edification of the saints, and benevolence to indigent saints (Eph. 4:12-16; 1 Tim. 3:15; 1 Thess. 1:7,8; Acts 6:1-6; et. al.). To know what the mission of the church **is** is also to know what her mission is **not**. In brief, we affirm that the church’s mission is spiritual in nature; it is not social, recreational, or political. Of all the institutions on earth, however worthy, only one was purchased with the blood of Christ (Acts 20:28), and only one is divinely decreed to be “the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15).

“But, “ someone says. “does not a youth program, a kitchen or a fellowship hall, and a bus ministry enhance a church’s ability to fulfill her mission?”

Many people who ask this, or related questions, are zealous and sincere. They deserve more than a condescending, sarcastic answer.

First, we consider the term “bus ministry. “ One

might reasonably argue that if it is scriptural to send a preacher to preach to people (and it is, Acts 13:1-3), then it would also be scriptural to take the people to hear the preacher. One principle difference, though, is the fact that we find an apostolic example of the

one, but not the other. However, our primary objection is not to a bus per se’ - though, in view of the large number of half empty “mini” busses (cars) that grace meeting house parking lots all over the nation, it is difficult to see how

the expenditure for a bus (plus insurance, gas, and upkeep) could be considered expedient. But the “bus ministry” approach is not simply intended as an expedient way to transport people to the assemblies of the church. It is a fun and games approach. Bribes in the form of candy, gum, entertainment, or a \$5. bill neatly tucked under the “lucky seat” are offered as enticement to get riders. And the transporting of young people to camps, ball games, picnics, and retreats constitutes a principle reason for purchasing the bus. This is one reason for purchasing the bus. This is one reason why they are called **joy** busses! In fact, if it were merely for the purpose of providing a way to, worship for people who could not otherwise get a way, it is doubtful that but few churches would see a sufficient need to justify purchasing a bus.

Secondly, we consider the term “church kitchen.” How does a church kitchen relate to the church’s mission – evangelism edification, and benevolence? By taxing the imagination, it is possible to conceive of a church with enough indigent members, in which a kitchen could be useful in the realm of benevolence. In such cases a place to sleep would also be equally as needful. But I don’t hear of many churches adding bedrooms to their meeting houses!

Hence, “church kitchens” are not built for the purpose of rendering scriptural benevolence. Surely no one would contend that a kitchen is needed for

Christ, through His word, revealed the three-fold mission of His church, it being evangelism, edification of the saints, and benevolence to indigent saints (Eph. 4:12-16; 1 Tim. 3:15; 1 Thess. 1:7,8; Acts 6:1-6; et. al.). To know what the mission of the church is is also to know what her mission is not. In brief, we affirm that the church’s mission is spiritual in nature; it is not social, recreational, or political.

evangelism and edification purposes! Thus, the only purpose for a “church kitchen” is to enable the members to socialize. But where in the scriptures is this set forth as a work of the church? No wonder Paul asked the brethren at Corinth, “What? have ye not houses to eat and to drink in?” (1 Corinthians 11:22).

Thirdly, we consider the term “youth program.” In a sense we have a program for our young people – the same which we have for the middle aged and the elderly. We encourage them to “live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world” (Tit. 2:12). We admonish them to abound “in the work of the Lord” (1 Cor. 15:58). We urge them to so study the scriptures that the word of Christ may dwell in them “richly in all wisdom” (Col. 3:16). We teach them as they have opportunity to “do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith” (Gal. 6:10). And in keeping with the principle of feeding “milk” to babes and “meat” to those skillful “in the word of righteousness, “ we have Bible classes geared to the age level of our members – whether calendar age or spiritual age (Heb. 5:12-14). So we do have Bible classes which, apart from the teachers, consist entirely of young people. But you will please note that I said “Bible classes” – not craft classes, or planning sessions on what to bring to the next outing. With us, this is a matter of conviction. We are glad to see young people enjoy wholesome recreation, but we do not believe such is to be provided by the church. For example, what responsibilities do elders, as elders, have to young people that they do not also have to all the members in the local church? What obligation does an evangelist, as an evangelist, have to young people that he does not also have to every other member?

Conclusion

I believe in kitchens. We have one in our house. I believe in young people. We have four children, including two young grandchildren (I just **had** to say that!). We believe in busses. Our youngest child rides one five days a week. But I also believe that we should distinguish between the individual and the

church. That which is an individual or a family obligation should be met by the individual or the family. In such instances, “let not the church be charged!”

But let the church be the church! Let us make certain that church work is indeed church work – as is enjoined upon the church in the scriptures. Otherwise, the designation “church of Christ” is misleading, for it attaches the name of Christ to that of which He is not the Author. Remember that if it takes food, fun and frolic to reach the young people, it will take the same to **keep** them. What people are converted **by**, they are converted **to**. And in the fun and games department, we cannot offer them a single thing which cannot also be offered equally as well by any man-made denomination. If we try to “ape” the sectarians in these matters (and this is where such practices originated), we will experience the same problems they have experienced – that is, when people get too old or too busy to play they will be too disinterested to attend.

On the other hand, **God’s** drawing and converting power is His word (John 6:44,45; Rom. 1:16). Those who are reached and kept by anything else may be converted – but they are not converted to the Lord. Brethren should be extremely dubious of any activity which will visibly swell their ranks but which will not bring a corresponding increase in spirituality, nor add to the number enrolled in the book of life. And if we reach people by any means other than the gospel, they (and we) may get excited, but they will not be converted, nor will their names be “written in heaven. “ **But ours** might be “blotted out!”

(Editor’s Note: We first ran this article thirty years ago in The Reflector. We do not know just when or where it was originally published, but it is just as relevant today as it was then. Since then the “Bus Ministry” fad has diminished, but for the most part the things brother Witherington dealt with are even more wide-spread than they were back then. We must keep this kind of teaching before each new generation.)

I Am Optimistic

Edward O. Bragwell, Sr.

Those who have read this paper and others for which I have written know that I have not hesitated to point out things that I believe harmful to the Lord's cause. There are a lot of discouraging things going on among brethren – even among some with whom I have had close association. It seems that with each passing year new issues come to the front. Regularly I receive discouraging news about some brother in whom I have had the utmost of confidence. I am not of the disposition to just sit by in silence while brethren teach or practice things that diminishes the church's influence – and could endanger their souls and those whom they may influence.

All of this may cause some to think that I am just a pessimistic old preacher who somehow manages to inject a pessimistic word into his every utterance. In fact, in spite of all the negative things going on, I am optimistic about the future of the church for the following reasons:

The lessons of history. God's people have always gone through periodic periods of crisis in both the Old and New Testaments. In most cases the majority has been swept away from the Lord, with few returning.

It happened to Israel more than once. It has happened to the church as well. But in each case, all was not lost. A remnant always emerged to preserve the practice of the Lord's way. The majority (10 of 12 tribes) of Israel followed Jereboam into apostasy. The southern tribes, remained for a while as that remnant. Then they were carried into captivity because of their wide-spread departure from the Lord's way. A remnant was saved and returned to their land, remaining there until God's ultimate destruction of the nation after it had served its purpose.

It happened to the church. Shortly after the death of the Apostles, events were set in motion that ultimately swept most into Romanism. But, through the reformation and "restoration movement" a

remnant again emerged. Then after the "restoration movement," the society/instrument "digression" swept away most of those who had been calling for the old paths. But, alas, a remnant that did not go along with these things emerged and grew. Then after WWII, another crisis over church support of institutions resulted in a majority going "institutional." A remnant again emerged content to do the Lord's work without the addition of human institutions.

The power of God. I believe that emergence of a faithful remnant in each case is the result of God's providence. I believe that if we will keep "planting and watering" with God's word that God will in his time give the increase (cf. 1 Cor. 3:6). I believe there will be those faithful Christians who are alive when the Lord returns again (cf. 1 Thess. 4:13ff). So, in spite of the things that I often criticize, I do not believe that New Testament Christianity is about to perish from the earth – but to the contrary.

Dedicated young Christians. I am becoming more and more impressed daily with the spirituality of many younger Christians, as I get to know them better. Add them to the older dedicated Christians I know that are more interested in pleasing God than men, then you have a sizeable faithful remnant. I know many young men whose aim is to preach the gospel and are willing to preach wherever the opportunity is, even if they have to "work for a living" to do it. Many of our young men and women go to great lengths to seek out an opportunity to get with others just to study the Bible. They are not too proud to seek out the advice of older Christians, taking advantage of their experience and knowledge. Nor are they bashful about asking for "book, chapter, and verse" authority for what is practiced religiously. You often see groups of them at gospel meetings where they know the Bible will be preached when they could be any number of other places.

Yes, there will always be corrections that need to be made even among the best of Christians. Still my overall and long term outlook for the church is optimistic.

edbragwell@gmail.com