



The Reflector

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The Gospel of Community Service

Edward O. Bragwell, Sr.

The gospel of community service. This is not the Apostolic gospel but another (cf. Gal. 1:6-9). Jesus' Great Commission was not to go into all the world and perform "community service." It was to preach the gospel to every creature. The New Testament church never met, nor was commanded to meet for the purpose of volunteering for social community service. New Testament congregations met to praise and thank God in worship and to build each other up in the faith. Members of these congregations pooled their funds into a congregational treasury to defray the expenses of corporate worship, preaching the gospel (including edifying the church), and supplying the basic needs of destitute saints with no other means of support. Like their Lord, individual Saints made it their work to "seek and save the lost." They were taught that they would have the poor with them always and as they had opportunity to do them good. It was not their mission to go into the world to "seek and feed" the hungry, or "seek and clothe the naked." In the course of their lives as Christians they would come across such unfortunate people and would have such come to them. They were to be compassionate and supply the needs of such people as they had opportunity and ability – but this was not their mission in life as Christians, it was to seek out the lost and offer them salvation through the gospel. Yes, Jesus had compassion on the hungry and fed 5,000 and 4,000 on different occasions. But, his purpose was much deeper than using these feedings as a "drawing card" to bring people to Him. Like, his other miracles, this was

done to furnish objective evidence (signs) that he was who he claimed to be – the Son of God. In fact, shortly after feeding the 5,000 (John 6:5-14) he made it clear that it made a difference to him as to why they came to follow him. He rebukes them:

"Jesus answered them and said, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Ye seek me, not because ye saw the miracles, but because ye did eat of the loaves, and were filled." (John 6:26 KJV).

They had missed the point of the feeding. It was not "the way to a man's heart is through his stomach" approach. In this case it was through his miracles that furnished additional evidence of his deity. Later in the chapter "many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him" (verse 66). If it makes a difference as to why one comes to Jesus, then it makes a difference as to what we use to draw people in. It is through a heart filled with evidence of the deity of Jesus and his work of redemption and not a belly filled with "meat that perishes."

But, aren't we to let our light shine so that men will be drawn to Christ by our good works? Jesus did say, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven." (Matthew 5:16 KJV) But, is this the same as using our good works as the drawing power to bring people to Christ? Or, is it that men seeing our good works and knowing we are "God-fearing" will glorify God by recognizing his power to make us into the persons we are. It may even cause them to be more willing to consider the gospel message after seeing what it

has done for us. But, that is a far cry from using good works (community service) as a tool to draw lost souls to the Lord. It might draw them to a group of “good people,” but it will not draw them to the Christ. Only being taught of God through the gospel will draw people to Christ.

“No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the prophets, And they shall be all taught of God. Every man therefore that hath *heard*, and hath *learned* of the Father, cometh unto me.” (John 6:44-45 (*Italics mine EB*)) ■

Pitfalls that Allure Bored Christians

Robert Harkrider

You have probably seen a few; perhaps even sat beside them during a period of worship. “Bored Christians” are usually second and third generation Christians who parents brought them to worship since they were infants. They were baptized because it was “the right thing to do.” They inherited their religious course from their parents and were not converted from a wicked life of sin nor from religious error.

These individuals never had to struggle to defend their faith nor oppose religious doctrines founded upon commandments of men. Being raised by Christians, they have experienced from early childhood that the Lord’s Supper was to be observed every Sunday. And music was always only by singing without addition of an instrument of music. To them, churches of Christ have always done these things by “tradition.” And now, as adults, they observe these same acts without emotional feeling and have become “bored.”

In search of an emotional feeling when worshiping, some have introduced new activities. A few things being done have been of value in stirring their hearts to appreciate the grace of God in providing means of salvation through the death of our Lord Jesus Christ. But not all has been commendable. In an effort to justify every new activity some have substituted “feelings for faith.”

That is, they have drifted to positions of religious modernism that finds them accepting anything and everything that human judgment approves.

“House Church”

The “house church” movement is an example of this search for more emotional feeling. Some have discovered a different experience through small groups sitting around a table expressing their testimonies. But this has also encouraged a few to seek other things “new/different.”

In their march for things never done before, the standard upon which faith is based has been challenged. Instead of establishing Bible authority by command, example, or necessary inference, they mock those who do so as being “C, E, N-I” people. And they substitute whatever “seems right in their sight” (feelings) as authority. Since they criticize the biblical hermeneutic, one would expect that they have discovered a different method of determining God’s commands, yet they offer no biblical basis of communicating the authority of Christ.

When the apostle Peter wrote, “If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God” he set forth the standard upon which faith is established. If indeed we are to “walk by faith and not by sight” (2 Cor. 5:7), we must base our actions on “hearing the word of God” (Rom. 10:17). But since God’s commandments are not laid out in a list of “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not,” how do we know what is His will? The answer is through direct command, example, and necessary inference.

This is not a man-made hermeneutic! The apostles and elders used this system when determining whether Gentiles must be circumcised in order to be saved. In Acts 15:7, Peter explained he obeyed the direct command of the Lord to go with the men sent by Cornelius, “doubting nothing” (Acts 10:20, 29). Next, Barnabas and Paul declared by the example of miracles and wonders that God approved of the preaching they did among the Gentiles (Acts 15:12). Finally, in Acts 15:13-17, James quotes Amos 9:11-12 and drew a necessary inference that if the “tabernacle of

David” had been established by Jesus Christ, then it was by God’s authority that the Gentiles should be saved by faith without circumcision. The controversy was settled by this method of hermeneutic!

We must learn how to defend our faith lest we be led into apostasy by substituting feeling for faith. Be careful not to establish a new “tradition” that is itself by human judgment. In time, what now seems “non-traditional” will become “traditional.” So just be sure that the new traditions will be only in the area of an expedient that aids obeying God’s commands.

A.D. 70 (Realized Eschatology)

In addition to the house church concept, another concept has appealed to some who were seeking something “new/different.” It is called, “Realized Eschatology,” and is also referred to as the “70 A.D. Doctrine.” “Eschatology” refers to the final events at the second coming of Christ. This concept declares that at 70 A.D. not only was Jerusalem destroyed, but also the second coming of Christ occurred, including the resurrection and judgment promised in the New Testament. Thus, all things prophesied in the Bible have been “realized.”

A.D. 70 is a doctrine that depends on special definitions in various contexts in order to understand and believe. But it appeals to those who are intellectually arrogant. It appeals to people with an attitude that searches for doctrines that the average Christian has never thought of before and would not know without their indoctrination. In John’s day it was Gnosticism. In our day, it is this 70 A.D. Doctrine. In every generation Paul warns to “guard against what is falsely called knowledge” (1 Tim. 6:20). Even in Paul’s day he wrote about those “who have strayed from the truth, saying that the resurrection is already past; and they overthrow the faith of some” (2 Tim. 2:18).

This doctrine can be shown to be false by studying context upon context wherein the Scriptures are abused. But in summary, the flaws

with its consequences should be considered:

(1) The New Testament is made to be of no effect today. Since they say the Bible is completed, the promises were to those who lived before 70 A.D. Therefore they are not sure what will occur beyond their own death. They have no scripture as authority for themselves. Therefore they cannot confidently sing of heaven (Heb. 9:28); nor can they partake of the Lord’s Supper to show forth His death till Christ comes again (1 Cor. 11:26).

(2) They must ignore the early historians (e.g. Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Victorinus, Eusebius) who affirmed that the Revelation was written by the apostle John during the period of Domitian’s reign, about 95-96 A.D., therefore several years after 70 A.D. Furthermore, none of these men wrote anything about the change in God’s kingdom that supposedly occurred after 70 A.D. Why not?

(3) All Bible prophecies had not been completed by A.D. 70! Both in Daniel 7:26 and 9:27, the fall of the Roman Empire was prophesied, and this was not fulfilled until several years after A.D. 70. In Daniel’s vision of the seventy weeks (Dan. 9:24-27) the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans was foretold as the time when the sacrifice and grain offering were brought to an end. This would be done by “one who makes desolate” (Roman Empire). After that desolation occurs, the verse then states, “a complete destruction, one that is decreed, is poured out on the one who makes desolate” (NASB). The one who makes desolate was the Roman power. Therefore since the persecuting Roman power did not fall until several years later, all prophecy had not been completed by 70 A.D. as claimed by those who advocate this doctrine.

Guard against being “bored” and looking for an emotional feeling by seeking something “new/different.” Instead, look deeper into the meaning of God’s gift through His only begotten Son. Learn how to defend your faith and do not let it be overthrown by substituting feeling for faith or by discovering something never before understood. ■

Looking at Trends

Edward O. Bragwell, Sr.

I was blessed with being able to solely “live of the gospel” (cf. 1 Cor. 9:14) for my 50+ years of working with local churches. For most of those years we were able to live on the support provided by the local church where we labored and what I received from gospel meetings. A few months, at one congregation, we received support from other congregations, but the local church was within a few month’s able to take up all of my support. For another 18 month period, I did secular work to supplement my income. In the years after reaching 65, we have lived on Social Security benefits and support from the church. All of this has been a great advantage to me in my being able to devote most of my time to study and preaching/teaching the word without the burden of “working for a living.”

Do I think this is the only way to go. No! Some of the most effective local preachers that I know are among those making their living by secular occupations. In fact, if it had not been for such preachers, the church as we know it today would not be. I have read from those who have researched “the restoration movement” that as a result of the split that resulted in “churches of Christ” and the “Christian Church” there were only a handful of churches that were able to fully support a preacher. The vast majority of the preaching was done by men who farmed, did other manual labor, or worked at some kind of professional job during the week and preached on Sundays. As the Cause spread more churches in time were able to support full-time men. I feel that my being able to enjoy the support that I have is a result of their sacrifices. I am eternally grateful.

As I view trends today, with a significant number of local church member being “tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine,” I fear that more and more preachers with solid Bible-based convictions will be forced to seek secular employment to feed themselves and their families.

Of course, they will not “quit preaching,” but they will preach when and where they have the opportunity. Most of the preachers who are spreading hair brain doctrines, will be safe in their support because the people love to have it so. (See Jer. 5:31).

If you think I am dealing in hypotheticals, then think again. I know churches and preachers right here in the state of Alabama who are being greatly affected by such.

I firmly believe that we may have the beginning of a period much like the time I described above about the split that came over the societies and instruments of music. Men are going to have to be willing to preach the truth in season, out of season, paid or unpaid and make their living in other ways so that “the truth of the gospel might continue with you” (Cf. Gal. 2:5) in order to establish and rebuild congregations firmly rooted in “what saith the Scriptures.”

At this point, I do not believe that the majority of congregations are bothered by these things. There are still many who are supporting (financially and morally) preachers who are doing a commendable job of preaching “the whole council of God.” But, given the trend of the last few years, I believe that in time these things will affect more and more of them as well. We are truly in “perilous times” as far as sound doctrine is concerned.

May we all plant our feet on the solid foundation of Bible truth and proclaim it from the house tops whether or not it is well received – whether or not supported by those that hear us. This is our only hope of passing Bible-based congregations on to the next generation.

I know that the kingdom of God or the universal church of Christ can not be destroyed (Dan. 2:44), but local churches can. ■

Attend the church of God’s choice.