



The Reflector

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

June 2009

MISPLACED FAITH

Edward O. Bragwell, Sr.

“... the genuineness of your faith, being more precious than gold that perishes,...” — 1 Peter 2:7

The Christian’s faith is too precious to be either destroyed or misdirected. Without it, it is impossible to please God. (Heb. 11:6). We must keep it and try to pass it on to our children (2 Tim. 1:5). Satan, through his agents, works day and night to weaken and destroy it. He abuses various legitimate disciplines of thought — science, philosophy, education and even religion — to try to undermine our confidence in the word of God, the source of our faith.

Many institutions in society (educational, literary, broadcasting, theological, political, etc.), influenced by false philosophies, overtly and covertly attack our faith. This should challenge every saint, be he parent, teacher, preacher, elder or otherwise, to guard his faith and the faith of those under his influence. Only by diligent study and skillful use of the word of God can we counter these flagrant attacks upon our faith. The immeasurable power of the testimony of God, unadorned by human wisdom or fleshly might, is sufficient to create and sustain genuine faith. Paul, knowing this, determined to present the testimony of God in a way so that our faith “should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.” Notice 1 Corinthians 2:1-5:

“And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness and fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration

of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.”

He not only warns against corrupting the word itself, he cautions against presenting it in a way that would focus one’s faith on the wisdom of this world, rather than on the intrinsic power of the gospel message. The testimony of God, of itself, even presented by “uneducated and untrained men” (Acts 4:13), is powerful enough to counter all adverse influences of the wise, mighty and noble of this world.

Paul, unlike some of the other apostles, was neither uneducated nor untrained. (cf. Acts 22:3). He possibly had the best education available to a Jewish lad of that day. When it came to fleshly credentials and attainments, he could hold his own with the best. Read what he wrote in Phil. 3:4-8.

“If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. But indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ.”

However, the “excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus” meant more to him than all his fleshly credentials. His preaching and teaching were designed to draw attention to his knowledge of Christ rather than his fleshly wisdom, relationships and attainments. He encouraged others to do the same. He did not cater to

those who desired wisdom, though he was capable of doing so had it been appropriate (1 Cor. 1:22). He even concedes that “not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble,” were called by his preaching. (1 Cor. 1:27). The bare testimony of God, without carnal enhancements, just did not appeal to their carnal minds. Yet, he showed no inclination to wrap it in carnal enticements in order to make it more appealing.

If Satan cannot keep us from speaking the testimony of God, he will undermine the effectiveness of the gospel in a more subtle way. He will cause us to promote the truth in a way as to produce a misdirected faith. Carnal incentives are dangled before the public to do just that. It is easy to convince ourselves that such means are justified because of the end we believe they will produce. We tell ourselves that we can not get their attention with just the gospel unadorned by fleshly incentives. So, we will draw them in by carnal means, then give them the testimony of God.

Churches use a variety of ways to appeal to carnal interests. Social and recreational activities are featured to impress and draw those who love organized parties and recreation. Well-known “Christian entertainers” are brought in to impress and draw fans of the entertainment world. Outstanding “Christian athletes” are featured to draw and impress sports fans. “Christian scientists” (not members of Christian Science denomination) are used to impress and draw the scientifically minded. They may even feature a “Christian philosopher” to draw and impress those interested in philosophy. Speakers’ high academic credentials are advertized to impress and draw the academically minded.

What is wrong with all of this? Is it wrong for the church to use a speaker or teacher who is also an entertainer, or an athlete, or a scientist, or educator? Should we avoid using one with a bachelor’s, master’s, or doctor’s degree? No, on all counts, if he is a faithful Christian who speaks the “testimony of God”. His message is neither weakened nor strengthened by his fleshly credentials per se. I have good friends who fit

into some of the above categories who are outstanding teachers and preachers of the word. It is when such fleshly credentials are displayed before the public in a effort to enhance one’s acceptability as a speaker of the gospel that causes us concern. This produces a subtle shift of emphasis away from faith in the divine revelation to faith in human wisdom.

We are seeing more and more brethren emphasizing the fact that their speakers and teachers are scientists, educators, engineers, politicians, criminologists, sociologists, physicians, psychologists, sports figures, and holders of various academic degrees. Is this not an effort to attract the carnally minded? If it is not then pray tell me why advertize the fleshly credentials of speakers and teachers? It seems not to be enough anymore for one to simply know and be able to speak the truth in love on the subject under study. This has little appeal to carnal minds in and out of the church. One must be academically or technically trained and degreed in some field that the audience can at least remotely (sometimes very remotely) relate to his subject.

A wiser and older preacher gave me some pretty good advise when I was a very young preacher still going to school. He told me to get all the higher education that I had sense enough to use. Then when I went out to preach to forget that I had it and try my best to keep the brethren from finding out. I still like that advice.

If one will hear and accept Biblical truth on any subject from a Ph. D., a scientist, engineer, or an educator when he would not otherwise do so, his faith is misdirected. It stands in the wisdom of the men and not in the testimony and power of God. It stands in the carnal credentials of the messenger rather than the credibility of the message. This is the very thing that Paul sought to avoid in his preaching. Why? “That no flesh should glory in His presence” (1 Cor. 1: 29) and “that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God” (1 Cor. 2:5).

THE CHURCH AIN'T DOING NOTHING

Raymond Elliott

How often have we heard that statement from a brother in Christ? And it is to be admitted that we often fail in fulfilling the many obligations that God has given us. But there are some pertinent observations that need to be made relative to this broad statement.

First of all, we could say that the brother who makes such an accusation has taken to himself some of the attributes that are considered belonging only to God. In Psalms 139 we learn that God is omnipresent and omniscient. Thus, for a brother to be absolutely correct in saying that “The church ain’t doing nothing” (a double negative which means that the church is doing something) he would have to have all the knowledge of what all the brethren may or may not be doing. Otherwise, where he could not be and what he could not know, some brethren could be doing some work for the Lord.

It is completely impossible for a mortal man to have a complete knowledge of every good deed done by Christians. One may not know of a marriage saved because an elder or a preacher counseled with a husband and wife in private. A letter of encouragement written to a friend. A family providing transportation to worship for an elderly person. A sister caring for a loved one who is an invalid. Members visiting those who are shut ins and/or sick. A young person carrying a gift to an aged Christian. Another young person reading the Bible for one whose eye sight is dimmed. A concerned Christian providing food for someone’s parents who are destitute, needy, and poor. A member of the church contributing money for the care of orphans. A mother teaching her daughter to become a good homemaker. A Christian encouraging a brother who has become weak in the faith. A father instructing his son in the way of the Lord. Parents providing opportunities for a Christian education for their children in the home and in Bible class. Teenagers standing firm on their convictions not to engage in acts of worldliness. Prayers to God both private and public for the spiritual welfare of loved

ones, friends, and brethren. Meditation on the grace of God and His Word. Faithful attendance by brethren to the various periods of Bible study and worship. The teaching of the Bible to seekers of truth in the privacy of their homes, and countless other acts of love and loyalty performed by faithful brothers and sisters in Christ.

Second, the brother who says that the church is not doing anything may, in fact, be projecting his own lack of involvement in the local congregation. William Thackeray, an English novelist, wrote, “The world is a looking glass and gives back to every man the reflection of his own.” But more importantly than what this uninspired man wrote, an inspired man named James wrote in James 1:23 about the “*man beholding his natural face in a glass [mirror].*” This is so often true with the critic who beholds the church as being complacent and inactive. The truth of the matter is that the brother who is complaining seldom responds to the various work programs and periods of fellowship. On the other hand, inquire of the brother and or sister who participates in the suggested areas of service and you will discover a more positive attitude. Jesus condemns the rash judgment of the church by such a hypocritical brother (Matthew 7:1-5).

Third, what the brother usually means when he says, “The church ain’t doing nothing” is that the church collectively, in a highly organized manner is not doing anything. Most of our larger congregations are geared to organized machinery. Organized work programs can be productive and expedient in the local congregation. However, organization for organizations’ sake is worthless. That is not to say that some amount of organization should not be had in reference to general visitation and personal evangelism. What we must understand is that each Christian is a living stone and a priest in the house or family of God (I Peter 2:5). This means that a member does not have to be told when and what to do for the Lord. Furthermore, when individual Christians are faithful and active, so is the church collectively. The Christian life is practical in every respect and consists of living and doing for others (Matthew 25:31-46). Since the Christian is not to shine

his light, but rather radiate a glow by one's life of service many deeds will go unheeded by the majority of people (Matthew 5:13-16). Jesus also taught that when a disciple does a charitable deed in secret that God will bless him or her (Matthew 6:4). The writer of the book of Hebrews informs us that "God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love, which ye have shewed toward his name, in that ye have ministered to the saints, and do minister" (Hebrews 6:10).

Fourth, we need to cease from comparing one congregation with another congregation. It is common to assume that one local church is very active when visited one time. A visitor to the congregation where you attend may be highly impressed with the activities taking place that particular time. It is often the case that a congregation located near a college campus or in a metropolis have more people to draw from and more opportunities for service. On the other hand, there are small rural congregations that do more, percentage wise, than larger congregations in mission work. One congregation should not be condemned because of another congregation's achievement. Each congregation has a distinct personality of its own and varied opportunities to serve (Galatians 6:10). Zeal is contagious. When we work it inspires others to do the same. When we are busy we will have the feeling that the church is active.

A CROSS MOVING ON WHEELS

Bobby Graham

A few days ago as my wife and I were traveling to a nearby town, we noticed a man rather easily and briskly moving a wooden cross, which was attached to wheels. From his dress I judged him to be a modern imitation of Jesus, just as I took his cross to be an imitation of the cross on which our Savior died. As he wheeled it along rather quickly, without any visible sign of groaning or sigh from his burden, I also concluded that he had no real conception of what Jesus had done in his act of bearing his own cross.

How similar that cross was to the attempts of people today to "serve the Lord." People frequently carve out

their own way and style of serving God, thinking their efforts will enjoy divine favor. It is truly amazing how humans somehow rationalize that if their efforts please them, they also please God. Why do we have such difficulty with pleasing God first in what we do and adjusting our attitude so that it then pleases us? Think of some important observations from this incident:

1. Man tends to project his own will on God in an unending display of will worship/self-made religion (Col. 2:18-23). Both the worship of angels and neglecting of the physical body (asceticism) illustrate such attempts on man's part in the Colossians passage. "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death" (Prov. 14:12). Subjective feelings are too often used as the measure of what is right, but God never elevated them to that level, did He? How could such sincere efforts be rejected by God? It might be wise to consult Nadab and Abihu, Cain, or David and Uzzah about that matter (Lev. 10; Gen. 4; 2 Sam. 6). God has clearly demonstrated his displeasure with such human efforts.

2. Man sometimes makes his demands on himself much easier than those of God are. The cross of Jesus was an instrument of physical torture and death, not a convenience easily handled. When He demanded our taking up the cross daily, He referred to our spiritual crucifixion of self to serve Him (Lk. 9:23), not to some physical imitation made comfortable by the addition of modern machinery, such as wheels. There is no way to lessen the impact of that demand or ease its burden and yet please God; there is no short-cut to dying to sin and self!

3. Human substitutes are utter failures in divine service. They show nothing of devotion to the will of the Master, but much to our own spirit of contrivance or innovation. How is that spirit able to serve the Lord? In the Bible the Lord had made known how He desires all to serve Him. Why can we not content ourselves with offering to God that which He has asked or mandated? Those willing to offer the God-appointed service please God; those who contrive their own "service/worship" serve themselves (Rom. 16:18; Phil. 3:19).