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Youth Meetings: Proceed with Caution

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Since the church is to “edify itself in love” by “speaking the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15-16), most Christians recognize that a congregation has a scriptural right to conduct special meetings for the edification of its members. Sometimes these are traditional “gospel meetings” that often address the needs of saints and sinners – but sometimes only the needs of saints. Sometimes they are special different speaker “lectureships” with multiple sessions daily, for a day or more, on themes aimed at edifying the local church as a whole. Sometimes they are Bible lessons especially applicable to the needs of certain members of the church – like young parents, seniors, or teens/young adults (cf. 1 John 2:12-14; Titus 2:1-6). These lessons may be in the form of preaching services or they may be set up as classes much like the church’s regular Bible classes.

In recent years the number of “youth specials” planned and carried out by local churches have multiplied many-fold. Because there is so much potential for good in such meetings, properly conducted, many are reluctant to sound a warning trumpet in regards to them. But like powerful building tools used to construct great houses, they must be handled with care or people will get hurt by them. The power saw or nail gun can do wonders in speeding up a building project, but, if handled carelessly, it can rip off the hand that must do the building.

For several years, I have had the privilege to work with young people at a great camp near my home. I have seen firsthand the zeal and enthusiasm of young Christians. Any congregation with just a few such young minds is truly blessed. The challenge for the leadership

of such a congregation is to harness and direct this powerful source of energy to the benefit of the congregation as a whole. Special efforts directed at youth can facilitate this challenge or they can be a detriment, depending on how they are handled. This is why we raise the yellow flag of caution. It is just too easy for these “specials” to spin out of control if they do not have adequate safeguards.

We have all seen the results of Protestant denominationalism’s overemphasis upon young people. It has led to their “youth ministries” with their full-time “youth ministers” who are nothing more than glorified social directors. Then there are the “youth rallies” which are glorified pep rallies filled with fun activities with just enough reference to the Bible to give them enough religious flavor to market them as “church work.” One of the reasons that brother Floyd Decker, in his famous article, *Why I Left the Christian Church*, gave for leaving the “Christian Church” and becoming a member of the church of Christ was “the Christian Church seeks to get crowds with Youth Meetings, Campaigns for Christ, Rallies, Drives and Promotions; the church of Christ does not.” Unfortunately, history shows that as the denominations go so goes a sizable number of our brethren over a period of time.

We believe that there are some precautions that congregations that choose to conduct youth meetings can take that will keep them from degenerating into the denominational style youth meetings and rallies mentioned above.

1. As with any congregational activity, these

meetings should be overseen by the elders. This means they should oversee the planning and execution of the event. (In the absence of elders, the same expediencies can be followed that are used to see that other congregational activities are done properly.) Too often the role of elders in these meetings is limited to giving their permission to use the church's facilities for the event. The actual planning and oversight is left to the immaturity of youth – either a young preacher or some other young leader. God knew what he was doing when he placed the oversight of the church into the hands of mature men. Both the knowledge from study and the wisdom of experience is needed to guide the local church in all its activities. When you can combine youth's enthusiasm for getting things done with the knowledge, wisdom, judgment, and hands-on guidance of mature men you have a great combination.

2. Emphasize that these meeting are just *one part of the congregation's over all effort to edify all of its members.* Stress that the young folks attending the meeting are no more “special” than the other members of the congregation regardless of their age. All are members one of another. Emphasize that each member is to supply his or her part to the edifying of the body as a whole. Each contributes his part to the body as a whole according to his ability and opportunity. Young people should not be treated as if they are a special segment within the church deserving special treatment and subject to special rules of conduct and responsibility. They should be considered as regular members of the whole body who are expected to do their share – neither more or less vital than the other members. When they are made to feel “special” as compared to the rest of the congregation you have the embryo for special “youth ministries” complete with their youth ministers. And even to further extremes of having separate “youth churches” and “youth worship.”

3. Be careful to maintain the *spiritual* nature of the “youth meetings” whether they take the form of a series of sermons/lectures or simply a series of classes.

The sermons and class material should be biblical in content. The sessions should be approached with the same reverence and decorum as is done in regular preaching services and Bible classes. “The word” should be preached/taught (2 Tim. 4:1-4) Instead, in “regular” and “special” meetings, all too often the talks that pass for gospel sermons and the classes that pass for Bible classes are nothing more than the latest pop psychology, or a review of the latest book by some popular (often denominational or other liberal minded) writer, or mere pointers to improve social interaction.

If it is a church function, all activities should be spiritual. It is all too easy to turn these specials into social events sponsored by the church. There is a place for fun and games when Christians, young or old, get together in their homes for social events. But the church has no business either planning or carrying out social activities for either young or old. The work of the church is spiritual. However, it is not uncommon for these church “youth specials” to be turned into a fun and games events. We know of one where an entertainment group was blaring on the power point system and a human pyramid was encouraged to be built in the isle of the meeting place. Before you know it these meetings are turned into full blown denominational style youth rallies rather than a special series of *gospel* meetings or a special series of *Bible* classes.

What ever the stated topics for these special meetings may be, it should be clearly understood that they will be dealt with from the *biblical* perspective. If the Bible does not deal with the stated subjects, then the church should not be having these meetings. The church is the “pillar and ground of *the truth*” (1 Tim. 3:15), not a purveyor of psychological or sociological dogma.

If the *main* purpose of these meetings is to provide an opportunity for young Christians to associate with others of like faith it would be better for Christians individually to open up their homes for such opportunities. While any church sponsored meeting will indeed bring people (young or old) of like faith together – the main purpose is to glorify God and build up the faith of those in

attendance by “speaking the truth in love.” (Cf. Eph. 4:15) It is an opportunity for biblical teaching and learning, not a social and recreational event.

The Search for Assurance

Paul Earnhart

It was a discussion between preacher friends. We were wrestling with the question of how confident Christians ought to be, moment by moment, about their salvation. Some were arguing for an absolute assurance, others for a more cautious one. There is perhaps no concern which weaves its way so pervasively through the history of God’s people as does the desire for assurance in one’s relationship with God. Christians seem to vacillate between two contrasting themes of Scripture—assurance (1 John 5:3) and warning (1 Corinthians 10:12).

The subject of assurance has been hotly debated down through the centuries, especially in the Calvinist-Armenian controversies. Are all who have been converted to Christ unconditionally assured of their eternal salvation, or is the life of a Christian one of probation in which his relationship to God is conditioned on faithfulness? Nothing is more clearly established in Scripture than the possibility of apostasy. As certainly as the wicked can turn and be saved, so can the righteous fall and be lost (Ezekiel 18:21-26). A Christian’s fellowship with his Father is dependent upon an ongoing spirit of obedient faith (Romans 11:19-22; 1 Corinthians 15:1-2; Colossians 1:22-23; Hebrews 3:6, 14).

Does this mean that we must live our lives in daily uncertainty about our relationship with God? Are we never, on this account, to experience any moment-by-moment assurance of our hope? This is a question which troubles many Christians and deserves study.

The evidence of Scripture on this matter is unequivocal. The heavenly Father clearly intends for His children to know assurance. The cry of “Abba, Father” is a cry of joy and confidence which comes from being sons, not slaves, of the living God (Romans 8:15). Paul affirms that the very essence of the kingdom is “righteousness,

peace and joy” (Romans 14:17) and names “love, joy and peace” as among the “fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5:22). It goes without saying that there cannot be peace without assurance, and no joy without peace.

The apostle Paul himself is a great illustration of the confidence a Christian may have of his relationship with God. In the final hours of his life, he confidently affirms that “there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give to me at that day” (2 Timothy 4:8). In his heart there was a certainty about his destiny, an assurance of his salvation.

It may be objected that the case of Paul, as an apostle, is different than our own. It should not be. As a sinner, he was saved by the grace of God just as you and I must be. Having no righteousness of his own (Philippians 3:9), he was “justified by faith in Christ” (Galatians 2:16).

There are only two ways to be justified before God—by my own perfect righteousness or by God’s grace. Since all men have sinned (Romans 3:10, 23; Ecclesiastes 7:21), seeking to find peace with God through our own righteousness is a dead end street. Confidence in our salvation and the peace it produces can come only from God’s grace and assured promises. It is what God has done, not what we have done, which gives assurance of salvation. We are justified by faith—looking up to God, not to ourselves (Romans 3:21-26).

Does this mean that we no longer have to be concerned about sin in our lives? To the contrary, the person who truly trusts in God as Father has never before fought sin so ferociously nor hated it so intensely (Romans 6:1-14). True faith works the will of God (Romans 1:5; Galatians 5:6; James 2:14-26). True love keeps the commandments of Christ (John 14:15). Any failure to please our Savior will bring grief (2 Corinthians 7:10) and result in penitent confession (1 John 1:9).

But what if I am deceived and sin ignorantly? A single-minded will to do God’s will (John 7:17) and a genuine love of His truth (2 Thessalonians 2:10) are an absolute defense against deception. If we trust in God with a whole heart, all that we yet need to know of His way will be revealed to us (Philippians 3:13-15). It is our

task to bring to our Father a true heart. It is His task to redeem His trusting child, and He is liable to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think” (Ephesians 3:20).

But what if I study God’s word and do all I know to do to serve Him and still can’t find peace in my heart about my salvation? Remember that “if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart and knoweth all things” (1 John 3:19-20). Put confidence in His promises, not your feelings.

God intends that the heart of every humble child of His be guarded by a peace which passes understanding (Philippians 4:7). The assurance of our hope comes to us moment by moment as we live our lives in faith. But it is not an assurance which is arrogant, cocky or heedless. No true servant of God, trusting Him, loving Him, ever dealt fast and loose with temptation or sin. The same one who said that nothing “shall be able to separate us from the love of God” also said, “I buffet my body and bring it into bondage lest after I have preached to others, I myself should be rejected” (1 Corinthians 9:27). The assurance of God is a holy confidence joined to a sober vigilance, in order that what we now assuredly hold, by His grace, may never be lost. — *Via The Auburn Beacon*

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).