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Varnishing The Vessel and Tarnishing The Treasure

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But we have this treasure in earthen vessels,
that the excellence of the power may be of
God and not of us. – 2 Cor. 4:7

The Lord purposely put His gospel “treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us.” These “vessels” were apparently the apostles. However, there is a principle here for all who preach publicly or privately. The Lord wanted attention to go to the treasure (the gospel) rather than the vessel (the preacher) So, he deposited it in plain earthen pottery. Yet, we spend so much of our time polishing and shining the vessel that too much attention is drawn away from the treasure itself.

Did you ever buy a child an expensive toy only to have him to set the toy aside and have a ball with the box? It may be that many of us are doing more playing with the box than we would like to admit.

Paul wrote, “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. (1 Cor. 2:1)

Faced with sagging interest, dwindling numbers and community rejection in many locales, brethren look for ways to turn things around. Just offering the bare “testimony of God” (the gospel) does not attract enough people. What are we to do? Elders, preachers, and other members wrestle with the problem. Shall we abandon the old gospel truth that we have believed and taught so long? Of course, not! That would be digression, even apostasy! If the meat is not appetizing, we just add spicy dressing to whet the appetite. If one will not

buy the product in a plain wrapper, we will jazz up the packaging to grab attention.

So, before long brethren become more concerned with how their approach appeals to a certain age group, a certain education level, or certain social class than they are in simply presenting the testimony of God and letting it have free course. Preachers are sought, not for being good Bible students, and their ability to share the fruits of their study, but their personal attraction to this or that age, social, economic or intellectual level. Preaching is measured more by its artistic value, entertainment rating and/or the appeal of its rhetorical style than by its Biblical content. We can easily rationalize such catering to the fleshly side of man so long we teach the truth. The problem is that we tend to draw more attention to the dressing and packaging than we do to the gospel itself. One should not detract from the gospel by wrapping it in a rude and crude package (presentation and personality). We have all seen this in some brotherhood “characters”. Nor is there any virtue in deliberately disregarding the correct usage of grammar to be “cool” and able to “relate.” Neither should one want to wrap it in so pleasingly dynamic rhetorical packaging that it over shadows the message itself.

Brethren would do well to carefully study Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 1 and 2

We must face the fact that the bare truth of the gospel plainly presented will turn many off. It is not what they are looking for. The Jews wanted a sign. The Greeks sought wisdom. Paul could have given them signs. He did at other times to confirm the

word. He was no dummy. He was well-educated. If this would have gotten their attention, why not use it. After winning their attention then he could have slipped the gospel in to them. He might have reached more of the noble and “better-class (?)” of people this way. Surely such would have been an asset to the church in its early stages.

Why not? It would have shifted attention and emphasis to the wrong place. It would have invited his hearers to place their faith in the wrong thing. It would have taken glory away from the Lord (1:31).

The gospel is God’s power to save. It is a stand alone system. It does not need me to dress it up in excellency of speech or with enticing words of man’s wisdom. It doesn’t need the playing up of my dynamic personality (that one that I have been able to keep so effectively concealed) to run interference for it. In fact, Paul indicates that he made a determined effort to avoid dressing it up in any such garb. Such would probably have appealed to the immature (it still does), but the gospel unadorned by such has its own beauty and appeal “among those who are mature”. (2:6).

If the Lord’s people will continue to present what the Bible teaches (and support men who will do so) to the world and to the church – unadorned by human wisdom and carnal appeal – souls will be saved. It will not appeal to every one in the community or in the church. It will save some of all classes of people. Their faith will stand in the power of God and not the wisdom of men. (2:5).

There is too much of “I am of Paul” and “I of Apollos” etc. without our encouraging it by using excellency of speech, dynamic personalities, or any other fleshly characteristic as the means of gaining, pacifying and holding members of the church.

Brethren often openly admit that they invite

men for local work or gospel meetings because of their personal appeal to certain fleshly classes. He appeals to our young. He appeals to our elderly. He appeals to our singles. He appeals to our married. He appeals to our educated. He appeals to our sports fans. He appeals to our affluent. He appeals to our sophisticated neighbors. On and on ad nauseam.

Brethren, the gospel simply presented with dignity convicts and appeals to the spiritually minded of all classes of humanity. It has its own power of persuasion by the sheer force of the truth of it. It has its own appeal to those who honestly consider it. We need to get back to using it as the drawing power. Study It, preach it, teach it, and point to it as the attraction rather than the personal and fleshly traits of brethren. We who preach would do well to project less of ourselves, seek to be less dynamic or dramatic, seek less to make a personal impression, study less rhetoric (developing excellency of speech) and spend more time with the Book, learning its contents and simply telling folks what it says so they can be saved and remain faithful to the Lord. We might even become less concerned with impressing folks with our oratory, rapport, wit and wisdom and more concerned that they clearly see the wisdom of God – the wisdom revealed in the Scriptures. If we could just preach so that people will exclaim, “What truth!” or “What a Savior!”; rather than “What a preacher!” or “What a delivery!” then we will be coming closer to the kind of preaching that will get the job done that God wants done.

If we do this and leave the results to God, it will attract and keep all that God wants attracted and kept and “no flesh should glory in His presence” (1:29) ■

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Serving at the Lord’s Table

Hugh W. Davis

I shall never forget the first time I was asked to serve at the head of the Lord’s table. The large

audience before me and the sacredness of the occasion combined to so unnerve me that I made a

big mistake. I knew the Lord first took bread and gave thanks and brake it and gave it to the disciples and afterward the cup (Luke 22:19-20), but I took the fruit of the vine first. Before I could give thanks, an elderly brother, about halfway back in the audience, arose and called out with quavering voice, "Brother, the bread! The bread!" Embarrassed? Yes, but I have never made that mistake again.

When brethren serving at the table fail to give thanks for the bread and the cup, as they often do, I can well imagine that voice, long silenced in death, calling out, "Brother give thanks! Give thanks!"

There is nothing wrong in praying for God to "help us remember the sacrifice that was made for us" or thanking God "for the opportunity to partake" of the bread or fruit of the vine, etc., but the responsibility is simply to give thanks for the elements. To fail to give thanks for the bread and the cup is to fail to follow the example of Jesus (Matthew 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:19-20; I Corinthians 11:23-25), and to fail to express what the congregation rightly expects to be expressed. In the midst of much praying at the Lord's table, brethren sometimes simply forget and afterward feel badly about it. Any brother who has a problem with this would do well to put first things first and give thanks for the bread or the cup first.

Some brethren pray for God to bless the bread and the cup. They do not seem to understand that in the giving of thanks the elements are blessed. This is apparent from a comparison of Matthew's and Luke's account of the institution of the Lord's Supper. Matthew says, "...Jesus took bread, and blessed it, and brake it..." (26:26) Luke, however says, "...he took bread, and gave thanks, and brake it." (22:19) There is no contradiction! In giving thanks, Jesus blessed the bread. When we follow the example of Jesus in giving of thanks for the bread and the cup, we likewise bless them.

We tend to limit the word "bless" to the idea of bestowal of benefits, but the N.T. usage is much

broader. W.E. Vine, in his Expository Dictionary of N.T. Words, defines "bless" from the Greek "eulogia" meaning "good speaking, praise." Vine goes on to list five ways in which "bless" is used in the N.T., one of which is: "the giving of thanks, I Corinthians 10:16." In I Cor. 10:16, the apostle Paul writes, "The cup of blessing which **we** (emphasis mine – HWD) bless, is it not a communion of the blood of Christ?" This shows clearly that there is a sense in which "we bless" the elements. This we do in the giving of thanks, even as Jesus did. Understanding this should further impress upon those who serve at the Lord's table the importance of giving thanks for the bread and the cup. To fail to do so is to fail to "bless" after the practice of the first century Christians.

Some may be reluctant to think in terms that "we bless" the bread or the cup because of our consciousness of the false idea of a supernatural change taking place in them when blessed by the priests of the Catholic Church. According to the Catechism of the Council of Trent, "The substance of the bread and the wine is so changed into the body and blood of our Lord, that they altogether cease to be the substance of bread and wine" (page 159). The very idea of converting the memorial feast into such a sacrificial (even cannibalistic) feast is repulsive to all Christians, who are in truth "an holy priesthood (I Peter 2:5). We would never want to be associated with that unholy misconception of blessing. Yet, let it be understood that we do bless the bread and the fruit of the vine in that we give thanks to God for them, understanding their memorial significance. "This do in remembrance of me." As we eat the bread and drink the cup we are to remember the sacrifice of the body and blood of Jesus (I Corinthians 11:23-25).

Sometimes, in the giving thanks for the elements, some confuse the person of the Father with the body of Christ. I have heard brethren say something like this: "Father, we thank thee for this bread which we break in remembrance of **thy** body, which was broken for us." Christ said, "This

is **my** (emphasis mine – HWD) body which is broken for you.” It was Christ who came from the Father to earth in a body of flesh to suffer the death of the cross. In all our prayers we should be careful to distinguish between the Father to whom we are praying and the Christ through whom we are praying.

In our attempt to focus attention of the church on the significance of the Supper, we can actually become a distraction through rambling words and inappropriate readings. Remarks, if any, should be brief, well thought out and plainly appropriate to the solemn occasion. Any reading of Scripture should so clearly apply that no lengthy explanation is necessary.

There is no need for those being served to “fall apart” if some well-meaning brother inadvertently fails to express himself properly at the Lord’s table. His failure to give thanks for the elements does not keep me from giving thanks. His misunderstanding of the significance of “blessing” the elements does not keep me from understanding. His failure to distinguish between the body of Christ and the person of the Father does not keep me from making that distinction in my own mind. His thought expressed at the Lord’s table do not dictate my thoughts – good or bad. “But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup.” (I Corinthians 11:28) ■

In View of Eternity

Edward O. Bragwell, Sr.

In years past those leading congregational prayer at a gospel meeting or other preaching service would quite often pray that “we might listen in view of eternity.” We still hear it, but not nearly as much as we once did. It could be that our emphasis in preaching and listening has gradually shifted from “in view of eternity” to in view of “here and now.” We are not so much concerned with preparing for eternity as we are for making this present world a better place to live and to pass it on to our children.

We don’t need to truncate Paul’s great teaching to Titus about the grace of God, in Titus 2:11ff, at the end of verse 12. The “denying ungodliness ... and living soberly... in this present world.” The things of verse 12 are not ends of themselves. They are to be done “looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ” (v. 13). Denying ungodliness and living soberly, righteously, and godly will make “this present world” a better place for all of us to live – but that is not the Christian’s objective. His objective is to be ready for “the glorious appearing...of Jesus Christ.” He lives that good life in the present world “in view of eternity.”

It is great to learn as much as one can about all the content of the Bible and to enrich that knowledge with linguistic, geographical, archeological and other supplemental studies– if we do not forget that the accumulation and distribution of such knowledge should not be an end of itself, but a means to preparing ourselves and others for eternity. It is so easy to get bogged down in our fascination of the facts learned that we forget that ultimately this knowledge is useless unless it is used “in view of eternity.”

Jesus made it clear than his purpose in coming was not to solve every earthly problem or settle every earthly dispute, but to get one to avoid that which would hinder him from going to heaven (Luke 12:13-15). We need to remember this as we search the Scriptures to find “the answer” for every problem people experience in this world so as to make our preaching “relevant.” Realize that the Bible is not a textbook on how to solve every imaginable problem or to answer every imaginable question that man might face in this world, but it is the book that points us to the ultimate solution – salvation from sin and a home in heaven. Let’s study it, preach it, and hear it “in view of eternity.”