



# The Reflector

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

November 2011

## A Spiritual, Not a Social Gospel and Organization

Edward O. Bragwell, Sr.

One does not have to be very astute to figure out that modern “Christianity” is geared to the “here and now” rather than the “hereafter.” As modern “Christian theologians,” since the nineteenth century, have either expressed doubt or have outright denied the reality of the resurrection and an afterlife, there has been a marked change in many professed Christians’ concept of the mission of Christ and His church in the world.

As faith in the world to come has declined, “Christians” have had to try to make sense of the real mission of Christ and the church. So, there has been a reinterpretation of the mission of Christ on earth and a shift of the church’s role in the community. Hence, local churches have shifted the focus of their “ministries” from saving souls and preparing them for the world to come to that of trying to solve all the problems of this world and making it a better place for mankind.

This shift in emphasis has become known as the “Social Gospel.” Even among those who still profess faith in the resurrection some have been affected by it without knowing the roots of it. It is appealing because it offers instant gratification rather than having to wait until the next life for our reward.

1) **Jesus’ mission.** Jesus came to “seek and save the lost.” (Luke 19:10). He came to address the problem of sin – the thing that causes man to be lost. He came to wage a “war on sin” rather a “war on poverty.” He lived a life of poverty and warned “ye have the poor with you always.” (Matt. 8:20; Mark 14:7). He refused to be diverted from his

spiritual mission to that of settling civil disputes (Luke 12:13-15). It was far more important to him that those involved beware of covetousness (a sin that would affect their souls) than who may have been right or wrong in the civil matter. Jesus came to help men go to heaven not to try bring heaven to them on earth. The good news of the gospel of Christ is He came to save sinners, not to right the social, civil, political and economic ills of the world.

2) **The church’s mission.** The mission of the church somewhat mirrors the mission of its Founder and Head. It is the “pillar and ground of the truth.” (1 Tim. 3:15).

The early church engaged in limited financial aid to the poor. It was limited to the poor among the saints (Acts 2:42; 4:34; 6:1-3; Acts 11:30; Rom. 15:25-28; 1 Cor. 16:1; 2 Cor. 8 & 9). Even among the saints it was limited to those with no other means of support (1 Tim. 5:8-16). The church was not a general welfare agency.

The primary work of the church is that of equipping the saints for the work of ministry (service) unto the edifying of the body of Christ (Eph. 4:11-16 ASV). It provides the means and facilities for local Christians to assemble “in one place” for spiritual worship. (1 Cor. 11:20; 14:23; Acts 20:7). It provides the support, means, and facilities for preaching/teaching the gospel to saint and sinner (Phil. 4:15-16; 2 Cor. 11:8).

3) **God’s provisions for other needs.** He leaves it to individuals, rather than the church, to provide for “houses to eat and drink in” – i.e., social

meals (1 Cor. 11:22). He has given great social institutions (Home and State) through which man's temporal needs can be addressed.

[edbragwell@gmail.com](mailto:edbragwell@gmail.com)

---

## “The Time Given us”

John R. Gibson

In his epic novel depicting a great struggle between good and evil, J.R. R. Tolkien narrates the following conversation about the evil threat of Sauron.

*‘I wish it need not have happened in my time,’ said Frodo.*

*‘So do I, said Gandalf, ‘and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.’ Lord of the Rings, p. 50*

Do we not often find ourselves like Frodo in wishing we lived in a different time, under different circumstances? Those who struggled to support their families during the Great Depression surely longed for the “good old days” of economic prosperity. With our current economic situation, how many young people are wishing they could have entered the work force at a different time? It can be depressing to think about the cultural and moral decline that has taken place in this country over the last fifty years or so. Despite the clear teachings of Scripture, fornication, adultery, divorce, and illegitimacy are everywhere (Heb. 13:4; 1 Cor. 6:9, 10; Matthew 19:3-9). Like the Gentile world of the first century many Americans have refused to retain God in their knowledge, thus paving the way for the grossest forms of immorality to become accepted (Romans 1:20-32).

Technologically there has never been a better time to live, but there are so many things around us that we wish had not happened in our time. One can hardly leave the house without being bombarded with sensual dress, coarse language, and a general lack of respect for what was once known as common decency. Even among the most devoutly religious today, the truth of God that can set one free from

the bondage of sin (John 8:32; 17:17) has been replaced with a subjective standard that encourages people to “serve God” by doing whatever seems appropriate to them. For many, religion is a product of the human mind (cf. 1 Kings 12:26-33) to be enjoyed on Sundays with little real impact on morals, business ethics, politics, family life, etc.

We could go on and on and include such things as the ever present threat of terrorism, but hopefully the point has been established. Now, what are we to do when we honestly assess the time we live in and the situations we face? Are we to sit and lament, wishing it were a different time and circumstance or realize that we cannot control when we live, but only how we live?

I imagine Elijah would have preferred to live in the days of David rather than the evil time of Ahab, but in the days of Ahab and Jezebel he was a mighty force for good. No devout Jew could have wanted to spend his adult life serving a foreign oppressor, but that was the time and circumstance in which Daniel found himself. Daniel may have wished it was different, but that didn't stop him from faithfully serving God.

It had to have been difficult for Timothy to read the warnings of Paul that departures from the faith were inevitable (1 Timothy 4:1-3), perilous times were coming (2 Timothy 3:1-5), and the time was nearing when many would lose interest in sound preaching (2 Timothy 4:3, 4). We cannot know how Timothy felt about the times he would face, but we do know what Paul urged him to do and that was serve God and preach His word in the time that was given him.

The saints at Smyrna lived in a time of poverty and tribulation and had to live with the threats of imprisonment and death, but the words of Jesus were not, “Lament that you live in such a time.” Instead, the Lord exhorted and promised, “Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Revelation 2:10).

No doubt there are certain times that are more difficult economically, culturally, politically, morally, and religiously, but we need to accept the fact that the time in which we find ourselves is the time

in which we must live and serve our God.

If we live in the days of an Ahab, then let's resolve to be an Elijah. We don't have to agree with every government policy to be an influential Daniel. It is easy to get discouraged about America's general lack of interest in spiritual things, but when faced with a similar challenge Paul exhorted Timothy to "preach the word" (2 Tim. 4:1-5). That people do not realize their need for the gospel does not change the fact that they need it. As with the saints of Smyrna, we may see hard times economically and we may face oppression from the forces of evil, but the Lord holds out the same promise to us as He did to them. If we are faithful in this time in which we live, the crown of life will be ours.

Rather than say with Frodo, "I wish it need not have happened in my time," why not say with Mordecai, "Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14).

[jrg1259@gmail.com](mailto:jrg1259@gmail.com)

## Elders and Majority Rule

R. L. Whiteside

The evidence that elders were intended to be a permanent feature in churches of Christ seems so clear as to admit of no doubt. It is not my purpose to argue this point at length. However, I call attention to two considerations, which, to my mind, settle the matter without further argument.

1. In every group of men there must be leaders, some one or more, to take the oversight, or there can be no order or system. That has always been true, as all men of experience and discernment must admit. It is as true of the church as of any other group of men. Certainly they are as much needed now as in the days of the apostles. Then they were called "elders" or "overseers." If men of age and experience now direct the affairs of a church, are they not elders and overseers? The whole contention on this point seems to me to be a war about words to no profit.

2. It is assumed by some that elders, or bishops, were made such by spiritual gifts, belonging, at least, to the class of inspired men. Is that so? God

selected the men upon whom he bestowed spiritual gifts. "But all these worketh the one and the same Spirit, dividing to each one severally even as he will" (1 Cor. 12:11). For that reason it was not necessary for the Lord to tell the church, or any member of it, what qualifications men must have in order to the reception and use of these spiritual gifts. Men did not appoint miracle workers, prophets, unknown tongue speakers, etc. But men did select and appoint elders, and for that reason we needed to know what sort of men to select. And so God gave full directions as to the necessary qualifications for elders. Develop this argument; it completely refutes the idea that elders were spiritually gifted men and passed away with the passing of spiritual gifts.

"Take heed unto your selves, and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit hath made you bishops, to feed the church of the Lord which he purchased with his own blood. I know that after my departure grievous wolves shall enter in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Wherefore watch ye" (Acts 20:28-31). The word from which we have "bishop" is defined by Liddell and Scott as "an overseer, watcher, guardian." This definition harmonizes with the duties laid down by Paul in the foregoing quotation. As a guardian, the elder is to see that the flock is fed and cared for; as a watcher, he is to see that no enemy comes in and destroys the flock. The overseer is an inspector. Any one can see trouble after it develops. An elder, by close and constant inspection, should be able to detect the seeds of trouble without waiting till the ripened fruits appear. Not many people apostatize suddenly. A little watchfulness at the right time might save a soul. Neither does division in a church come suddenly. Complaints come that a preacher has run things over the elders and the more conservative members by majority rule. How did it happen? The elders employed a preacher and allowed him gradually to assume control. When he reaches a point where they can stand him no longer, they find that he is the ruler and they are the ruled. It is too late then to save the congregation from ruin.

The responsibility of the watchman is set forth in Ezekiel 33:1-6. If the watchman does not sufficiently inform himself so as to be able to recognize an enemy, how is he to be of use as a watchman? The watchman on the walls must know the enemy when he sees him approaching. Any man who divides churches in an enemy. If we do not inform ourselves concerning such men, how can we obey Paul's injunction? "Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them that are causing the divisions and occasions of stumbling, contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and turn away from them" (Rom. 16:17, 18). Because we have not informed ourselves concerning such men so as to avoid them, much harm has come to many good churches. Sometimes the watchers, instead of giving the alarm when such enemies appear, go out and invite them in, and practically turn matters over to them. Then, before the elders realize it, the enemy has spiked their guns and is in full charge. In a recent letter from a friend where the church was in trouble, I found a statement like this: "If we had investigated Brother Blank's record, we never would have had him here." Because of that failure, trouble has been stirred up that may never be settled. Instead of giving alarm at the approach of the enemy, they went out and hired him to come in, thinking he was a friend. The preacher who runs over the elders and divides a church is doubly a sinner, but the elders must share their part of the blame. They frequently wake up too late. But trouble may be expected when the command to watch is disregarded, and also when God's order both in nature and the Bible is disregarded, as it is when mere boys are given practical charge of a church. Also, Absaloms are too much in demand for the welfare of the kingdom.

The Bible tells us to submit to those who have the rule over us, but gives no hint that we are to submit to majority rule. In majority rule Paul would count no more than Mr. Care Less, who cusses, gets drunk sometimes, and goes fishing on Sunday. Generally there is no such thing as real majority rule, even when it is claimed. That is especially true when the party spirit runs high. A group rallies around a leader, and he dictates every move. He

votes his followers. Instead of going through the farce of calling for votes, the leader might as well say: "I control the votes, of my two hundred followers, and I cast their votes so and so." When the preacher is the bone of contention, he naturally becomes the party leader. As he has more experience in public speaking and manipulating a body of people than the elders have, he has a decided advantage over them, even if they should care to resort to his tricks. And Paul says of such men that their god is their belly, and they will work all the harder for their bread and butter. As he votes all his followers, there is really only one voice raised on that side. All he needs to do is to tell how he stands and how many followers he has. That is all there is to such voting as that, and it is folly to call it "majority rule." And we are told that the ballot is a safeguard against the unfair rulings of the elders!

It is readily conceded that God's plan of church government is imperfectly carried out. The best men make mistakes. Elders have a heavy responsibility and a hard task. They are not infallible. They may, at times, deal unjustly with a preacher; but is better that the preacher suffer wrong than to divide a church. If the preacher thinks it unfair for them to put him out, how does he figure that it is fair for him to put them out?

Whereto shall this voting lead? Where will it stop? It is contended, of course, that only matters of opinion shall be voted on; but who shall decide what are matters of opinion? The Methodists and some others have decided that the form of baptism is a mere matter of opinion. If you believe in voting, and your congregation decides by popular vote that these things are matters of opinion, what can you do about it?

But it is contended that every expression of a preference is a vote. If that is so, some men, when a political campaign is on, vote several times a day for months before election day! If that is voting, most of the votes are cast prior to the election and are never counted. But the claim is too absurd for serious consideration.

- *The Gospel Advocate*, Jan. 1932 via *The Auburn Beacon*.