



The Reflector

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BABBLE IN BIBLE CLASSES, PIFFLE AND PABLUM FROM PULPITS

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“Are we the Bible believing and Bible preaching people we once were? Do we still carry that reputation in the community? Or do we have babble in our Bible classes and piffle and pablum from our pulpits?”

My father used to tell about a man in the community where he once lived: He was not a religious person, and was a member of no church in the community. He had several daughters. When they reached the age at which they became concerned about religion, they asked him where they should attend church. His advice? “Go to the church of Christ, they believe and preach the Bible. “This has been the reputation of the Lord’s church throughout the years, but one must ask, “Is this true now?” I challenge you, dear reader, to consider the question of whether this can be said of local church pulpits and Bible classes in our generation. I think we need to give serious consideration to what is taking place in the Lord’s church in our time. Are we the Bible believing and Bible preaching people we once were? Do we still carry that reputation in the community? Do our actions merit it? Please consider what I say with a prayerful attitude.

Babble in Bible Classes

What is the average criterion of a Bible class teacher in local churches? We often put people up as teachers simply because they are members of the church without regard to their skill and experience as teachers, their Bible knowledge, or their faithfulness. Usually, in the lower classes, if one is a member of the church and is older than the

students, he/she is qualified to be a Bible class teacher. In the upper classes, if a person can stand up before the class and mechanically go through some other person’s prepared material, we consider him/her a qualified Bible class teacher. Some such teachers wouldn’t be able to detect or refute error if it occurred in the material they teach.

A common complaint of teachers where I have worked concerns the literature. It’s too difficult, or the lessons are too long, etc. So much of the published literature for Bible classes is just plain babble at its worst, and misdirected and shallow at its best. It tends to cater to and accommodate the shallowness of Bible knowledge that exists among us. Some of the literature is so concerned about the method of teaching that it ignores the substance. Consequently, people complete the book with little or no more knowledge than they had when they started it. We need to study the Bible, not about the Bible.

Much of the complaining about the literature comes from a desire on the part of inept teachers for someone to “shell the corn” for them. They sort of want the book to lie on the podium and teach itself! They want the literature to do their work for them. Excuse me, but I have always said that a bad teacher can’t teach a good class with the best literature, and a good teacher can teach an excellent class with the worst literature. Beside that, God gives us teachers who can simply teach the text of God’s holy word. Why have we developed such shallowness that we must depend

upon commercial material for our Bible classes?

Writing new Bible class literature is about like the constant escalation of what I call "popcorn" versions of the Bible. Men keep trying to remedy the problem without knowing what the problem is. We don't need new versions of the Bible, but conversions. We need teachers who are willing to conform their lives to the versions which have served us well for hundreds of years; who so saturate themselves with Bible knowledge that teaching it to others becomes natural and easy. Likewise, we don't need new Bible class literature, we need literate Bible teachers. We don't need new kinds of literature, we need a new kind of teacher. The problem is the ineptitude of so many of our teachers, not just the inadequacy of commercial literature. I am not anti-Bible class literature, but I am anti much that is on the market today. From time to time someone comes along with the idea that we need new Bible class literature and proceeds to produce the same kind we already have.

There is more to teaching than standing before a class and sequentially going through a book prepared by some-one else where all one has to do is fill in the blanks. In many such classes there is little or no discussion because of the teacher's lack of depth in Bible knowledge, the skill to generate discussion, or the ability to challenge the students to think. If the blank is filled in, the student reads what he/she has written, and the teacher says, "next question."

I am not exaggerating when I say that the church contains many, many members who have mechanically gone through our Bible class system from pre-school to adult class who can't give the plan of salvation or the acts of worship and substantiate them with Scripture. It's like our public education system's graduating students who can't read. The dumbing down of America by the public school system has its counter part in the church. I once received a phone call at midnight from a sister who had been in the church all her life; as long or longer than had I, and her request was, "Brother Needham, I am discussing the Bible

with a friend, and would you give me some Scriptures that teach that baptism is essential?" Obviously, she thought baptism was essential, not because she had read it and been convinced of it on her own, but because she had heard preachers preach it. I fear this is not unusual among us. This is like a person who finishes high school without the ability to look up a phone number or fill out a job application.

A preacher friend told of how he was about to teach the Book of First Corinthians. He gave a thorough introduction to the book. When he was ready to begin a study of the text, one of the elders said, "Brother was First Corinthians written before or after Pentecost?" Lord, help us! I once commented in a Bible class that not many brethren are Bible scholars. A brother replied, "Not many are Bible students." Is that correct?

Now, on the positive side, and lest I seem harsh and uncharitable, let me commend all teachers for their willingness to do their best, even though in some cases their best falls short of adequate. The condition I am describing is not altogether their fault. The fault lies largely with the leadership in local churches. If I had my way about it, and I don't, no person would ever be appointed to teach a Bible class who is not regular in attendance, whose life is not exemplary, who does not dress properly, who does not have a working knowledge of the entire Bible, and who has not gone through a teacher training class. It is absurd to place the responsibility of teaching a Bible class upon a person who has absolutely no training in the skill of teaching. That's like buying your teenager a new car, giving him/her the keys without giving them driving lessons. Driving is a skill to be learned, not something inborn. I use the word "skill" intentionally, because teaching is a skill. A skill is something one learns, not something with which he was born. To be sure one can have inborn traits and abilities that will enhance his/her skill as a teacher, but teaching is a skill that must be learned. This is obvious from the fact that our public education system has a minimum requirement of four years of college including

education courses before one can be a licensed

For over a year now, due to health concerns, I have been forced into what might be called “semi-retirement.” This means that I have not preached every Sunday, or had a Bible class to teach all the time. Thus, I have been in Bible classes taught by others, and have listened to others preach more than I have in the last 49 years. This article is based upon observations during the last year, and upon experience over 49 years in local work and 13 years as both an elder and local preacher.

I recently sat in a Bible class in which Jesus’ first miracle at the wedding in Cana was the subject. Here are some of the comments and questions that occurred in the class. Who catered the wedding feast? Since Jesus’ mother asked him to provide the wine, and told the servants to do whatever he told them to do, perhaps she was in charge? Since she seems to have been in charge, was the bride or groom a relative of Jesus? How many gallons did the waterpots hold? How many persons were present at the wedding? These and similar questions consumed the entire class and the students went away without learning anything of the significance of the event or lessons to be learned from it.

I also sat in a Bible class in which Dorcas (Acts 9) was the subject. Here are the questions and comments that consumed the class period. How old was Dorcas when she died? What was the cause of her death? How many garments had she made and given to the poor widows? She must have been wealthy to have given all those garments to the poor widows. Of what fabric were the garments made? Why was she called by two names, Tabitha and Dorcas? Most of this is just plain babble, speculation, and shallow.

I know of a Bible class which at “Valentine” season had valentines all over the room. Another one taught a lesson out of published literature about Easter and Christmas. Another class was teaching children that they should not be ashamed to be different by suspending pictures of penguins from the ceiling. A vacation “Bible” school class

had silly looking cartoon characters riding camels, palm trees, etc. all over the walls from ceiling to floor, and a make-shift booth where animals were supposedly sold for sacrifice. In all this there is more entertainment than Bible study. It demonstrates artistic ability not teaching skill.

It may be shocking to some but it is a fact that a good artist is not necessarily a good Bible teacher. It is sometimes the case that in trying to use visual aids the student’s attention is drawn more to the art, the technology, and the gimmicks used to present the lesson than to the lesson itself. The end result is that knowledge of God’s word is not increased. A brother recently told me of a business presentation he saw. He said the teacher had the latest technology in visual aids. He had every-thing set up on a computer, and all he had to do to project a chart on the screen was to push a button. He said I was so fascinated by his slick machinery and technology that I got nothing from his presentation. Please consider the implications of this with reference to Bible classes.

This shallowness in our “Bible” teaching is manifested when local churches choose elders. An elder is supposed to be “apt to teach.” The general concept of this qualification is this: can he stand before a class and mechanically go through material prepared by others? He may never have taught but a class or two, and the majority of the members who select him were never in a class he taught. He may not be able to handle controversial questions and false concepts that rise in the class, but if they know that he has made any kind of an effort, regardless of how feeble, to teach a class, then he is “apt to teach.” Now, does any serious Bible student believe this to be what the Spirit had in mind in requiring that an elder be “apt to teach”? Come now, let’s be serious! I’ve heard it said that someone asked brother J.D. Tant once if he thought elders should be apt to teach, and he replied, “Where I have preached elders are apt to do most anything.” Once I was going to be absent from my Bible class, and I asked one of the elders who attended the class, if he would fill in for me. His reply was, “You wouldn’t put that on me,

would you?"

I once asked for a meeting with the elders to challenge some false doctrine that was being taught by the preacher. I asked, "Do you brethren endorse this teaching?" To which they replied, "No, but we don't know how to refute it. We don't have a spokesman." Interesting! It has been my understanding of the Scriptures that the elders are supposed to be their own spokesmen. Paul said elders are to "Hold ... fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers. For there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers, specially they of the circumcision: Whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre's sake" (Tit. 1:9-11). It was argued that elders don't have to be able to refute false doctrine, but provide a refutation of it. Please read the above passage carefully, and see if you think that's a proper understanding of it.

Piffle and Pablum From Pulpits

There is a lot of piffle and pablum pouring forth from pulpits across this land in what we think of as conservative churches. "Sermons" consist of quotations from Calvinistic theologians, philosophers, and pop psychologists.

Personal motivation talks are not gospel sermons. Quotations from C. S. Lewis and Karl Menninger are not equal to quotations from Peter, John, and Paul. I am not saying it is always wrong to quote from men when they say something better than we can, but when such quotations dominate our preaching, or become the basis of our faith, something has gone wrong with our priority list.

Many young preachers today don't know how to refute false doctrine and have no interest in learning how. They don't see the refutation of false doctrine as part of the work of preaching the gospel. They shy away from controversial subjects. I sometimes refer to it as "slap Jane preaching." A mother took her little Johnny to school for his first day. Knowing that he was wont to get out of hand sometimes, she said to the teacher, "If Johnny misbehaves, slap Jane who sits next to him, and it

will scare him and settle him down." Paul said, "Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them" (Eph. 5:11). Preachers who don't have the courage to preach the truth and expose error by name, need to find something else to do. If they curry the favor of men, they should not be servants of Christ (Gal. 1:10). They ought to be politicians. They need to spend more time studying the word of God and less time drinking at the fountainhead of denominationalism. Many are not looking for an opportunity to serve the Lord but a way to serve their own interests. As N.B. Hardeman used to say, "They want to sit down in a tub of butter." Some who have never been involved in the rough and tumble of contending with false teaching and teachers, criticize the fight we made in the 40's, 50's, and 60's over institutionalism and the sponsoring church concept. They criticize the way we went about it. Good friends, it is one thing to be in the thick of the battle and quite another to sit on the sidelines and criticize the way the soldiers hold their weapons. Their philosophy is, "Let error alone, let it die a natural death." How naive can we get? Error never dies a natural death, it has to be killed with the sword of the Spirit.

I knew a young preacher who persuaded the church to conduct a call-in radio program. He asked preachers in the area to be his guests. During all the time that I listened to the program, he invited only young preachers even though older and more experienced preachers were plentiful. One could have listened to the program for a year and never learned what to do to be saved or that there is a difference between the Lord's church and human denominations. This young man and his guests conceived of themselves as counsellors, and every question was approached from the viewpoint of pop psychology. They quoted psychologists, C.S. Lewis, Carl Menninger, and other popular writers, and almost never the word of God.

College lectureships used to be staffed by the most able preachers in the brotherhood who filled their lectures with solid Bible teaching.

(Continued Next Month)