



The Reflector

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by Edward O. Bragwell, Sr.

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When the Means Becomes the End

Edward O. Bragwell, Sr.

The end for which a Christian should conduct his life is to live with God eternally. If we are not careful, we may focus so much on the means that we forget the end.

Paul tells us how to live in this present world: “For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world” (Titus 2:11-12). But, this lofty life-style is not the end of itself, but the means to the end of being prepared at “the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ.” (Titus 2:13).

There was a time when preaching among churches of Christ was almost exclusively geared to “first principles” with the view of saving alien sinners from the wages of sin so they could go to heaven to be with the Lord forever. Eventually brethren realized that more preaching on “Christian living” was needed because churches were being filled with worldliness and indifference toward personal and congregational duties as Christians. They came to see that “bringing in the sheaves” was of little profit if you leave them to rot in the barn.

But eventually, as is often the case, the pendulum swung to the opposite extreme. The vast majority of sermons became directed to “present world” issues in the lives of Christians with little

said about the hereafter – except maybe a brief reference to it at the end while extending the invitation. We seem to have forgotten that just as the obeying of the first principles is a means to the end of eternal salvation, so is “denying ungodliness and worldly lust” and “living soberly, righteously and godly in this present world.”

So much of the teaching on moral vices and virtues is geared to producing temporal results. Preaching against immorality is often geared to avoiding “Aids” or “unwanted pregnancies” and making our society better, rather than to pleasing God so we can avoid hell and go to heaven. A casual reading of sermon topics for Sunday worship and gospel meetings for the average congregation today reveals a heavy emphasis on the temporal “issues of life” and little attention to the pursuit of “a better country.” (Cf. Heb. 11:16).

Preaching on “family values” and dealing with “real life situations” has been the popular trend for sometime now, more often than not, with the view of a happier life on earth. When the New Testament writers touched on such matters, it was in view of obeying God in matters of this life, in order to prepare for eternal life and happiness in the world to come. Thus, when we speak on such matters we should show the relationship of these topics to our eternal hope in Christ. If we cannot find that connection, it would be better to leave such topics to psychologists and sociologists.

The quest for Bible knowledge is a noble and essential endeavor. The lack of it spelled destruction for ancient Israel (Hosea 4:6). Ignorance of it caused the Israel in Paul's day to not submit to God's righteousness and be saved (Romans 10:1-4). Peter admonished Christians to grow in knowledge (2 Peter 3:18). Every Christian, especially those who preach and teach, must be a good student of the Bible. Young preacher wannabe, it takes more than a pleasing personality, a way with words, being a natural leader, and being at ease speaking before an audience to preach the gospel of Christ. If you are not willing to spend hours with the Bible and learning as much as you can from it, you should pursue some other calling to use those talents. You cannot preach the Book that you do not know.

But, the one seeking such knowledge should not consider it as an end of itself, but a means to the end of preparing himself and others for heaven. (Cf. 1 Timothy 4:16). Whether one is just satisfying his thirst for knowledge or aspiring to biblical "scholarship" status, if that is the focus of his study the benefits will only be temporal. In time his knowledge will perish with him. On the other hand, if he humbly uses that knowledge as the means of preparing himself and any who are willing to listen to face the judgment and go to be with the Lord forever, he has truly benefitted from his labor of study. Then his labor will not be "in vain in the Lord."

The local church exists and functions to facilitate the preparation of men and women for heaven. Scriptural worship and work is geared to that end. It is easy to let functions of the local church to become ends within themselves.

The purpose of assembling together is to edify and encourage one another (Heb. 10:24-25; Col. 3:16), with the view of strengthening one another in "the faith" so we can receive the end of our faith, even the salvation of our souls. (1 Peter 1:9) But, you say, "Is not the object of the assembly to worship and praise God?" That is only partially correct. It is to worship and praise God *together*.

We can and do worship and praise God at home *alone*. But God, in his wisdom, knew that, in addition to private worship, we needed to worship him regularly *together* with others of like faith. Worshiping *together* contributes to the strengthening of each other's faith in God and strengthening each other's desire to go to heaven.

It is easy to let various aspects of the assembly to become ends within themselves rather than a means to the end. The assembly, itself, can become an end within itself. An opportunity to socialize with other folks, much like other community gatherings. An opportunity to meet and get close to people – for economic, social, friendship or even romantic purposes. When this happens the church becomes just another social club to enrich our lives.

Congregational singing is designed to speak "one to another" (Ephesians 5:19 ASV), to teach "one another" (Col. 3:16). This contributes to the purpose of assembling to build each other up in the faith with view of being saved eternally. Here too, it is easy to make the song service an end within itself. It then becomes mere entertaining performance and mood lifter.

The sermon can also become an end of itself rather than a means to the end of saving sinners from sin and its penalty and edifying saints. When the "manner" of the delivery becomes our focus rather than the "matter" of the message, the means becomes the end. This can happen either in the mind of the speaker or the hearer. Then the sermon becomes either good or bad based on the wrong criterion. We come to evaluate preaching by its soothing or stirring value rather than its saving value. The prime purpose of preaching is to save (1 Cor. 1:21). Will not soul-saving preaching sometimes be soothing and soul-stirring? Of course, it will. But that is not the end of itself. The end is salvation. When either soothing or stirring becomes *the thing* with us we lose sight of the end and the means becomes the end.

Let us never forget that "the end of your faith," is "even the salvation of your souls." (1 Peter 1:9) ■

Dangerous Preaching

Sewell Hall

A man who accepts the task of preaching the gospel accepts a dreadful responsibility. “My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment” (James 3:1). Application of these words may not be limited to what we commonly term local preachers, but they apply in a special way to such men. The longer a man remains with a church, doing such work, the more responsible he becomes for the convictions and faithfulness of the members.

Brother, why do you preach? Is it a profession for you, simply a way of making a living? Is it a career that you wish to enhance by building up a large congregation? Is it an opportunity to exercise your artistic talents by producing a masterpiece of words each week? Is it the pride of having people praise your preaching for years without tiring of it? Preaching for these reasons may build reputations or even larger congregations but it will not produce godly, well-informed, and indoctrinated Christians. Preaching that is God approved is not for the advancement of the preacher but for the salvation and edification of the hearers.

Note three examples of dangerous preaching.

Preaching What is False

The Old Testament is filled with warnings. Remember the “man of God” who died because he believed a false prophet’s lie (1 Kings 13). Jesus warned, “Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves” (Matt.7:15). Peter echoed these words, predicting, “...there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies...” (2 Pet.2:1).

The danger of false teaching is recognized by most of us. But teaching does not have to be false

to be dangerous. We have seen how the media can distort the news by reporting only selected facts. Those facts may be true but if they do not give the whole picture, false impressions are left. A mother may not feed her child poison, but if she does not give it the balanced diet it needs she may contribute to its sickness or even death.

Preaching Only in Generalities

We may be pleased when someone says, “You have made me eager to obey God in everything.” Such words are encouraging, but we should not suppose that our job is done when this is said. Jeremiah’s countrymen said, “Whether it is pleasing or displeasing, we will obey the voice of the Lord our God...” (Jer.42:6). But when Jeremiah told them what God wanted them to do, they totally rejected it and called him a liar. It is our job, as it was Jeremiah’s, to show our hearers what God says they should do and not do. We need to be teaching what is wrong with profanity, dancing, drinking, immodesty, and other worldliness; as well as with the social gospel, instrumental music, Calvinism, denominationalism, institutionalism and other doctrinal errors.

Preachers, how long has it been since you have preached on these important subjects? Elders, how long has it been since the flock for which you are responsible have been taught on such subjects as these? We may think that the congregation knows about these things, but how do they know? Even if the older members know, what about young people who did not hear the old sermons of thirty years ago? It is a failure to continue preaching on such things that leaves a church open to worldliness and unscriptural innovations.

My brother, Bill, has observed that churches

vary in their feeling about sound doctrinal preaching. The first church does not want sound teaching and will avoid preachers they fear might produce it. The second church will accept sound teaching and appreciate it, but they do not demand it. The third church not only accepts sound teaching but will accept nothing short of it. However, those churches that will accept it but do not get it for a period of ten years will cease to want it.

Preaching that is Limited to Attacks on Worldliness and Error

It can kill a church. Recently, someone reported to me their periodic visits to a very small congregation of older Christians, and observed that every time they visited the preacher was warning about some kind of apostasy that really does not threaten those faithful veterans. All Christians, young and old, need encouragement. The gospel is good news; the promises it makes and the hope it gives should be often stressed.

The same passage (2 Tim.4:2) that calls upon evangelists to convince and rebuke also instructs them to exhort. Exhortation involves appeal, entreaty, encouragement, consolation and comfort (Vines). “Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all” (1 Thess.5:14).

On the Other Hand...

Great preaching has always come from the heart of one who was passionate about the needs of his hearers and confident that God’s word is the solution to their needs. One of the temptations involved in preaching to the same congregation each Sunday is the feeling that one must come up with something that is either new, or a novel presentation of what is old. The needs of the hearers may be forgotten. One may use scripture—even limit himself to expository preaching—yet not deal with the current needs of his audience.

I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom; Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables. But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry. (2 Timothy 4:1-5)

Jeremiah rebuked the sins of his generation and warned them of future consequences until he was tempted to keep silent. “But His word was in my heart like a burning fire shut up in my bones. And I was weary of holding it back, and I could not” (Jer.20:9). “Someone has said that there are three kinds of preachers. The first has to say something—he is a paid talker who has to fill a certain amount of time each week. The second has something to say, and that is a whole lot better. But best of all is the third—the man who has something to say and has to say it. That is the kind of preacher Jeremiah was” (L.A. Mott in *Thinking Through Jeremiah*).

Each of us who preach should ask, “What is the burning fire in my bones that I cannot hold back?” If we do not have such a burning fire, or if it is something other than “what is good for edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers” (Eph.4:29), then we had best quit preaching.