

Banner of Truth

"The truth shall make you free." (John 8:32)

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Going, Going, Gone! — Into Denominationalism

*Some brethren are going into denominationalism,
while others have already arrived.*

What can be done? What will be done to halt this great tragedy?

[EDITOR'S NOTE: We wrote this article in 1997, but looking back we realize that the affinity for denominationalism among members of the church is stronger now than it was then. Congregations that now stand fast in the faith as they generally once did are few and far between. Unless we "stand fast in the faith," we have not seen the worst yet. Another reason for running the article again is that our mailing list is now more than twice what it was in 1997.]

When thinking of the frightening rate at which the Lord's people are going into the man-made religions of denominationalism, the cry of the auctioneer — Going, Going, Gone! — often rings in my ears. But aside from the concern over the rapidity with which this tragedy is taking place, there is heart break which is undoubtedly being thrust upon our Savior by these ungrateful people for whom He shed His blood having undergone the agony on the cross. In my christian life, this has to rank at the top of the sad tragedies which have taken place. The same would surely be said by others who have the proper reverence, respect and godly fear for the Father and the Son.

Can it be that those, for whom our Lord did so much making the invaluable gift of eternal life in Heaven available, have simply forgotten all that God has done for them? As sad as it is, it would seem so. When Christ came to earth, "he came unto his own" (Jno. 1:10), but the majority of His own rejected Him. We see the pathos of Jesus in as He wept over Jerusalem:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, which killest the prophets, and stonest them that are sent unto thee; how often would I have gathered thy children together, as a hen doth gather her brood under her wings, and ye would not. (Lk. 13:34)

These words of Jesus express His tender love and concern for a forgetful and rebellious →

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people who rejected the greatest of all blessings as offered by Him. Is there not a similarity between those ungrateful Jews and those members of the church who are turning away from His blood-bought church and all the blessings available therein?

Later, when Jesus comes near the city of Jerusalem, He pours out His heart's concern for the rebellious people and their forthcoming destruction. The record says, "when he was come near, he beheld the city and wept over it" (Lk. 19:41). *Lenski* says he "burst into sobs."

It is indeed hard to understand why those who come to know the truth which makes men free (Jno. 8:32), and realize that this is the only right way, turn away from it into that which is in opposition to God's will and which has nothing to offer but false promises. Though that question is difficult to answer, the New Testament is replete with

warnings against such, and makes it clear that this will happen. With regard to the present "falling away" it is in order to ask:

WHAT IS DENOMINATIONALISM?

It must be that some of our brethren have never actually learned what denominationalism is. Otherwise, why would they, if they have any love and respect for the Lord's will turn to a form of man-made religion which gives a lie to the true and distinctive way of Christ and the one true blood-purchased church?

We cannot go to the Bible for a definition of denominationalism as it is known today. This is true because such did not exist in New Testament times. There was division then (cf. 1Cor. 1:10), but that was not denominationalism. It was division within the church. Denominationalism is that division outside the church, among those hundreds or thousands of religious bodies which claim to be the Christian religion, but which owe their existence to the "vain" doctrines of men (Matt. 15:9). God is not the author of such and neither did Christ purchase a single one with His blood.

It is evident that some people baptized in years gone were not taught sufficiently and neither did they have a clear understanding of the distinctiveness of the New Testament church. These people simply saw the church as one of the many denominations. But the number of those people was relatively small when compared with those of today who are falling away. In our day it is tragically clear that a majority are gravitating toward denominationalism at one rater or another.

A great many more people than most realize have already crossed the Rubicon into denominationalism as evidenced by their thinking teaching, and practice. The use of the term "Church of Christ" is not assurance that those who employ it are true to the term. A great many of the Christian Churches use the term Church of Christ, but they do not follow the New Testament pattern of

the one true, distinctive church about which we read in the New Testament. Names are important, but calling something by the right name does not make it so. Some of our own brethren who still claim affiliation with the church are in reality denominational to the core.

It is most encouraging that a great many brethren are deeply concerned about the apostasy which is in progress. That such is the case is evident from the response received from readers of *Banner of Truth* and other readers of other publications which are dedicated to upholding the truth without compromise. A question which is often posed by those concerned brethren is,

WHY ARE OUR BRETHREN GOING INTO DENOMINATIONALISM?

It is indeed sadly ironic that people who have been set free from their sins through gospel obedience (Rom. 1:16) would choose to return to that bondage of sin. It is almost like people released from prison wanting to return to imprisonment. In the past century a great many brethren spent much of their lives in efforts to free themselves from the shackles of denominationalism and to lead others to that freedom. Great strides were made, and multitudes were able to profit from those efforts in that the distinctive New Testament gospel of Christ was made available to them, free from the doctrines of men which hold sway in denominations.

Now we are seeing many, who apparently have known the Lord, giving it all up, as they opt for the man-made religions around us. Why is this happening at such a rapid rate? It would be too simplistic to suggest that any one particular factor is responsible. Obviously, a number of factors are involved, and we shall consider only a portion of them. There is no attempt to list the things on a graduated scale from the least to the greatest, especially since some of them are variables. We begin with,

LACK OF KNOWLEDGE

As it was in the days of old, God's people are being "destroyed for lack of knowledge" (Hosea 6:4). We are no longer "People of the Book" as we once were. When have you heard it said of us by some denominational person, "They know their Bible?" The Bible is no longer being studied as it once was. Sound brotherhood publications which deal with the problems now confronting the church are not being as widely read as they should. These papers sent out to congregations (some do not request them) too often end up in a rack or on a shelf gathering dust. Bible class materials are often less than Bible centered. Sermons from many pulpits are sadly lacking essential areas, thereby failures from the standpoint of emphasizing the distinctiveness and essentiality of the one true church, and the necessity of a "thus saith the Lord" for belief and practice. Then there is,

THE INCREASING NUMBER OF UNSOUND PREACHERS

It should be a compliment to a preacher when he is told that he is "an old fashioned preacher." That means he is preaching the word like it once was done in days gone by. That type of preaching was often called Book/Chapter/Verse preaching. There was a time when God's plan of salvation, involving a number of "steps," was set forth without any fear or semblance of an apology. This old-time preaching which produced such favorable results, is now being looked upon with disdain with many present day preachers. It is not uncommon for younger preachers to snidely mock our older preachers.

Some years ago, some of our preachers began sitting at the feet of denominational "doctors" to get their degrees. In a majority of those cases those preachers imbibed the denominational doctrines being set forth by their professors, who were neither New Testament Christians nor likely ever to be. The quest by congregations for these →

“degree-ed” preachers has grown stronger over the years. In many cases, a preacher’s knowledge of the Scriptures is relatively unimportant as long as he is qualified by his “degrees.” This is typical in many denominations. This leads to,

THE INFLUENCE OF OUR SCHOOLS

Whereas our schools at one time constituted an asset for the most part, they are now a liability in almost every case. Such schools as Abilene, Lipscomb and Pepperdine no longer uphold the plea for distinctive New Testament Christianity, but on the contrary are undermining the plea. Other of our schools are also drifting into the acceptance of denominationalism’s ways. One means of promoting denominations is through the pushing of denominational literature in their book stores. A case in point is the bookstore at Freed-Hardeman. They have pushed the sale of books by such men as: Max Lucado and Rubel Shelly without a single word of warning. Brother Milton Sewell, in a letter to me, upheld this practice. Various denominational writers are promoted, but Lucado and Shelly are denominational to the core, though they claim affiliation with the church.

Our schools of preaching, though having for the most part served a good purpose, are not immune to teaching error. I was greatly disappointed this past summer when the elders of a congregation, who are over one of our larger schools of preaching, asked that the sending of bundles of *Banner of Truth* to the school and congregation be discontinued. They gave no reason for their action; but we assume it is connected to *BOT*’s opposition to a practice which the school upholds in the absence of scriptural authority.

It is simply a matter of fact that students who attend our schools are going to follow what is taught in many instances. At the rate things are now going, in the years ahead our schools will be adding to the ranks of denominationalism. In fact, more and more of those who are now coming out of

our schools have embraced the errors of denominationalism. They are denominational in thought, though they may not have yet aligned themselves with a particular denomination. There are not, to my knowledge, any signs of change for the better in many of our schools. If it is true that history often repeats itself, our schools will go even farther from the truth in time to come. Not all schools of preaching are headed in the wrong direction, and thank God for them; but some are not what they should be.

We consider now the contribution to the problem from,

INEFFICIENT, UNQUALIFIED ELDERS

The blame for the proliferation of denominationalism within the church lies at the feet of elders more than any other group. The dearth of qualified elders has never been greater in our time. Congregations blessed with true elders, as per the New Testament qualifications are few and far between. Where elders “rule” over the flock and “watch” for souls “as they that must give account” (Heb. 13:17), false teachers and their teachings will not be allowed “no, not for an hour” (Gal. 2:5).

In some cases “elders” are bringing denominational-minded preachers to feed the flocks. That has happened recently here in our hometown of Murray, KY. The Glendale Road congregation had Walt Leaver (a Jubilee man) for a meeting. Similar things happen all across the country, not just here.

In some cases, elders may not outright promote denominationalism, but at the same time they keep quiet as a tomb with regard to opposition. Speaking about the present state of affairs of churches in our county, a fellow christian recently said, “As long as congregations remain quiet and do not voice their opposition in a public way this condition will be encouraged.”

As to elderships, there are in our time

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CONVOCATIONS OF LIBERAL, DENOMINATIONAL-MINDED PREACHERS

two extremes which are having a pronounced effect upon the church: 1) Serving as mere figureheads with no authority; 2) Acting as dictators by assuming the right to be “lords over God’s heritage” (I Pet. 5:3). In the first case, the elders exercise no authority as rulers over the flock as God has authorized (Heb. 13:17). In the second case, the elders assume more authority than God has given elders, thereby becoming “lords.” The flock, in such cases, is kept in the dark and never consulted on matters of importance to the congregations. This is completely the opposite of what is involved in being true leaders and examples to the flock over which they oversee (I Pet. 5:3).

This leads, on the part of many, to a sense of unquestioned allegiance; that is, the idea that whatever the elders do is not to be questioned by the flock, regardless of whether or not it is in harmony with God’s will. A few years ago, a prominent preacher maintained that elders are “Holy Spirit appointed” — which they are — and therefore are not subject to being questioned about their actions — which is not so (cf. 1Tim. 5:20). In this particular case, the elders maintained that they had authority which God has never given to elders. One would be pressed to say that some who are serving as “elders” are in fact “Holy Spirit” appointed. To do so would be to charge the Holy Spirit with gross disregard for the God-given qualifications of elders as set forth in the New Testament.

Elders are subject to error and their error is no more acceptable to God than the error of any member. When elders are in error, it is not only right, but also our responsibility to speak up with regard to that error. As noted above, Paul said of elders in error: “Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear” (I Tim. 5:20). Qualified elders are a great and much needed blessing, but on the other hand unqualified elders can be one of the greatest harms to befall a congregation.

Now, we face the brazen problem of,

The infamous “Nashville Jubilee” convened for the 9th year this past July. This is probably the largest gathering of denominational-minded preachers and like-minded listeners presently occurring amongst members of the church. This activity is serving as a gateway in today’s denominational religion. It is clearly evident that the objective of the majority of those speakers is to align themselves with the denominations and take as many as possible along with them. To make bad matters worse, a number of Jubilee speakers are quite influential, preaching for sizeable congregations and in some instances turning out reams of spiritually poisoned literature by which many are being influenced by error.

The Jubilee is not the only convocation of denominational-minded preachers. Tulsa’s “Soul Winning Workshop” continues its propagation of deadly error, which is eroding the ranks of the faithful remnant in some cases. There is also a yearly gathering in Indianapolis, IN called “Heartland,” which is of the same flavor as the other gatherings mentioned. Additionally, there are a number of gatherings of a smaller size which are also helping to carry the church away from God’s truth into denominational error.

Space does not allow the discussion of these but we are listing a number of preachers who are known for their error and/or fellowship with those who are guilty of serious error. A great many others could be listed, but we ask you to consider the following: Jerry Jones, Prentice Meador, Rubel Shelly, Jeff Walling, Max Lucado, Buddy Bell, Mike Cope, Joe Van Dyke, Joe Beam, Harold Harelip, Steve Flatt, Randy Harris, Rick Archly, Jim Woodruff, Gary Bradley, Phillip Morrison, Marvin Phillips, Randy Meraux, Wayne Kilpatrick, F. LaGard Smith, Walt Leaver, Landon →

Saunders, and Jim Bevis.

As noted, this is not an exhaustive list, but it does contain the names of those who are in most cases quite well known. Their influence is much greater than the average preacher. That they are messengers of error, or in some way encourage error is not a matter of hearsay. Their error is documented. Those who doubt the error of these men, and others of like-mind, are simply unwilling to face the facts.

That these men are turning their backs upon that sacred institution which Christ purchased with His blood is not a matter to be taken lightly, and should arouse the faithful to action in defending the truth.

This insidious and yet bold movement to take the church into denominationalism has been the most heart breaking happening to occur within the Lord's church since I have been a part of it. To make it sadder still is the fact that there is so much indifference among members of the church, including some who claim to love God and His truth. If this current tragedy is not enough to shock us out of our indifference, I doubt that anything would do so.

Those who are not highly concerned over the present state of things must: 1) be unaware of what is happening because they choose to remain uninformed; or, 2) have not learned enough to know the difference between the Lord's church and those built by men; or, 3) simply fail to care about what happens to the Lord's church; and/or, 4) be making merchandise of the gospel by some means or other by compromising the truth with error. So, we ask,

WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT THIS GREAT TRAGEDY?

A number of things can be done. The trials we face now are no greater than those faced by many christians in the First Century. In fact, they are not nearly as great. We are not faced with the

possibility of losing our physical lives by standing up for God's truth. We are not going to be thrown into prison, as were many early christians. Yes, we could lose a few friends, even family members. We could be called unflattering things: narrow minded, unloving, divisive, anti, ignorant, etc. As preachers, we might not be able to preach in meetings in some places or be on some lecture-ships. But if such things as the above would deter us from standing up for the Truth, we cannot be rightfully named among the faithful.

Let us now consider some things which can be done to overcome the dangers we face.

Increase our knowledge. Only those who are strong in faith will be able to claim victory in the end (I Jno. 5:4). And faith comes from the hearing of God's word (Rom. 10:17). Being well-versed in God's word enables us to recognize error and to be able to stand against it. Our knowledge needs to include the conditions within the church, and the "devices" and "wiles" used by Satan to overthrow God's faithful servants. Knowledge applied is the strength which we need.

"Stand fast in the faith" (I Cor. 16:13). To know God's word, to be able to distinguish right from wrong is great. But unless one is strong enough to stand in the face of temptations and evildoers which may be brought to bear, little will be contributed to the strength of the cause of Christ. With God on our side we can always be victorious.

"Contend for the faith" (Jude 3). *To contend* "signifies to contend about a thing as a combatant" (*Vines*, p. 235). When we fight for the faith we do not give up easily. We will stand by it in the face of all manner of opposition. We will not falter in face of a preacher, teacher, elder, or whoever chooses to deny the truth. In so many instances error has prevailed because those who knew the truth simply kept quiet. In a sense, when we keep quiet we are giving consent. Error will

take advantage of this, and the devil will be pleased.

“Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them” (Eph. 5:11). A great step in stopping the drift into denominationalism is to respect the inspired apostle’s command in the above passage. The error under consideration has been greatly encouraged by those who fellowship the promoters of it. Those who bid “God speed” to error by fellowshiping it are themselves guilty of sin (2 Jno. 9-11). Yet, we have brethren all over the country who are doing that very thing, and some of these brethren claim to be faithful.

“Mark them which cause division” (Rom. 16:17). This command of Paul is just as authoritative today as when Paul penned it to the Romans. To “mark” these teachers of error is to call attention to them, not keep their error hidden. This is one of God’s ways of curbing error, yet I have known brethren who simply disagree with God on this matter. The church would not have gone so far from the truth if we had started marking these false brethren years ago. A number of weak preachers, elders and brethren will have to give account for their failure in this respect. Even now, some do not believe in making public the name of those who are outright servants of the Devil.

Warn others of error. When we know a person is a false teacher we should warn others who may not know. Just today I received a letter asking me about a certain preacher who had been listed in *BOT* as a false teacher. The person wanted some evidence of his error. The querist had been impressed in the past by hearing “some truth” taught by that preacher. Tomorrow I will be sending him documented evidence of the preacher’s rank error. The teaching of some truth does not give anyone a right to teach any amount of error. Even some of the most wicked of men teach some truth. A preach-

er can teach nine items of truth and one item of error, but he is still a false teacher who must be avoided.

Challenge teachers of error. When a preacher teaches error he should be challenged. A preacher has no more right to preacher error than any other brother. When a teacher in a Bible class teaches error, that teacher should be called in question. When an elder teachers error he should be confronted. Elders are not above the law, though some seem to think they are. It should come as no surprise that when one is called in question teaching that which is not according to God’s word, that one may be viewed as a trouble maker. But Paul would have been so called, and even the Lord himself would have been viewed as a trouble-maker.

These are a few things that can be done to halt the drift into denominationalism. There are others, of course. But let us now consider another important matter.

WHAT WILL BE DONE ABOUT THE GREAT TRAGEDY?

What can be done and what will be done are two different matters. A great weakness among us has been a lack of resolve to do what we know can be done. It is my fervent prayer that brethren will take a stand for God’s truth as never before. We must not underestimate what we can do with God on our side, and He will so be if we stand fast as faithful servants. If a few people can turn a congregation away from the truth a few can maintain a course of truth.

It had been my intention to include in this discussion a lengthy list of evidences which clearly show the intention of a number of our brethren to take the church into the error of denominational religion. It is my plan to address this important matter in the January 1998, issue of *Banner of Truth* in an article entitled, “A State Of The Church Message.”

—Editor

THREE TYPES OF PEOPLE

Brock Hartwigsen

There are many ways of grouping or labeling individuals. For the sake of this article I would like to divide everyone who is old enough to make moral decisions into one of three groups.

The first group is the *wicked*. These are people who are actively evil. They are those who live for the here and now. They are those who live for the present world, like Demas and others (2 Tim. 4:10; 1 Jno. 2:15-17). Unlike Moses, they prefer to “enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season” (Heb. 11:25). It is the “lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life” (1 Jno. 2:16) for which they live.

The second group is the *content or complacent*. Lot and the rich young ruler would fall into this group. These are people who were not actively evil, but who simply never put their energies into doing good. Their failure is not that they aimed at anything bad, but just that they failed to aim strongly enough at anything good.

A good example of this group would be the Israelites in the wilderness. They wanted to go to the promised land of milk and honey. They wanted to be free from Egyptian bondage, but when the going got tough, they wished that there were simply back home in Egypt. While the goal was appealing, the desire was not strong enough.

The third group is the *righteous*. These are the people who either have or who or are willing to forsake anything and everything that this world has to offer for the goal of Heaven. These are people, who like Abraham are “strangers and pilgrims on earth...they seek a country...if they had been mindful of [the world] from whence they came out, they might have had and opportunity to have returned. But...they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city” (Heb. 11:13-16). These are the people who truly become the disciples of Jesus (Lk. 14:25-27; Matt. 10:34-39).

The above three groups can plainly be seen in

Jesus’ Parable of the Sower in Matthew 13. The *wicked* is the “way side.” They are those who outright reject the word. The *wicked* also includes the “stony ground.” As Jesus explained the “stony ground” is the convert who “heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it; yet he hath no root in himself but dureth for a while: for when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended” (vss. 20-21) or “wither away” (vs. 6). The “stony ground” are converts who Peter describes as a “dog” that has “turned to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire” (2 Pet. 2:21). These people are worse off than the “way side” people. In verse 20 Peter said, “it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them.”

The *content* or *complacent* is the “thorny ground.” He is the one who “heareth the word; and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful” (vs. 22). These converts do not leave the church, but just learn to be content with their level of Bible knowledge, with their attendance to some but not all of the services of the church, with a low level of involvement in the activities of the church, with a minimal if any involvement in personal work, etc. They are content with being milk drinkers all their spiritual life and never mature to the point where they become eaters of meat (Heb. 5:13-14).

The *content* and *complacent* are like the Laodiceans. They are lukewarm. Jesus said of them and will say the same of the *content* and the *complacent* Christians. “I know thy works, that thou art neither cold or hot, I will spue out of my mouth” (Rev. 3:15-16).

Jesus said that the *content* or *complacent* “becometh unfruitful” or in other words, never produce any fruit or quit producing fruit. He also said that “Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire”

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(Matt. 7:19), and “every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away:...and cast them into the fire, and they are burned” (Jno. 15:2, 6), The *content* or *complacent* christian is just as bad off as the *wicked* christian.

The *righteous* christian is the “good ground.” He is the one “that heareth the word, and understandeth it; which also beareth fruit, and bringeth forth, some an hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty” (vs. 23). These are the ones who never go back to their evil ways no matter what “tribulation” or persecution ariseth because of the word. These are the ones who never allow “the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, [to] choke the word.” These are the ones who are never content or complacent with their level of Bible knowledge, spiritual maturity, etc. These are the ones who become meat eaters.

What about you? Are you wicked or just plain content or complacent? Or, are you numbered among the righteous? Christianity is much more than not doing, it is also doing, no matter what the sacrifice or cost.

Paul said, “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God.” (Rom. 12:1-2).

—189 Brookside Dr., Stanton, KY 40380

An Unnamed Reader Comments

Consider the following letter we have received:

Brother Pigg, What kind of preaching does the church need? I wish you would write on this some time. We know of several young preachers that present good lessons, but they seldom ever say anything that could not be preached at any denomination. They do not teach error, but they preach little that is distinctive. We have a whole

generation of young people growing up who have not heard the plan of salvation, the undenominational nature of the church, why we do not use instrumental music, or why we believe baptism is necessary to salvation. I dread to think of what this will mean in the years to come.

What is the duty of elders in this situation?

Let us attempt to respond to this good brother’s questions and observations—

We must say you have hit the nail square on the head. You do not mention your age, but it appears that you have been in the Lord’s church long enough to remember when things were quite different to the situation we see now, and you have seen changes that many younger people have not seen.

Those who preach a non-distinctive gospel are not teaching error in a direct way, but by implication they are teaching error. To the Ephesian elders Paul said, “Wherefore I take you this day, that I am pure from the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God” (Acts 20:26-27). If Paul had left off some of “the counsel of God,” he would not have been “pure from the blood of all men.” Those who fail to preach a distinctive doctrine are leaving off part of the counsel of God.

Your question — “What is the duty of elders in this situation?” — is a most timely one. The apostle Paul told the elders from Ephesus “...to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood” (Acts 20:29). Peter said, “As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word that ye may grow thereby” (I Pet. 2:2).

Elders who allow a non-distinctive gospel to be preached are guilty of failing to feed their flocks, and that which is not sufficient to bring about spiritual growth. There are many elders who fall into this category. Not only do they allow non-distinctive doctrine to be preached and taught, in a great many cases they are leaders in the failure to feed their flocks that which is necessary for God-approved spiritual growth.

The blame for many of the growing problems within the Lord’s church today can be laid at the feet of those who are called elders. I, too, “dread to think “of what will happen within the church in years to come, unless the present trend is stopped. The church has already lost much of the strength which it once had in the past.

—Editor

IS AMERICA A HOPELESS CAUSE?

Roger D. Campbell

“God Bless America.” Now where have I heard those words before? Perhaps I saw those words printed on small flags. I might have read them on a license plate or a bumper sticker. It could be that I heard them in a song.

America has survived a number of intense trials. In its 230-year history, the U.S.A. has survived a number of wars, including the nation-ripping “War Between the States.” It survived “The Great Depression.” In more recent memory, it has survived “9/11.” Time and again, Americans have come together to take on or stand against common foes which somehow sought to destroy us. The “American Spirit” has been wonderfully demonstrated in the lives of so many, by folks of all backgrounds and races, from those that served in the White House to those that are just common red-blooded Americans. Yes, the U.S. has truly had some great days.

There are, however, a number of things going on in the U.S. at this hour that ought to be of major concern to every God-reverencing citizen. Statistics compiled by our federal government indicate that violent crimes in America rose in 2006 (the figures for 2007 are not yet available). The production, sale, and use of meth are a nationwide plague. An actor fathers three illegitimate children by three different women and Hollywood names a street after him because he is a Star.” Kill a critter that is on the endangered species list and you may pay a fine and/or do jail time, but murder an unborn baby in a government-funded abortion clinic and you are considered a community servant. Such is modern America.

If a public school teacher enthusiastically leads a campaign to indoctrinate with the theory of evolution, he may be nominated for “Teacher of the “Year” honors, while a second teacher who dares to teach that the major elements of evolution are illogical, not provable, and anti-biblical may lose his job for such. America has legalized prostitution [making it] available in the state of Nevada [www.prostitution.org/law.htm], makes smut available 24/7 on a TV screen in every home, and in some public schools counsels teenagers on how to practice “safe” fornication. This is some “Christian nation,” huh?

In our country, if you quote from some God-basher, you are considered a scholar, but if you openly speak of God as being worthy of praise, you might be censored, suspended from school, or lose your job. Simply quote a Bible verse that shows God’s attitude toward the abomination of homosexuality and you may be called a bigot or charged with homophobia, but if you express the view that same-sex relationships ought to be accepted, you might be praised for being an open-minded person.

The picture in America looks bleak, does it not? In the moral and spiritual realms, America is sick. She needs treatment that only the Great Physician can give. Yes, there is balm in Gilead (Jer. 8:22) which only the great Balm-Giver can supply. Thankfully, He is ever ready to apply that balm to our spiritual illnesses whenever we are willing to humble ourselves and do His will.

“God Bless America.” Sometimes when I hear of see those words, I wonder to myself, “Why should He?” Think about it. Why should God bless a nation that is so filled with people that love themselves, love sin, and defiantly rebel against the authority of the Almighty? America is not exempt from God’s wrath. Powerful nations or empires have come and gone in human history. In the Old Testament we see the truth that God destroyed nations because of their iniquity. They did not simply get overthrown or go out of existence — the Lord God brought them down! That was true not only of “the heathen” nations, but for God’s people as well (Amos 1:3-28). How America needs to take these words to heart: “Righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin is a reproach to any people” (Proverbs 14:34). Are we listening?

I know of no Bible passage which indicates that America is somehow God’s favorite little place. Where did anyone ever get such an idea? Apparently some have convinced themselves that God is committed to being on “our side.” Who said so? Oh, yes, the Lord has blessed us immensely. No doubt we owe our survival to Him. That does not mean, though, that He has given us a free pass to snub our nose at Him and not have to face the music for such ingrati- ↓

tude and insubordination. God's word still says, "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap" (Gal. 6:7). While it is true that such teaching applies to individuals, it also applies to families, congregations, and entire nations. Are we listening?

God owes America nothing. He promises, however, that we, like all others before and after us, will reap what we sow. America's real strength has nothing to do with our military might and technology. Neither is a strong economy the key to a strong country. Higher test scores by graduating students can be encouraging, but they have no direct link to genuine character and what counts in the sight of our Lord. We can make enormous improvement to our military, economy, and school test results, but still be a doomed society.

It seems to me that making America strong is not about having references to God inscribed on national monuments, nor is getting prayers allowed in public schools a guarantee that our nation will get back on the right track. If we petition for our teachers and their students to have the right to lead prayers in public schools, then if that request is granted, we will get just what we asked for: Muslim teachers leading prayers and praising Muhammad, Catholics praying to Mary, and Hindus praying to any of their myriad of "gods." While I do not oppose the concept of prayers in public schools, I personally do not see such privilege as the key to Getting God back in America.

Brothers and sisters, the way to get the U.S. in good standing with the Lord is to reverence Him and let His word dwell in our hearts (Col. 3:16). God's word is a light for our path (Ps. 119:105), and taking heed to it will cleanse our way (Ps. 119:9). "Blessed are the pure in heart" (Matt. 5:8). — it all starts with individuals having pure hearts, for only then will there be pure speech and pure conduct.

America is in bad shape, but is our nation a hopeless cause? Some conscientious students of both the Bible and history have concluded that the U.S. has gone so far down the path of wickedness that her doom is inevitable. Time will tell if such predictions are accurate. We know this much: it is God's longsuffering that allow America to continue to exist, and "the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation" (2. Pet. 3:15). Each day of life that God grants to wayward men and women is a chance

for them to obtain salvation. Each day is also an opportunity for those of us who are Christians to season society with our salt and help remove darkness with our light (Matt. 5:13-16). There will be no sudden turnarounds for this or any other country. Darkness is not easily or quickly expelled, but the gospel light can get the job done (2 Cor. 4:4).

The apostle Paul once saw a man in a vision who said, "Come over into Macedonia, and help us" (Acts 16:9). Paul and his co-workers realized that it was God's will for them to go and "preach the gospel unto them" (vs. 10). Brethren, do you and I really want to help America? If so, then what we need to do is continue to live the gospel and get busy teaching it more zealously.

America needs the gospel. Not a Baptist-gospel, not a Pentecostal-gospel, not an interdenominational gospel, not a Protestant-gospel, and not a Catholic gospel. Our country needs the one and only gospel of the Lord Jesus (Gal. 1:6-8). Can the Lord count on you and me to get up out of our easy chairs and go tell our fellow Americans of His great salvation? The church of Christ proclaiming a risen Savior is America's only hope. Do you know what? If God's church is not going to make its greatest effort to educate America in the ways of Jesus (because people will do better only when they *know* to do better), then, yes, America *is* a hopeless cause.

"The USA is a Christian nation." If it were not so serious, such an unfounded claim would be comical. There is another matter in this regard that troubles my soul. If we come together in our public assemblies, and in those settings we remind one another that (1) America is in sorry shape, and (2) all people outside the Lord's church are lost (Eph. 5:23), those are two undeniable facts. But, after we share those truths with each other and shake our heads in sorrow over the present state of affairs, what kind of effort do you and I go out and make to teach Americans God's nation-changing and Soul-saving truth? If we just remain quiet and keep the truth to ourselves, then we are not being helpful to the good old USA, and not only is *it* going to remain in sorry shape, but when we stand before the King of Kings on Judgment Day, we will be sorry for *our* failure to teach God's truth to those who need God's truth so badly.

— via *The Reminder*, 120 Will Lewis Dr. SE, Cleveland, TN 37323.

The Gospel according to Oprah

Sellers S. Crain, Jr.

In addition to being one of the richest women in America, Oprah Winfrey is one of the most admired women in this nation and in the world. When you know of her humble origins, it is easy to admire her success.

She was from a divorced family, raised mostly in East Nashville by her father, Vernon, who was a barber. She said she was sexually abused by a male relative when she was a small girl. She was given her real start in Nashville when Chris Clark hired her as a reporter on Channel 5 news. From here she went to Chicago and had a local network afternoon talk show. The rest is history.

Oprah is one of the most powerful individuals in this country. She can make careers, such as that of Rachel Ray, Dr. Phil, and Dr. Oz. Her recommendation for a book can make it an instant best seller. She can accomplish a lot of good with that kind of power, but if it is improperly used she can do a lot of harm. Her programs have probably helped a lot of people with many personal issues. However, she is now venturing into the area spiritual instruction, and it is here that Oprah can do irreparable damage. She has been called “The most influential spiritual leader in America today.

On January 1, 2008 on her daily radio program, Oprah began a year long course on the New Age Christ for 365 days. It is used as a workbook called “A Course in Miracles.” Oprah said this was one of her favorite books. She bought thousands of them to hand out to her studio audience. Listeners to her program will be encouraged to purchase the book and an audio version of CD by Richard “John Boy” Thomas will be available. Popular author, Wayne Dyer told his PBS audience that the “brilliant writing” of this book would produce more peace in the world. The book proudly states that “This is a course in mind training” and is dedicated to “thought reversal.” It is allegedly a “new revela-

tion” which began to be “channeled” in 1965 to a Columbia University Medical Professor, Helen Schueman, who claimed she received messages from “an inner voice” from a person calling himself Jesus, and he asked her to write them down. The message from this “Jesus” bears no resemblance to Jesus Christ of Scripture.

Here are some of the dangerous doctrines that can be found in this book. “There is no sin...” A “slain Christ has no meaning.” “Do not make the pathetic error of ‘to the old rugged cross.’” “The journey to the cross should be the last ‘useless’ journey.” “The name Jesus Christ is just a symbol...It is a symbol that is safely used as a replacement for the many names of all the gods to which you pray.” “The Atonement is the final lesson he [man] need learn, for it teaches him that, never having sinned, he has no need of salvation.”

Oprah has made several statements similar to these on her programs. She said, “Who you are requires no belief.” She said she took “God out of the box.” “God is not something to believe in. God is a feeling experience not a believing experience.” “My mind is part of God. My holiness is my salvation—it comes from me.” She said “Christians are confused, and a big mistake many Christians make is to believe “there is only one path to God” and “There could not possibly be only one way to God.”

Jesus still says, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No man cometh unto the Father by by me (John 14:6).

—via *The Eastside Edifier*: 2141 Kingston, Muskogee, OK 74403.

EDITOR’S NOTE: The Psalmist said, “The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God...” (14:1) Why do people who do not believe in God, profess to believe in anything? Does it salve their conscience and give them a false hope?

Gleanings from Ezekiel

“Things [which] were written aforetime were written for our learning...that we might hope” (Rom. 15:4). Included in these “things” are the sermons of the prophet Ezekiel preached “among [the] captives by the river Chebar.” “Hope” can be strengthened by great lessons contained in Ezekiel’s writings.

Some among us fail to see the need to study the Old Testament. It was credibly reported that an “elder” once said that as far as he was concerned the Old Testament could be thrown in the wastebasket. Our failure to emphasize the need to study the Old Testament may have contributed to the false and prejudicial statements by denominational people that “The church of Christ does not believe the Old Testament.”

While we, as New Testament christians, are not under the Old Testament as a law, it is interesting to note that so many things contained therein are found in principle in the New Testament. We shall note some of the similarities between the responsibilities of Ezekiel as a prophet and those of the gospel preacher in our time.

Of course, the gospel preacher of today is not a “prophet,” notwithstanding the fact that some of our brethren are claiming to be “apostles” and one brother took the position that he was a “prophet.” The Old Testament prophet was God’s “mouth piece,” his very words coming directly by revelation from God. The faithful gospel preacher sets forth God’s will as spoken by inspired men and recorded in God’s book, the Bible. But just as the prophets had serious responsibilities in proclaiming God’s word, so do gospel preachers.

Ezekiel Sent to a Rebellious People. God sent Ezekiel to the children of Israel, “a rebellious nation that hath rebelled against me...” with the instruction to say to them, “Thus saith the Lord God” (Ezek. 2:2-3).

Unlike Ezekiel’s message to Israel, the gospel preacher’s message (the gospel) is intended for “all the world” (Mk. 16:15). But like Israel in Ezekiel’s time, people of the world today have in general rebelled against God. Even within the church, the complete and unadulterated word is often unwelcomed. Ezekiel was commanded to speak God’s message to a “stiff-hearted” people with the following in mind: “And they, whether they will hear, or whether they will for-

bear... ye shall know that there hath been a prophet among them” (Ezek. 2:5). Does the Lord expect less of the gospel preacher? Paul commanded Timothy to, “Preach the word; be instant in season and out of season, reprove, rebuke, exhort with all long suffering and doctrine” (2 Tim. 2:4). Some of today’s preaching is so lacking in distinctiveness that when people are exposed to it they cannot be sure that there has been a “prophet” (preacher) among them.

Concerning the people to whom he was to speak, Ezekiel was told: “be not afraid of them, neither be afraid of their words..., nor be dismayed at their looks...” (2:6). The faithful gospel preacher will preach “all the counsel of God” (Ac. 20:27) without fear of the listeners and their words. Sad to say, but too many preachers of our day preach their own “edited” version of the gospel. The preacher who for fear of intimidation preaches what the people want to hear, is not worth his salt; he is not an asset but a liability, and would have been a dismal failure if he had been given Ezekiel’s commission.

Ezekiel as a Watchman. God said to Ezekiel, “I have made thee a watchman unto the house of Israel” (3:17). There is a sense in which the gospel preacher is to be a watchman, notwithstanding the fact that liberal, “loving” brethren seem to be fond of calling the faithful gospel preacher a “watchdog” when he preachers the whole truth without fear.

Ezekiel’s responsibility as a “watchman” is set forth clearly: “...therefore hear the word at my mouth, and give them warning from me” (3:17b). The gospel preacher of today, if true to God, will 1) hear God’s word from his mouth as recorded in the inspired word, and 2) speak it as a warning from God. “Bands” (3:25) may be put upon the preacher today by those who do not want to hear. Christ was “banded” by the unbelief of those in Nazareth, and thus among them “did not many mighty works.”

If Ezekiel failed “to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life” his blood would be required at Ezekiel’s hand (3:18).

These and more are the great lessons to learn from Ezekiel the preacher.

— Editor

Water: Of All the Things To Stumble Over

Nicodemus wanted to know if “born anew” (John 3:3) had reference to a physical birth. Jesus said, No. It is certain that no one can be “born again” in the physical sense. We are stuck with the bodies we inhabit, and not all the vitamins, cold cream or exercise in the world are going to change that; which is why Jesus explained that He had in mind a rebirth of “the spirit,” a “renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2). The Holy Spirit, causes our spirit to be “begotten again” through the “incorruptible seed, the word of God” (1Peter 1:23). God’s word enters the ears, then the heart of man, and brings about faith, repentance, and a desire to be right with God. This is being “born of the spirit.” But now, what about that *water*? There are some pretty exotic views about this little word.

When Jesus first said the thing about being *born anew*, Nicodemus was puzzled, so the Lord explained that being *born anew* means to be “born of water and the spirit.” There is nothing to indicate that Nicodemus did not understand what Jesus meant by the words *water* and *spirit*. It is granted that sometimes words are used figuratively; just as here where Jesus is using the normal word, *born*, to talk about something other than what that word usually means. But, — and this is a really important rule to follow when interpreting the meaning of words — Jesus made clear from the context that he was using the word *born* in a figurative sense; because, when Nicodemus asked him about a man entering his mother’s womb the second time, the Lord explained that he was not talking about being physically *born*, rather spiritually.

Yet, when Jesus went on to say that the new birth was of *water and the spirit*, He left no indication whatsoever that the words *water* and *spirit* mean anything other than what they normally mean. Were it not for some people being so dead set against the idea of water baptism being connected to one’s being saved, it is doubtful that anyone would ever have read John 3:5, and come away understanding any thing other than Jesus saying, In order for a person to enter the kingdom of God, he must be undergo a change of *spirit* and he must be *baptized in water*.

Did you know that just twenty-two verses before

Jesus talks of being *born of water* (John 3:5), he uses the exact same word? In John 2:7, it says that Jesus told some people to “fill the waterpots with water.” And did you know that just 18 verses after John 3:5, it says (3:23) that John “was baptizing in Enon near to Salim, because there was much water there”? It is not reasonable to doubt that *water* in John 2:7 or John 3:23 means anything other than H₂O. Why would anyone imagine that it means something other than that in John 3:5?

Some people say that *water* in John 3:5 really symbolizes the Holy Spirit, because they want to argue that Jesus is saying a person must be baptized in the Holy Spirit to enter the kingdom of God. If that were true, then you would have Jesus saying, a person must be born of the sprit and of the spirit to enter the kingdom of God; which, of course, would be absurd. Jesus uses two distinct words side by side: water and spirit. Neither symbolizes the other. There is no reason to imagine that they do. Some say that the water here symbolizes the word; again, in the absence of compelling reason. Doesn’t Paul speak of the church being cleansed “with the washing of water by the word” (Ephesians 5:26)? Both the word and water have their place. One does not symbolize the other. The most exotic explanation of the *water* in John 3:5, is that it refers to the amniotic fluid in which a baby, for nine months, floats around while in his mamma’s tummy. Now, did Jesus really mean to say, “except a baby be born after his mamma’s water breaks, and then years later as a man he be born of the spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven”? Surely not. In fact to answer Nicodemus’ query about being in his mother’s womb again, Jesus explained that he was talking about an entirely different birth, that of being born of water and the spirit. There is really no way around the fact that some way, somehow, pure, plain old *water* has some connection with one’s entering the kingdom of God. And if that water is not water baptism that is mentioned no less than seventy-five times in the New Testament, then it can have no meaning at all.

When the Bible says, *except*, that pretty well settles it. Those and only those who are *born of water and the spirit* will enter into the kingdom of God; which is to say, only penitent baptized believers are in the kingdom of God.

—AA

Grooming and “Going to Church”: Any Connection?

Humans tend to make judgments as to the worth of people on “the outward appearance,” but “Jehovah looketh on the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7). Thus, we must be prudent in making judgments about people. Does it, however, follow that how one grooms or attires himself is of no concern to God? The Bible does not support that view.

Priests were instructed to wear “linen breeches to cover the flesh of their nakedness; from the loins even unto the thighs...” (Ex 28:42). One who wears the “attire of a harlot” (Proverbs 7:10) is inviting herself to be judged as such. Christian sisters in the church at Corinth were in some sense “dishonoring” themselves by not wearing a veil (1 Corinthians 11:1-16). Some sisters were being ostentatious, and thus were told that they, in public assemblies, ought to “adorn themselves in modest apparel” (1 Timothy 2:9).

We are concerned about how people groom and dress themselves for public meetings of the church. It is our purpose to give good reason as to the inappropriateness of some grooming and attire that has become fairly common in our public assemblies. We are not suggesting the need for a “dress code,” nor that a coat and tie produces piety. We are, however, promoting the same sort of prudence, and propriety included in the Spirit’s admonition that what we do in our assemblies be “decent...and in order” (1 Corinthians 14:40).

Do grooming and dress say anything about our attitude, or the seriousness with which we approach things? They self-evidently do. Thoughtful prudent people would not go to a job interview dressed and groomed in the same way they sometimes come to church. Why? Because we generally know that sloppy dress and disheveled appearance imply a blasé attitude toward the affair at hand.

First Corinthians 11:1-16 is seldom read except to prove that women today do not need to wear doilies, veils, or other head coverings in public assemblies. That matter aside, there are some abiding principles in this section of Scripture. One is the principle that Christians ought to respect customs which serve to manifest fundamental Bible principles. In

this Corinthian case, the women were told not to dispense with a Corinthian custom, because it fit so beautifully with the Scriptural principle that the “head of the woman is the man” (v. 3). This little piece of attire implied certain things about the woman’s respect for her role and the situation at hand; just as washing feet implied certain attitudes about respect for one’s guests (Jno. 13:3-17). Whereas these particular acts would have no meaning in our present society, yet the underlying principles are still there.

As wacky as our society has become, we yet generally consider it gauche, unrefined, inconsiderate, and disrespectful to attend certain public functions with uncombed hair and unkempt dress. Is it reasonable to think it necessary to “clean up a bit” in order to go to a funeral of a dead person, but when we assemble as the “church of the living God” (1 Tim 3:15), just any old thing will do? Is there no incongruity between seeing the need to clean up and dress up for a wedding, and yet as Christ’s spiritual “bride” (Rev 21:2), the same sort of dignified grooming is not necessary when we as the church meet together? Allow me to anecdotally draw from the past, and say: One day, when some boy comes to your house to pick up your little girl for a date and he is wearing some of the stuff that is worn in our assemblies — well, please — ; if you know it is going to happen beforehand, invite me over so I can watch.

Please do not think this is harsh, unkind, or unfair. We are not talking about suits and ties here. We are talking about the inappropriateness of wrinkled, rumpled shirts, pants, and skirts; disheveled hair and slouchy postures; shorts and athletic wear; untucked shirts; T-shirts (with logos). One need not go out and spend a lot of money on “church” clothes. It costs very little in time, money and effort to clean up and dress up in a modest and dignified way, a way which manifests respect and seriousness for God, the church, and others with whom we have gathered.

Yes, we know that extenuating circumstances sometimes make it difficult for us to be at our best, but let us be sure that it is not because we just do not want to go to the trouble. Please, “think on these things.” —AA

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Jn. 20:30, 31; Rom. 10:17

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Rom. 1:16; Acts 18:8; Heb. 11:6

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Lk. 13:3; 24:47; Acts 3:19; 17:30

Confess Faith in Christ

Rom. 10:9, 10; Acts 8:37

Be Baptized

*Mat. 28:19; Mk. 16:16; Acts 2:38; 10:47, 48;
22:16; Rom. 6:1-6; Gal. 3:27; Col. 2:12;
1Pet. 3:21*

Be Faithful Unto and Until Death

*Mat. 25:21, 34; 2Pet. 1:1-11; Rev. 2:10;
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