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## Varnishing The Vessel and Tarnishing The Treasure

*Edward O. Bragwell, Sr.*

*"But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us."*

-- 2 Cor. 4:7

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

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

Paul wrote, "And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. (1 Cor. 2:1)

Faced with sagging interest, dwindling numbers and community rejection in many locales, brethren look for ways to turn things around. Just offering the bare "testimony of God" (the gospel) does not

attract enough people. What are we to do? Elders, preachers, and other members wrestle with the problem. Shall we abandon the old gospel truth that we have believed and taught so long? Of course, not! That would be digression, even apostasy! If the meat is not appetizing, we just add spicy dressing to whet the appetite. If one will not buy the product in a plain wrapper, we will jazz up the packaging to grab attention.

So, before long brethren become more concerned with how their approach appeals to a certain age group, a certain education level, or certain social class than they are in simply presenting the testimony of God and letting it have free course. Preachers are sought, not for being good Bible students, and their ability to share the fruits of their study, but their personal attraction to this or that age, social, economic or intellectual level. Preaching is measured more by its artistic value, entertainment rating and/or the appeal of its rhetorical style than by its Biblical content. We can easily rationalize such catering to the fleshly side of man so long we teach the truth. The problem is that we tend to draw more attention to the dressing and packaging than we do to the gospel itself. One should not detract from the gospel by wrapping it in a rude and

crude package (presentation and personality). We have all seen this in some brotherhood "characters". Neither should one want to wrap it in so pleasingly dynamic packaging that it over shadows the message itself.

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

We must face the fact that the bare truth of the gospel plainly presented will turn many off. It is not what they are looking for. The Jews wanted a sign. The Greeks sought wisdom. Paul could have given them signs. He did at other times to confirm the word. He was no dummy. He was well-educated. If this would have gotten their attention, why not use it. After winning their attention then he could have slipped the gospel in to them. He might have reached more of the noble and "better-class (?)" of people this way. Surely such would have been an asset to church in its early stages.

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

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

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

There is too much of "I am of Paul"

and "I of Apollos" etc. without our encouraging it by using excellency of speech, dynamic personalities, or any other fleshly characteristic as the means of gaining, pacifying and holding members of the church.

Brethren often openly admit that they invite men for local work or gospel meetings because of their personal appeal to certain fleshly classes. He appeals to our young. He appeals to our elderly. He appeals to our singles. He appeals to our marrieds. He appeals to our educated. He appeals to our sports fans. He appeals to our affluent. He appeals to our sophisticated neighbors. On and on ad nauseam.

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

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

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### *Moving?*

*Please notify us of you change of address. Give both you OLD and NEW addresses.*

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## Who Is Sound?

Robert Welch

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Much is said these days about who is a sound preacher and which is a sound church. Those who are liberal in their attitude toward the church's engaging in recreational and denominational arrangements for work, have persons and churches of the same kind in mind when they speak of "faithful" preachers and churches. Those who are opposed to such things have in mind those persons and churches who similarly oppose those things as they speak of "faithful" preachers and churches. But it is entirely possible that one is just about as faithful as the other, or that one is just about as faithless as the other.

The Lord insists that we "be sound in the faith." (Tit. 1:13). He also requires that we be "faithful unto death" (Rom. 2:10); and that we be "faithful in all things" (1 Tim. 3:11).

The Pharisees were meticulously sound and faithful in their tithing. But they were far from sound and faithful in a number of things which the Lord required of the Israelites. The Pharisees were never condemned for being exacting in observing any requirement of the Lord. They were condemned for their failing to keep other commands of the Lord, but were commended for that part which they meticulously observed.

"Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye tithe mint and anise and cummin, and have left undone the weightier matters of the law, justice, and mercy, and faith: but these ye ought to have done, and not to have left the other undone." (Matt. 23:23)

Church members have been known to engage in various forms of dishonest business practices; but because they attend regularly and contribute liberally they get to be considered faithful by the others. By the same rule the apostle Peter could have considered Simon the sorcerer a faithful Christian when he thought to obtain the gift of God with money (see Acts 8:20-23)

They have been known to engage habitually in various forms of immorality,

but when they attend regularly they are considered faithful and are made public examples of faithfulness by giving them public part in the worship. This was the condition existing in the church at Corinth which necessitated the severe censure of the apostle Paul in 1 Cor. 5.

There is far too great a tendency to consider a congregation faithful merely because it does not financially support some separate human organizations; when, in fact, it may be the harboring place for all the misfits and immoral outcasts of the area, embracing all kinds of personal strife and jealousies. Such a church may be so considered faithful but it may be harboring and endorsing people with all kinds of false doctrines and compromising ways with evil and error. The church at Ephesus would not permit some things to come in, but because they had left their first love their candlestick was about to be removed. They were right in one thing and were commended for it, but that one thing did not make a faithful church (See Rev. 2:2-6).

Many churches are in the habit of accepting without question brethren who come to them for membership. They consider these brethren as sound because they come from a congregation which is well known to be sound. The saints in Jerusalem were right in not receiving Paul with open arms before they found out about him (Acts 9:26-30). Brethren are admonished: "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but prove the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets are gone out into the world." (1 John 4:1)

It is far too easy to consider a church as sound because it sounds forth the truth on the issues; while internally it may be opposed to scriptural organization; or as an opposite unscriptural extreme it may have one or more self-willed lords operating under the title elder, who, in fact, act as Diotrophes (see Heb. 13:17;

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## Thanks

As we begin 1987, we want to just give a word of thanks to **Merchant's Printers & Shopper's Guide** and to **TekSouth** for their valuable and continued assistance in getting this paper out.

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## SCHEDULE OF SERVICES

## Sundays:

Bible Classes ..... 9:45 a.m.  
 Worship ..... 10:45 a.m.  
 Worship ..... 6:00 p.m.

## Wednesdays:

Bible Class ..... 10:00 a.m.  
 Bible Classes ..... 7:30 p.m.

## SOUND

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Tit. 1:7; 1 Pet. 5:3; 2 Jno. 9,10).

Preachers are sometimes considered sound because they preach the truth on the institutional question but their personal lives may be far from exemplary. One may be constantly engaged in personal, bitter bickering; but because he "stands on the issues" he is thought to be sound. Another is "sound" even though he may have been involved in a trail of "affairs" in his preaching itinerary. Of course he is not sound in the faith even though he may stand for the truth on some issues which confront churches today. Soundness comprehends all scriptural precepts and principles.

(EDITOR'S NOTE: Brother Welch, who used to live and preach in this area, makes some pertinent comments on an ever-growing tendency overlook ungodliness among brethren so long as they do not "support the institutions". It is a problem that more of us need to think about and address ourselves to. We commend the article to you. - Ed).

## A BIBLE CLASS TEACHER'S PRAYER

Several souls  
 Will come to me today  
 To hear of Thee.  
 What I am,  
 What I say,  
 Will lead them to Thee,  
 Or Drive them away.  
 Stand by, Lord, I pray.

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## See Who I Am

I am the greatest one in the world.  
 I have killed and maimed and ruined.  
 If the world of the world  
 I have turned it upside down.  
 I have made millions of slaves.  
 I have transformed many ambitious men  
 into hopeless pariahs.  
 I made smooth the downward path for  
 countless millions.  
 I destroy the weak and weaken the strong.  
 I make the wise man a fool and trample  
 the fool into his folly.  
 I ensnare the innocent.  
 The abandoned wife knows me, the hungry  
 children know me.  
 The parents, whose child has bowed their  
 gray heads in sorrow, know me.  
 I have ruined millions and shall try to ruin  
 millions more.  
 I am alcohol.

H.W. Gibson in *Young Pilgrim*  
 Via *The Speaker's Sourcebook*.

Wine is a mocker,  
 Intoxicating drink arouses brawling,  
 And whoever is led astray by it is not  
 wise.

-- Proverbs 20:1 (NKJV).