

It Was Bound To Happen

"First Elders' Conference meets goals", reads a headline in "The Lipscomb News" of November 1983. Now for the details:

"Some 48 men from congregations of the church of Christ in middle Tennessee and southern Kentucky visited the David Lipscomb College campus Oct. 8 for the first Elders' Conference."

"The Elder's Conference is an outgrowth of a desire at Lipscomb to help identify the needs of elders and develop means of meeting those needs."

For those active in the controversy of the last 30, or so, years over church work and organization, this is a sad but not surprising development. We warned years ago that the concepts of church organization that allows churches to support human institutions (Colleges, Benevolent organizations, etc.) and/or "sponsoring churches" could eventually lead to steps such as this - a step that moves just a little closer to denominational status and universal organization. We cannot help now but wonder just how long it will be until such a conference becomes wider than "congregations of the church of Christ in middle Tennessee and southern Kentucky" to include elders from "congregations of the church of Christ" (an expression of a denominational concept) from the U.S., northern Mexico and southern Canada. In fact, the concept sets no bounds short of a world-wide conference, or convention.

What church sponsored this conference? None! Which church was the host church? None! It was David Lipscomb College, whose spokesman stated, "Of the many things that have marked this administration, (Lipscomb's administration- EOB) one as been building stronger and stronger ties with the brotherhood...."

The spokesman said, "After a lot of discussion and boiling it down, we decided we first of all need to be more oriented to the role of a shepherd instead of the role of an administrator. So the first training exercise was to focus on what a biblical shepherd did and what we ought to do."

One thing "a biblical shepherd did and what we ought to do" was to, along with other local shepherds (the only kind in the Bible) was to "tend the flock of God among them" (1 Peter 5:1-5; Acts 14:23). One thing

"a biblical shepherd did(not) do and what we ought(not) to do" is to meet in conference or convention with other shepherds in the area or throughout the world. If so, where is the passage that authorizes it.

The issues that forced many of us to come out and be separate from these brethren was more than just over how to best care for some orphans or how to carry out the Great Commission - it was even more fundamental than that. It involved attitudes toward biblical authority and the basic structure of the church -- attitudes and steps (however small they may have seemed at the time) toward full-fledged denominational organization. We preached, warned, and pleaded -- often with tears -- that brethren abandon the attitude that would lead to such conferences.

For those fainthearted brethren who are crying for us to get back together with our brethren who favor church supported institutions and pooled resources- arrangements (but maybe have not gone as far those at Lipscomb) -- take note of this development. To unite, without basic changes in attitudes, would place us once again where we were years ago when the controversy first heated up. It would be only a matter of time until such developments as this would be supported and/or tolerated by this union. Brethren, don't let anyone fool you, the sentiment toward working out some kind of accommodation with such brethren is growing. And it is a sentiment for a return to the very conditions that has led to this human institution's sponsoring an area-wide (the area can be widened as far as the imagination can stretch) elders' conference. Brethren that is why we "make a big deal" out efforts to forge such compromising unions and accommodations with our more liberal-minded brethren. That is why it cannot simply be "business as usual" with brethren who openly support such compromises.

I strongly suspect that if I were a member of a congregation and did not know how far the preacher or elders were willing to go to reach an accommodation with the institutional brethren in the area that I would be asking some probing questions of them to find out.

-- Edward O. Bragwell, Sr

Perils Of Preachers

"In journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by my own countrymen, in perils by the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren;...besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my anxiety for all the churches." - 2 Cor. 11:26-28

A preacher I once knew answered the question, "Are in you engaged in a hazardous occupation?", on an insurance application: "Yes, I preach".

Thanks to God's providence, our government and good brethren, few of us have felt threatened physically. About the only discomfort we feel is indigestion caused by being overly-stuffed by the good sisters in gospel meetings. But, there are more subtle perils to our effectiveness and general spiritual well-being as gospel preachers. Since this paper goes to a goodly number of preachers, especially younger ones, I thought it might be good to think about some of these preachers' perils:

1. DEPRESSION is a real peril. I am not talking about normal concern for conditions in the world and among brethren. Paul expressed anxiety for all the churches. I am talking about the sense that all is lost with little use to continue. It is Elijah's state of mind (1 Kings 19). He had to be reminded that things were not nearly as bad as he pictured them. In fact, rather than he alone being left (v. 14) there were "seven thousand in Israel" who had not bowed to Baal. How about that! Things were 7,000 times better off than he had thought!

One is likely to become depressed if he gets his information solely from "the news". Bad news makes news, both secular and religious. A small misbehaving element of society makes today's news (papers, magazines, or broadcast). How many of your neighbors have ever been on the news? Let one of them rob a bank and he will get his name in the paper. But none of hundreds who worked and made the deposits that he robbed ever were written up. It is easy to measure all of society by the few who make the news.

If you allow your perception of brethren to be formed primarily by what you read in the religious papers, you will likely become depressed. You may think that all brethren everywhere are misbehaving, or that nearly all preachers are fussing with each other over something, or that nearly all congregations are having serious diffi-

culties. It is enough to make one say, "move over Elijah".

Are we down on papers? No! We need religious papers of warn of things going on among brethren - just as we need the secular press to keep us informed of secular affairs. But, if these are our prime sources of information about brethren our view of things is going to be pretty dismal.

For every dishonorable brother that we read about or hear about through the "grapevine", there are hundreds who are quietly going about the Lord's work almost unnoticed. For every troubled congregation that you hear about, there are hundreds working and worshipping peacefully who never catch the attention of any writing brother.

A city-raised preacher friend of mine was once given a country smoked Tennessee ham. Before he ate it, he almost threw it away. It was all molded and thus must have been rotten throughout! He didn't know that surface mold was normal for such hams. Of course, he didn't want to eat molded meat - but only a tiny percentage was molded. The problem was that that tiny percentage was the more visible part. It is easy to see only the more visible "molded" brethren and churches and conclude that all is lost when, if one would just look a little closer, things are really much better than he may think.

We cannot let the conduct and problems of a few to depress us and sap our energy away from getting on with bringing the lost to Christ and building them up in the faith. We must recognize problems for what they are, do all we can to avoid and solve them, not letting them get us down to the point of hindering our work in the Lord and cause us to be down on brethren in general.

2. POLLYANNAISM is a peril. According to the dictionaries, Pollyannaism is blind optimism -- the opposite extreme from depression. Depression sees a world gone to pot, Pollyannaism refuses to see the pot. Some brethren walk around with their heads so far above the clouds, with smiles that cover their eyes, making them unable to see reality. They know that the Bible condemns "false brethren" and they will too - if they ever see any. They know that the Bible is hard on sin, in and out of the church, and they will be too - if they ever find a sinner in the church. They would withdraw from a disorderly person - if they ever found one. In fact, they may be surrounded by such

and really not see them because they have so conditioned themselves to thinking positively about brethren to the point of being unrealistic. They may be hard working, "dynamic soul-winners" who cannot find the time or inclination to think about any internal corruption that might threaten the church. To them, if we will just get busy converting the world, building up the church, then all the pesky problems that plague churches will either never arise or will go away. Internal problems are not problems where they work and worship - because they refuse to even think about them. They are not depressed but neither are they very realistic. These naive souls could fall in a pit, drown, thinking they had fallen into a tub of butter. Such an attitude is dangerous because it will hinder one from fulfilling the charge that Paul gave Timothy to "reprove and rebuke" brethren (2 Tim. 4:1-5)

3. ENTANGLEMENT is a peril. Paul warns the young evangelist Timothy against "entangl(ing) himself in the affairs of this life". I take it that he is not saying have no interest in the affairs of this life, but not to become so entangled that it would hinder his work as a Christian and evangelist. I have known preachers, fully supported by the church, who have become so entangled in secular (social, civic, and/or economic) activities that they all but cancelled out their effectiveness as preachers. When brethren see them coming they don't know whether they will hear about souls or soaps; the plan to "lay aside every weight" (cf. Heb. 12:1) or the latest sure-fire plan to lose weight now; a pitch on insuring their Calling and Election or one on ensuring their life for a bundle. Brethren grow tired, and I don't blame them, of preachers who are always approaching them with, "Boy, have I got a deal for you". If one must supplement his income (and many must), then let him do it - but not get so engrossed with his "sideline" that it virtually becomes his mainline. Also, let us be honest with the brethren. If they think they are supporting us "full-time", they ought not to be led to believe that such is the case when they really are not! We who preach the gospel today need the same warning that Paul gave Timothy: "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have straved from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. But you, O man of God, flee these things..." (1 Tim. 6:10,11).

Having said that, one other word needs to be said. Brethren could go a long way in

removing the temptation to become so entangled from good preachers by being more considerate of their financial needs. In some cases, preachers ought to be named, "Lazarus", because they are expected to beg and eat the crumbs that fall from the rich brethren's table.

4. OTHER BRETHREN'S DISPUTES are perilous for preachers. Preachers need to be awfully careful about becoming involved and remember: "He who passes by and meddles in a quarrel not his own is like one who takes a dog by the ears." (Prov. 26:17). Not even our Lord felt that he must become an arbitrator in every dispute that was brought to him: "Then one from the crowd said to Him, 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.' But he said to him, 'Man, who made Me a judge or an arbitrator over you?'" (Luke 12:13,14).

There may very well be cases where an impartial outside observer, who is respected and wise enough, can be called in and help brethren settle their difficulties. In such cases we find no fault, but such cases are rare. In general we have seen that little is accomplished and often matters are made worse. We think it significant that Paul's remedy for the law-suits at Corinth was, "Is it so, that there is not a wise man AMONG YOU...who will be able to judge between his brethren?" Who would be able to deal with the matter better than one AMONG THEM who best knew the parties and details of the dispute?

We can't help but wonder what would have become of the early Gentile churches had the dispute between Paul and Barnabas, in Acts 15: 36-41, occurred under conditions all too prevalent today. It might very well have been that they would have been permanently divided over it.

By the time each man (Paul, Barnabas, Silas and John Mark) was through writing letters to all the churches explaining his side of the dispute.

By the time all the circular letters ("brotherhood" papers) had been published about the matter.

By the time each had replied to the letters of the others to correct all the distortions and replies to the replies had been duly made.

By the time each of them insisted that they leave town TOGETHER or not at all.

By the time Barnabas told every brother whose ear he could catch his "side of the story" about how hard-hearted Paul was in not forgiving John Mark's mistake.

By the time Paul countered by pointing

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out how self-willed Barnabas was in insisting on carrying his relative along.

By the time each had expressed his disappointment in his friends (some mutual friends) who did not take his part in the matter.

By the time the other apostles had injected themselves into the dispute - after all a dispute this serious ("the contention became so sharp") demanded their standing on one side or the other.

By the time all the other friendly observing brethren in Antioch and Jerusalem put two-cents worth in as to who they thought was at fault in the dispute or else blaming both parties for not giving in on the matter and wringing their hands crying, "what is the church coming to when two men like that can't get along?"

By the time brethren "both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth" decided who caused "that trouble over at Antioch", based on what they had "been reading in the letters."

By the time scribes as far away as Antioch of Pisidia had written brother Luke up, because they heard that he was going to write just a brief account of the incident in his upcoming new book on church history, without particularly blaming anyone, and stick it away in the middle of the book. If he was afraid to take a firm stand on the matter, why did he just not say so, instead of virtually sweeping it under the rug like that!

By now, they would have had to cancel any plans of going to encourage the brethren and preach the gospel in Asia. Even if they went ahead with their separate tours they each need to take time-out at every stop along the way to fire off another letter to all the brethren to remind them that they were waiting for the apology due from the other with John Mark and Silas amending in post scripts. They would have to be sure to save enough copies to pass out from their respective booths at the lectures at "the school of Tyrannus".

In fact, by the time all of this happened

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opened the brethren throughout Asia Minor would have been so disgusted with them that they would likely have closed their doors to them anyway. Paul and Barnabas would be so hurt by now that they would never fellowship each other again or any brethren who did.

The churches in the area might have folded from discouragement or continued in bitter strife between the Paulites (those who just knew Paul was right in that dispute) and the Barnabasites (who just knew that Barnabas, as a good man, must be right).

Paul and Barnabas' sharp dispute was over a matter of judgement. It was not over whether or not the gospel should be preached in Asia Minor. It was not over the kind of churches that should be established and encourage. It was not over any fear that either would "yield submission even for a hour" to "false brethren" (cf. Gal.2:4-5). It was over how or by whom (John Mark or perhaps another) the work could be most effectively done at that time and place.

It was not over anything that would affect the faith and purity of the brethren or the nature of the kingdom of God.

Why can't brethren who have such disagreements either come to complete agreement in their judgement or else agree to disagree and go ahead doing the Lord's work - encouraging each other even if they cannot bring themselves to work together without trying to involve the whole brotherhood in their dispute? Why can't brethren recognize local and personal judgement disputes for what they are without injecting themselves into them - leaving it to the parties themselves to work it out?

At any rate, any involvement we have in such matters should be with fear and trembling -- recognizing that any involvement is extremely hazardous. We have to understand that there are some matters that we are simply in no position to settle and it is best to back off, threat all parties in the dispute as brethren, and hope they will have enough sense sooner or later to either settle it or forget it.

These are indeed perilous times, but I believe that if we preachers (and other Christians) would be more understanding of these dangers that our work and influence would be far more effective.

After I hear from this article, I may be writing next time on the perils of writing

in an article like this. Edward O. Bragwell, Sr.

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