

"FULL TIME HOSPITAL MINISTER"

"Help us place a full time hospital minister in M. D. Anderson Hospital in the Texas Medical Center to serve the needs of the 60 patients from churches of Christ who daily receive treatment there.....Please put us in your budget now for \$50, \$100, \$200, or more per month..."

-- Excerpts from a recent letter

This project will be viewed by some as a great step forward in extending the "ministry" of the church. This progressive church is not only willing to hire such a "minister" -- they are willing to let us help them pay for it!

What on earth could be wrong with such a project as this? Why not put a full time minister into every hospital and nursing home in the country? Why not? There is not one iota of scriptural authority for the church's being in that kind of "ministry". It is not the mission of the church to minister to the physical, social nor psychological needs of people. It is in the soul-saving business. (See Eph. 4:11-16; 1 Tim. 3:15).

There are two basic things that disturb us about a report like this:

1. That brethren would think that such is the mission of the church.

If such a work is the mission of the CHURCH, just where is the verse that authorizes it? I can read where New Testament churches supported gospel preachers (Phil. 4:15,16, 1 Cor. 9), elders who labor in word and doctrine (1 Tim. 5:17,18), and saints in financial need (Acts 6; 11:29,30). But I read nothing that would parallel "hospital minister". Such is just another example of the "social gospel" shift in emphasis from the a spiritual ministry to a social one.

2. That it may just be an extension of a concept that too many brethren have had a long time.

The fact that full time gospel preachers have long been expected to be hospital ministers could have well paved the way for such a step. Too many brethren think that a major reason for "hiring" a full time preacher is that we may now have someone to spend more time ministering to the sick, afflicted, and aged. He is expected to make regular rounds at the hospital -- as one of his duties as their preacher. Just where did brethren ever get that idea? Not from the Bible. It comes from a concept formed in the minds of brethren as they watched the denominational preachers, faithfully making their appointed rounds, assigned to them by their church. Frankly, we do little to dispel that idea by of falling right into step with that concept in our practice.

Don't get me wrong. Visiting the sick, as we have opportunity, in or out of the hospital, is a good work that a Christian ought to do -- even gospel preachers. (See Matt. 25). But, it a work of every Christian -- not the work for the church to hire a full time hospital minister. Nor, to support a gospel preacher -- and turn him into a semi-official hospital/nursing home chaplain. He should gladly, visit the sick (in or out of the hospital) as he has time and opportunity -- to fulfill his personal obligation and to be an example to believers, just like any other Christian. But, not as a hired representative of the church to do the brethren's visiting for them! We need to get out of this business of thinking that we are doing "church work" when we serve the physical and emotional needs of man. Christians should do it -- but it is not "church work". --Editor.

POOR WATCHDOGS

"His watchmen are blind: they are all ignorant, they are all dumb dogs, they cannot bark; sleeping, lying down, loving to slumber." -- Isaiah 56:10

I heard the ominous bark of a dog at a house where I was about to invite folks to a gospel meeting. Here he came and there I went. The owner yelled, "Oh, come on up -- he won't hurt you." The dog didn't get the message and kept coming. Then I discovered a courage-bolstering fact -- the dog had no teeth! I never feared that dog again. Oh, his bark was a little bothersome, but I knew that I could now ignore it.

After I quit shaking, I gave some thought to watchdogs. It seems to me that there are three kinds of dogs that make poor watch dogs. The never barking -- like the ones in Isaiah. The ever barking -- at every thing that moves. The barking but biteless. I think that I have known all three types among those who should be watchmen in the Lord's church.

Some brethren simply will not expose false brethren regardless of how threatening their influence may be to the church. To them brethren are brethren -- all genuine. They don't like labels on brethren -- like "false" or "true" (cf. Gal. 2:4). They really see no danger or do not think it serious enough to raise any kind of racket.

There are other brethren to seem to always bark. They see potential apostasy and apostates under every bush. If the truth is not stated in the exact terms that they want it said -- they see grave departure from the faith. If there is any changes in means and methods from "way we have always done it" it must be unscriptural. These watchdogs do so much barking that after a while they are ignored even when the danger is real. Brethren just think it is another case of their barking at their shadow.

Then, some, like the one that scared me half to death, bark as they should; but they put no teeth into their bark. Few get the idea that they are really upset about the matter. These watchmen recognize soul-threatening influences and real dangers to the soundness, security, and peace of God's people. They bark at the right things at the right times. Yet, they greatly weaken, if not destroy, the effect of their warning. Their bark may be heard, but one perceives rather quickly that it is a harmless sound because they have no teeth. They do speak against "sin" and "error" -- but not like they think anyone has really been up to it.

I am not talking about being unkind, uncouth nor uncharitable toward any brother -- be he "true" or "false". Patience must be exercised toward one who may still have doubts but is trying to sort things out. Gentleness must be shown toward those suddenly overtaken in a fault. Some may hold some incorrect views and practices that do not particularly pose a threat to the church. I am talking about one who has turned to a life of sin, or has turned to false doctrine, or who openly promotes positions that would -- if practiced -- corrupt and compromise the Lord's church.

In cases like these it is not enough to just bark (state our opposition). We need to put some teeth into our bark. Our warning will seem rather hollow to both those guilty and to those who need to be warned against their influence -- if they see by our actions that our bark is just that -- all bark. Even though we admit that brethren are outright sinners, false teachers, and/or compromisers with error -- we have no hesitancy to so label them, but we go right on using them in our public worship, go on encouraging folks to support them in their work, announcing and supporting activities that feature them, making no difference in our treatment (except for a negative comment now and then) of them than before their defection. It is simply business as usual. We treat them as faithful brethren while we say they have become unfaithful.

Then we wonder why they never really get the message that we seriously think that they need to repent. We wonder why our warnings against their influence are not taken seriously by brethren. It might be good if we showed our teeth once in a while.-- Editor

"BE COURTEOUS"

"...Be courteous; not rendering evil for evil or reviling for reviling... -1 Peter 3:8,9.

"Courteous" is "having or showing good manners; polite...--Syn. See civil. --Ant. rude." --The Random House American Dictionary.

It may be because of the fast-paced, high-pressured, me-first, society of today. It may be aided by so much controversy among Christians. It may be that we have not really emphasized it's importance to this generation. I do not know all the causes for it -- but I do know that I am seeing a marked decline in common courtesy among my brethren. I even find myself, at times, falling into the pattern and having to apologize and repent of it. It is sad. It is sin.

It is easy to blame it all on the stress of the times. But, First Peter was written to Christians with severe trials and sufferings. In such times it would be easy for Christians to think only of themselves and be short fused with each other -- yet it was because of such trying times that Christians need to be more courteous one to another.

It may be that our lack of courtesy today is not so much due to the stress of our times, as it is to the "every man for himself" view of life. The idea that I don't see why I should be "put out" for anyone. Why should I step aside and let anyone go ahead of me. It may be due in part to all the "rights" movements -- movements that would have us think that it a sign of weakness to step back and let another have my place in line.

It may be that we parents who remember the day when common courtesy was more common have failed to demand it of our children by allowing them to grow up thinking they do not have to give place to any one; without insisting that they be courteous at home to the family.

But, whatever the cause. Whatever the background. It is becoming more and more evident that courtesy is becoming less and less evident with each new generation. It is a sin that needs our urgent attention. It is not enough to just sweep it aside with the excuse -- "well, that is just a personality trait".

Yet, as we deal with the problem of the rudeness in others, we must be careful that we do not fall into the trap of becoming discourteous toward the discourteous. We can get into the childish "he hit me first" mode and actually violate two parts of the text -- rudeness to the rude and "rendering evil for evil and reviling for reviling." God is not even pleased with discourteous treatment of discourteous people.

Like charity, courtesy begins at home. If we can learn to be courteous at home, where we are not trying to impress anyone -- then we are not likely to become discourteous in public. When one gets into the habit of being rude and crude at home then it will sooner or later spill over into his public life.

Speaking of home, a word about hospitality might be in order. Christians, of all people, should be hospitable people, especially to other Christians, and that without grumbling. It is no accident that hospitality and courtesy are mentioned in the same book.(1 Pet. 4:9).

What does hospitality have to do with courtesy? A whole lot! There are Christians who do not know how to be courteous either as hosts or guests. One can either make his guest feel that he is there because he is truly wanted -- or that he is an intruder. If one is not really welcome in your home, you should not invite him in -- take a long hard look at yourself in view of the Biblical injunction to be hospitable. If you are truly hospitable you will treat him with all the courtesy becoming to a Christian. Read the foot-washing chapter, John 13, sometime.

There is another side to the coin -- that of accepting hospitality. As a guest, I am in another's home. It is not mine. It is not for me to impose myself upon my host in such a way as to demand that he jump to my tune. It is not my place to rearrange the whole household routine. It is not my place to see that all attention is focused on me because he has been gracious enough to ask me in. It is not my

place to make demands on his attention and time, but to graciously accept his hospitality so freely given. I have known a few preachers who have stayed in private homes during meetings that were so demanding, meddlesome, and downright rude that their departure was the best event of the week!

There are so many areas where we could use the command to "be courteous". Differences are going to arise between brethren of strong convictions. They always have and always will. There is a dire need for courtesy in controversy. Just because I may disagree with a brother, or even think that he has become unfaithful or unsound is no reason to be discourteous. Do we not often resort to tactics and language that we would consider extremely discourteous -- if they were directed at us by those who might oppose us? Does the fact that we are using the tactic in "defense of truth" make it any more or less courteous?

One can be pointed. One can be plain. One can be unyielding to sin and error. One can even refuse to associate with disorderly brethren. One can still be courteous through it all. The Lord was. His apostles were. So can we.

Should we not want to be the most courteous to those that we love the most -- our families and our brethren? Is it not sadly true that we are often more discourteous to these than anyone? Is this because we think that we have to be polite to the general public in order to get what we need and want from the world -- but that we don't have to be so careful with our courtesy to family and brethren because they love us so much that they will overlook our rudeness? It may very well be that they will overlook it because they do love us and they want to please God by showing compassion and forbearance toward us. But, at the same time, does it not say something about our character? Does it not say that our public politeness policy may be a men-pleasing ploy, similar to that of the Pharisees (Matt. 6), to be used to our advantage and that the very fact that we turn it off when with family, close friends, or brethren shows that it is not genuine. That it not really being done any time to obey and please God -- but is a mere self-serving tool?

I do not believe that most brethren who are discourteous really mean to be. In fact, in most cases, they are truly surprised to learn that folks consider them rude. In many cases they really think that they are showing that they have strong character and are too strong to be controlled by the "whims" of a marriage partner, or another family member, or a friend, or an associate, or a guest, or a host, or a even a fellow Christian. When, in fact, it shows a weakness of character that shows that they cannot even control themselves enough to make themselves servants of others (Rom. 15:1-3). "For even Christ did not please Himself". He was no weakling!

It is a habit that can grow on me and overpower me before I knows it. It is hard to break, because it means that I must deny the one person that I am the closest to -- myself. But, it is habit that I must break, if I am going to please the Lord.

Brother, sister, just how courteous are you? To members of your community? To members of your family? To members of your spiritual family, the church? When you associate with them, do you go out of your way to find ways to serve their interests? To please them? Or do you try to see that things go your way or no way? Do you make them feel that their comfort and wishes come first, or do you make it clear that yours are going to be first - and they just as well get used to it.

After all, common courtesy, is simply stepping aside and giving way to the interests of another. It can not only effect your relationships with brethren, friends and family -- it can effect by relationship to God. "Be courteous" is a command of God. To ignore a command of God is sin. Think about it. -- Editor.

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