

THE REFLECTOR

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SPEAK TO US SMOOTH THINGS

Edward O. Bragwell, Jr.

It seems that there was a preacher one time who moved into Kentucky to begin work with a congregation there. The first Sunday that he was there, he preached a sermon on smoking. After the lesson, a member came up and said, "Preacher, I'm sorry, but you can't preach on that. You see, we have members here who grow tobacco and they might be offended." So next Sunday, he decided to preach on drinking. But he met with the same reply. "I'm sorry," he was told, "but you can't preach on that either. We have members here who work at the distillery, where they make bourbon." So the next Sunday the preacher thought that he would try preaching about gambling. Again, he was met with opposition. "Preacher, I'm sorry again," he was told, "but we have people here who raise horses to run them down at the race tracks. You are going to have to find something that is less offensive." Upon hearing this same story for the third time, the preacher finally threw up his hands in disgust and exclaimed, "Well what can I preach about?" The member replied, "You might try preaching about them heathen witch doctors. I don't believe there is one of them in a thousand miles of here."

I am afraid that we have too many members who just want to hear about heathen witch doctors. If preachers preach on much needed subjects such as adultery, drinking, immorality, and so on, they are rebuked by the members. As long as the preacher doesn't say things that I don't want to hear, everything is just "peachy". Too many today are like the people in Isaiah's day who told their prophets, "Do not prophesy to us right things; Speak to us smooth things, prophesy deceits." (Isaiah 30:10). They just want their ears tickled. (cf. II Tim. 4:3,4).

It seems that there are two charges that are always made, when a preacher proclaims things from God's word that members just don't want to hear. First, he is charged with negative preaching. I suppose that people never stopped to think that the majority of the ten commandments are negative in nature. This being so, it is very difficult to preach very much, without something negative in nature entering into one's preaching. I'm sure there were those in Paul's time who could have made this charge of him. He rebuked the Corinthian brethren for continuing to fellowship an adulterer. He rebuked the Galatians brethren for turning away from the gospel. Why, he even "jumped on" Peter, one of his fellow apostles.

Usually connected with the charge of negative preaching, it is also charged that this type of preaching runs people off or causes visitors to be offended. However, if you examine the New Testament, you immediately see that there were many in that day who were offended at what Christ had to say that they wanted to stone him. (John 8:48-59). Some were so offended at what Paul and Silas said that they beat them and threw them in jail. (Acts 16:16-24). I have heard it said that you really can't

(continued on page 2)

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SCHEDULE OF SERVICES

SUNDAYS:

Bible Classes 9:45 A.M.

Worship 10:45 A.M.

Worship 6:00 P.M.

WEDNESDAY:

Bible Class 10:00 A.M.

Bible Classes 7:30 P.M.

OCTOBER'S AVERAGES

Sunday Bible Classes 121 -- Sunday Morning Worship 127 -- Wednesday Evening 105
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SMOOTH THINGS

(Continued)

preach the gospel without offending someone. If you preach God, you offend the atheist. If you preach Christ, you offend the Jews. If you preach baptism for the remission sins, you offend the Calvinist. The Bible by its nature is offensive to those who are influenced by Satan. Truth is always at odds with error.

A second charge that is usually made by those who are offended by the preaching of all Bible truth is that the preacher is a hobbyist. Those who do not like to hear a particular Bible truth expressed will invariably claim that the preacher preaches every sermon on that very thing. What usually happens, though, is that a person is so offended by the mere mention of a particular subject, that when any reference is made to it, no matter how slight, that is all they hear. Maybe one statement is said about a subject in passing and the person who is so offended by that subject immediately begins to say, "See, He's harping on it again!" A person with such an attitude would probably have thought that Peter was a hobbyist. He told the people that he wrote to, "Therefore I will not be negligent to remind you always of these things, though you know them, and are established in the present truth." (II Peter 1:12). John would have been considered a hobbyist. It could have been said of him, "Love, love, love. That's all he ever talks about. I certainly wish he would talk about something else."

Preachers need to be careful to always speak the truth in love. And all of us who listen to preaching must develop the right attitude toward what is being taught. We need to search the scriptures to see that what is being taught is true. (Acts 17:10). Then, we need to determine in our hearts that we are going to follow the truth, whatever it may be. If we are studying the Bible in order to do what it says, rather than to justify ourselves, we will not try to ignore what the Bible says by making absurd charges concerning the preacher. If a preacher or any other teachers of God's word is teaching false doctrine, he should be dealt with in the way that the Bible tells us. But many times it is easier for us to say that we don't like the way the preacher is preaching, that to admit that we don't like what the Bible says and that we don't intend to do it.

† † †

Even Mason and Dixon had to draw the line somewhere.

WE PREACH NOT OURSELVES

"For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake." - 2 Cor. 4:5.

I suspect the numbers would be astounding if statistics could be compiled of people who were once identified with the Lord's church but no longer do anything that would cause one to suspect them of being members. It would probably be a revelation to learn of the real reasons for their no longer being so identified. Only the Lord can know the whole story behind each case. But, I suspect a reason high on the list would be that of misplaced loyalty at "conversion" or having shifted emphasis to the wrong thing after conversion. Either those who "converted" them so taught or so behaved so as focus their attention upon the wrong thing. Or, those "converted" focused their attention upon the wrong thing without it being the fault of the one who "converted" him. It was not the fault of Jesus that many were converted by "loaves and fishes" rather than His miracles (the evidence of His claim to deity) and thus turned aside when there were no more "loaves and fishes" to hold them. (See John 6). Nor is it always the fault of a preacher or teacher that some are converted to his personality or to the attention that he gives them. Yet, those who teach must be careful they do not allow the fruits of the gospel overshadow the gospel itself. They should take every precaution to see that one's faith stands in the gospel, in the power of God. (1 Cor. 2:1-5; 15:1-4). One's faith will only last as long as he finds the object of his faith attractive and worthy of confidence. If he no longer feels a need for object of his faith or if his confidence in its object is weakened or destroyed, his faith is destroyed.

In talking with many who no longer are active in the worship and work of the church and even with some still active I have found that they are not really converted to the Lord by the evidence of the gospel nor from a desire to obey the Christ - but the fruits of the gospel (even necessary fruits). Here are some things in which people place their faith all too often only to have it destroyed if and when the object of their faith fails them. People are often converted not only by, but to:

1. A particular congregation.
2. Mere attention.
3. A good preacher.
4. A friendly church.
5. An active church.
6. Impressive good works (visitation, personal work, etc.).

But, you say, "aren't these good things?" Yes! "Aren't they necessary to the practice of Christianity?" Yes! "Should not Christians be members of a particular congregation, Christians be attentive toward others, preachers good, churches active, friendly, and have good programs of work?" Yes!

"Well, then what is the problem?" It is when the things become the object of one's faith -- when it becomes THE primary thing that causes one to become active in Christianity and keeps him active. When such is the case, one's faith is only as dependable as the preacher, the church and the programs. Should any of these fail one's faith is destroyed. The goodness of a preacher, the faithfulness of a congregation, the success or quality of a program may fail (humans are subject to such), but the truth of the gospel, the genuineness of the Christ, the power of God never fail. One can obey Christ, live right, and die in the Lord - if every preacher

in the world turns reprobate, every congregation in the world turns sour, and every program of work in the world proves futile.

Let us be careful to point people to the Christ, not to ourselves - our wisdom, our faithfulness, our zeal, our personality (even a godly one); nor to some pleasant effect of being a Christian (a united home, pleasant and caring associations, etc.) - as the drawing card to entice one to be a Christian.

Let each one considering being a Christian take heed that he becomes such for the right reason - that he is acting out of faith in the Christ (a faith based upon conviction, based on the evidence). Let each one who is a Christian take heed that he is serving Christ - first and foremost - even his service to others is tied to his loyalty to the Christ.

Let each one who is zealous for Christ and is going out to win others for the Lord take heed that they indeed win them to the Lord and not to themselves or even to their own performance in the faith. Let the emphasis be upon being united with Christ rather than with us. Let them be more interested in changing a life to conform to the will of the Lord than merely marking up another statistic to our success as "personal workers". Convince a man by the evidence that Jesus is the Christ, that the Bible is His word, that there is hell to be avoided, that there heaven to be gained, that a prescribed action is God's will, that one's eternal destiny is tied to his treatment of those facts and the doing God's will - then very little persuasion will be needed to get him to act. He will act regardless to the temporal effects of Christianity (pleasant or unpleasant). After all Jesus promised as many unpleasant temporal effects of being a Christian as he did pleasant -- see Matt. 10:22; John 16:33.

If one is converted by an over-emphasis upon the pleasant temporal effects of Christianity his faith will be too earth-bound and will fail him when persecutions, hardships and a need for sacrifices arise.

If by using persuasive words of man's wisdom or emotion-stirring persuasive devices one is induced to act, his faith will not stand in the power of God. It will rest upon the wrong foundation. Such conversions are of no real value to the person, himself, and eventually cause the the way of truth to be "evil spoken of". Such may inflate a local church's membership, help it meet it's budgetary goals and bring seeming success to our program of work. But such growth is but an illusion that helps neither the church nor the "convert".

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Nobody likes a wise guy, apparently, even if that wise guy can't fight back anymore. From Eugene, Oregon, comes a report of an old cemetery containing a crooked old tombstone, which reads

"Remember, friends, as you pass by
As you are now, so once was I
As I am now, you soon shall be
Prepare for death and follow me

Someone - just possibly a student from a nearby university - scratched in one additional verse

"To follow you, I'm not content
Until I know which way you went

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