

Reading It As It Is

J.D. Barnes, long-time gospel preacher, told me a story which he insists actually happened many years ago at Bessemer, Alabama, where he had been training men to make announcements at worship.

One nervous trainee was given a handwritten note about a gospel meeting at which Harry Pickup, Jr., was scheduled to preach at the Ensley church in Birmingham. Reading from the note, he said: "Harry, pick up Junior at 7:30 in Ensley."

—Al Diestelkamp



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Problems With Local Autonomy

By AL DIESTELKAMP

One of the most important characteristics of the Lord's church is local autonomy. Each congregation is completely independent from all other congregations or organizations.

Local autonomy is shown in several New Testament examples:

- The church in Jerusalem had control of its own membership and did not accept Saul of Tarsus until they were convinced that he truly was a disciple (Ac. 9:26);

- The apostle Paul acknowledged the right of the church in Corinth to choose their own messengers to deliver contributions to the poor saints in Jerusalem (1 Cor. 16:3); and

- Paul implied that the church in Philippi did what other churches chose not to do—support him in gospel work (Phil. 4:15).

Whenever men try to mobilize the universal church, even for seemingly noble causes, they compromise local autonomy leading to more departures from the truth. Truly, the wisdom of God's plan is seen when local churches are not swept with the tide into error. Without local autonomy, error at the "top" would permeate the whole body, resulting in wholesale apostasy.

But, admittedly, there is a "down-side" to respecting local autonomy. There are some things we may not be able to accomplish because of local autonomy:

1. We won't be able to accomplish uniformity. Every church will not be identical in what they do, or how they do it. We have come to expect uniformity in many aspects of life. No matter where we go, we expect golden arches and drive-up windows at every McDonald's, a light on at every Motel 6, and glazed donuts at every Dunkin' Donut shop. But the church is not a franchise or corporate operation. If we are following God's pattern, there will be some things the same in every place, but there will also be many differences.

We joke about congregations which don't meet at "the scriptural time," but we

need to remember that's just a joke! When we are away from home we should seek out congregations where we can worship. Simply finding a building where brethren meet doesn't always tell when they meet. I've seen visiting brethren just show up at 11 a.m. for worship only to become angry when they learn that the congregation was saying "Amen" to the closing prayer.

For others, a "red flag" might go up if they hear about a congregation which uses a description on their advertising other than "church of Christ," or if they decide not to have weddings in the building, or if they don't have a second serving of the Lord's supper, or if there is no overhead projector, or the preacher uses a modern translation, or the songbook is not one of the "standard" editions, etc., etc.

It might be a bit more convenient to visitors if all congregations had the same sign, same hours and same order of services, but God didn't organize the church that way. From man's standpoint it might seem to be a problem caused by local autonomy, but evidently God thinks the benefits outweigh the problems.

2. We will have limited resources for mass advertising and evangelism. It may be hard for some to understand why the Lord, who's "not willing that any should perish" (2 Pet. 3:9), would not want local churches to pool their funds which would enable us to evangelize using cutting-edge techniques and mass media which are financially out-of-reach to any local congregation.

The temptation is to suspend or amend our opposition to centralized control in order to accomplish something we deem to be advantageous to the cause. However, the Lord knew before the Bible was written what our dilemma would be, and still He didn't authorize the mobilization of the universal church through sponsoring churches and/or other organizations.

3. Fellowship issues will not be as "cut and dried." Even among those of us who teach and preach that each church is inde-

pendent, there are those inclined to meddle into the affairs of congregations other than the one of which they are members. Don't misunderstand me! You have a right and a responsibility to teach what you believe to be truth to anyone and everyone (even members of other congregations), but you don't have the right to use other means to bring them into compliance.

There has been much written about the "fellowship issue," centering on whether certain brethren should be called upon to preach or lead prayer. No matter what conclusion one comes to on this issue, the application must be made locally. Any attempt to enforce compliance on any congregation other than the local congregation of which one is a member is "none of our business."

We venture into dangerous territory when we begin to brand as "unfaithful" whole congregations or quarantine brethren because they have not arrived at the same convictions as we have. Our Lord had some pretty strong warnings for most of the seven churches of Asia. If we found a church today like the church in Thyatira (Rev. 2:18-29) would we consider them "faithful" or "unfaithful"? How about Sardis (Rev. 3:1-6)? As bad as things were in these churches, it appears there were some in each which pleased the Lord (2:24; 3:4). Nor did the Lord tell the faithful brethren in nearby Smyrna and Philadelphia to put a quarantine label on the other congregations.

There is a certain comfort zone we enter when we "write off" some brethren as apostate or unfaithful. We no longer feel a kinship to them and we are able to ignore them instead of trying to correct them. Furthermore, we don't have to listen to the abuse they heap upon us. But at the same time we lose the opportunity to be a safety net for a few honest truth-seekers who eventually may be open to study when they realize that they are unable to halt digressions.

We "talk a good game" when it comes to local autonomy. We need to practice what we preach.

'But That Would Mean We've Always Been Wrong!'

By **ANDY DIESTELKAMP**

One of the most difficult things to deal with when trying to teach people what they need to know is their past. "Unteaching" is always hard. People develop habits, ways of thinking and traditions that are sometimes very difficult to correct despite the best efforts of truth and reason.

The human tendency is to define what is true and good by personal experience. Thus, if you have always thought something to be true, then it might be difficult to get you to see otherwise. If you have taught or acted on your beliefs, then the likelihood of your changing becomes even more remote.

Whenever we are confronted with teachings and practices that are contrary to what we've always believed there is a tendency to become defensive. This is natural and not inherently bad. However, we must not allow our defensive reactions based on our personal pasts to be our means of determining truth.

"But that would mean that we've always been wrong!" is often a defensive reaction that is at least thought if not spoken. If that is the basis of our resistance to any teaching or practice, then we have set up ourselves and our experiences as the standard of truth. This attitude often comes out at times of controversy when truth and reason have failed to convince some.

Martin Luther, while on trial before Charles V with his life at stake, said, "Unless I shall have been convinced by the witness of Scripture or of evident proof from reason—for I do not believe either pope or councils by themselves, since it is agreed that these have often made mistakes and contradicted themselves—I am overcome by the Scriptures I have quoted, my conscience is captive to God's Word: I cannot, I will not, revoke anything, for to act against conscience is neither safe nor honest."

The response of Charles V to others after Luther had been escorted away was, "A single monk led astray by private judgment has set himself against the faith held by all Christians for a thousand years or more and impudently concludes that all Christians up to now have been in error." Notice that King Charles did not respond to Luther with scripture as requested, but with tradition. For Charles to admit that Luther was right would have been to admit that he and many others before him had been wrong. That was unimaginable to Roman Catholic leadership and therefore Luther was denounced as a heretic.

Interestingly, Luther also fell prey to the same kind of reasoning several years later on the subject of infant baptism. "If [infant] baptism were not right, it would follow that

for more than a thousand years there was no baptism or any Christendom, which is impossible....But the fact that child baptism has spread throughout all the Christian world to this day gives rise to no probability that it is wrong, but rather to a strong indication that it is right."

Christendom (as defined by Luther) had practiced infant baptism for a thousand years and throughout the world. Therefore he "reasoned" that it was right. For him to have admitted that infant baptism was without scriptural justification would have been to admit that what he perceived to be popular (orthodox) Christianity had been wrong for a millennium.

This attitude was seen in the 1960s when the Roman Catholic church was debating the issue of birth control. The first "working paper" of the Papal Birth Control Commission contained the following quote, "If contraception were not intrinsically evil, in honesty it would have to be acknowledged that the Holy Spirit...assisted Protestant churches, and that for half a century...a great part of the Catholic hierarchy...condemned most imprudently, under the pain of eternal punishment, thousands upon thousands of human acts which are now approved....For the Church to have erred so gravely in its responsibility of leading souls would be tantamount to seriously suggesting that the assistance of the Holy Spirit was lacking to her."

The argumentation is the same. To change is tantamount to suggesting that we've been wrong all this time and *that* is inconceivable (pardon the pun). My point is not to argue the issues of infant baptism or birth control. It is to point out the faulty rationale that is often used to defend what people believe and practice.

What if Saul of Tarsus had had this kind of thinking? Saul was on his way to Damascus to arrest Christians and take them bound to Jerusalem to be punished. He did this out of his zeal for God (Ac. 22:3-5). Indeed, he *thought* he must do many things against the name of Jesus of Nazareth (Ac. 26:9). This changed when he was confronted with the undeniable reality of a resurrected Jesus. Imagine if Saul had said, "If Jesus of Nazareth was raised, in honesty it would have to be acknowledged that God has been with the Christians and that for the last decade a great part of the Jewish hierarchy condemned most imprudently those thousands of disciples of Jesus. For the Sanhedrin to have erred so gravely would be tantamount to suggesting that God was not with that esteemed body. That is impossible. Thus it must be concluded that Jesus is still dead."

Saul of Tarsus did not resort to such

nonsense and neither should we. When we are confronted with the truth, it should not be our practice to defend ourselves against it by arguing from our past beliefs or those of any other group. Our response to truth should be to repent and submit.

So often we run into this "that means I've always been wrong" mentality when trying to convert someone from their misconceptions and error. We know the power the past has in keeping people from making the changes in thought and practice that need to be made. We just need to beware that we don't fall into the same pit (Gal. 6:1).

I sometimes get the impression that my brethren think that we have arrived. When did the so-called restoration movement become the restored movement? Is it possible that we have practiced some things that are wrong? Admitting the possibility of being wrong on something that has "always been believed" seriously threatens the veiled implications that the "churches of Christ" connected with the 19th Century restoration movement constitute the one church of scripture. Why, if we've been wrong on anything that has caused division, then that would seriously question our being the one church some may reason. Thus, many will stubbornly refuse to give serious consideration to old or new issues. That kind of thinking is no different from that which Martin Luther and Roman Catholicism and many others have used.

The spirit of restoring individuals and churches to the pattern revealed in God's word cannot be maintained by pointing to what uninspired men have taught and practiced in our country in the last two centuries. Each generation needs the restoration spirit and that is not sold through any bookstore, imparted by any publication, or taught by any school (church sponsored or not). No local church or collectivity of churches (denomination) can be so presumptuous as to point to themselves as being the pattern.

God's word is truth (Jn. 17:17)! Instead of trying to determine truth by looking at what we've taught and practiced in the past let's get back to God-breathed words. They are all we need for teaching, convicting, correcting, and training in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16). Remember, God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord and He will lift you up (Jas. 4:6,10). When confronted with truth it may require us humbly to acknowledge that we've always been wrong, but that gives us access to God's grace. Pride leaves us in the unenviable position of meeting the resistance of God.

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Living Up To Our Reputation

By AL DIESTELKAMP

Some brethren who hold to a more liberal view of Bible authority have accused those of us who oppose church support of institutions, centralized control and social gospel concepts of being “against everything.” Of course, this is an unfair accusation—one which is issued to prejudice and intimi-

date—used only when valid scriptural arguments are lacking.

We have no reason to be ashamed if we are labeled as “anti” when we oppose anything we find to be lacking scriptural authority (cp. Rom. 1:16; Col. 3:17). Indeed, we must be “anti-sin.” However, there may be times when some of us give the appearance of being against everything. When we op-

pose something simply because it’s new, or because we “don’t like it,” we live up to our reputation and our accusers feel vindicated.

A Case In Point

Ladies’ Bible classes have been (and continue to be) a practice which has gone unchallenged. I believe there is ample evidence of scriptural authority for them, whether done on an individual basis or as part of the teaching program of a local congregation. However, in recent years there has been considerable criticism of special “Ladies’ Day” studies which may involve women from more than one congregation.

So far, I have not heard any critic of these sessions argue that they are unscriptural. What I have heard is behind-the-scenes complaining and reluctance to announce them. Brethren, if such meetings are unscriptural opposition ought to be out in the open where they can be tested in light of the New Testament.

I’ll have to admit that I can’t imagine any argument against these special meetings which would not apply to the “traditional” ladies’ Bible classes. Let’s examine both practices at the same time.

What Will It Lead To?

I know that some are worried about what these meetings will lead to. They think it is the first step to gain the pulpits. Some think that women, after speaking before large groups of women, will develop a “lust” for the power of the pulpit. This betrays a misconception about gospel preaching. If a man preaches in order to get a “power-rush” he ought to quit preaching!

But where were these cautious souls when women started reading scripture, answering questions and making comments in adult Bible classes involving men? The risk of women “taking over” Bible classes men are teaching is greater than women preaching in our assemblies.

What Opposition Leads To

Perhaps we ought to consider what opposition to a scriptural practice will lead to. Already, many godly women have declined being speakers and teachers at such events. They fear being accused of aiding the worldly feminist movement—even though what they teach is in direct opposition to it.

If there is general authority for ladies’ meetings, then opposition has deprived young women from being taught “good things” by older women (Tit. 2:3-5).

Those who know me know that I have no tolerance for the feminist movement. That is why I feel so strongly that women who respect God’s law concerning subjection need to be teaching the next generation.

MY CHURCH

By ED BRAND

There is no subject taught in Scripture upon which “believers” are united. I have placed quotation marks around the word believers to indicate I am using this word in a special way. I use it to include everyone who “believes” the Bible. There is not even unanimity among “believers” about the inspiration and authority of Scripture.

This lack of unanimity is neither surprising nor discouraging. There was a variety of reactions to the person and work of Jesus. Some were devoted followers (Mk. 1:16-20) while others sought to kill Him (Mk. 14:1-2). I expect many were between these two extremes. Jesus provoked many responses, but this did not stop Him from teaching truth.

Toward the completion of His earthly work, He briefly mentions His church (Matt. 16:18, 18:17). He introduces a new word to describe a new relationship. His usual designation is “kingdom” or “kingdom of heaven (God)” (Matt. 16:19).

Jesus uses this word in two senses, primary and secondary. When He promises to build His church (Matt. 16:18), He speaks about the universal community of saved believers. Later references suggest this relationship transcends time; all those saved by Jesus throughout all time (Heb. 12:23) are included. There was no power, even that of the Hadean world, which would be able to stop the plan Jesus had set in motion.

This universal community of saved people is called “the church, which is His body” (Eph. 1:22-23). Men and women responding by faith, are “baptized into Christ” (Gal. 3:27). It is evident from these verses that obedient believers become a part of the body of Christ upon baptism. They are saved by the blood of Christ (Eph. 1:7), and consequently are added to His body. This is a community (body) of saved people. They are not added to His body, then saved; but they are saved, then added. Scripture does not suggest any other way to enter this relationship of the saved and Christ.

The secondary use of the word church is congregational. This relationship is smaller than the universal body of the saved. Jesus implies this in Matthew 18:17, “tell it to the church.” It is physically impossible to do this in the primary usage of the word church. No one can gather it and no one can speak for it. Thus Jesus recognized and approved of the congregational aspect of this word. The epistles frequently use the word in this way (Col. 4:16). Christians can enter this relationship by “trying to associate with the disciples” (Ac. 9:26). This local community does not contain all Christians (Col 4:16), but only some of them. The association is controlled by men (Ac. 9:26-28), and thus is subject to error and mistake (3 Jn. 9-10). Sometimes those who are included should be excluded (1 Cor. 5:13), and some are excluded who should be included (3 Jno. 10). This relationship is not entered by baptism, but upon the request of one already baptized and the acceptance of the congregation (Ac. 9:26-28).

Realizing the primary and secondary uses of the word church in the New Testament will help us avoid a sectarian concept. Carefully examining the context will assist us in making a distinction between the worldwide (universal) and congregational (local) use of this word.

Many people have not learned to make such a distinction. Multitudes believe the universal church is made up of man-made denominations of all kinds. The language of many “believers” reflects this basic misunderstanding. The universal body of Jesus is not made up of churches (denominations), it is made up of people. Sometimes confusion occurs even among Christians. Some believe the universal church is made up of congregations; the same mistake our denominational friends make, only in a different sense. The universal body of Christ is composed of saints and Christ. Our speech and practice should illustrate this distinction.

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Now I Can Laugh About It

By AL DIESTELKAMP

In December, 1991, I traveled to Prague, Czechoslovakia (now Czech Republic) for a six-month evangelistic effort. In preparation for the trip I was determined not to exceed the baggage requirements. My "carry-on" consisted of my computer and briefcase. I had repacked my briefcase several times.

The morning of the flight I opened my briefcase in order to squeeze in one more item. This required temporarily taking out some items while I rearranged things to gain space. In my haste I neglected to repack one important item—my Bible.

When I discovered my mistake I was understandably upset with myself. The fact that "it could have happened to anyone" was little comfort to me. I immediately made a call back to the U.S., asking that it be sent to me and suggesting that I be spared further embarrassment by "keeping a lid on it."

My attempt at a cover-up was foiled once the information was leaked to Matt Hennecke, a brother-in-law. He was so amused by my plight that he got up in the night and wrote a poem about it. When my Bible arrived, a laminated copy of the poem was enclosed.

Enough time has passed that I can laugh at a situation which was most embarrassing, and I'm now willing for you to laugh along at the poem I still carry with me wherever I preach:

FOR A FORGETFUL PREACHER

or

Always Remember to Czech...

*Consider an author who misplaced his thesaurus,
He'd be frightened and fearful his writing might bore us.*

*And we would have nothing but hostile and angry looks,
For the unlucky librarian who misplaced all her books.*

*And you know it's true—that people would gape,
If Superman were to fly off, but forgot his cape.*

*More likely, but still very hard to image,
Would be a policeman with gun who forgot his badge.*

*And for firemen there could be no greater woes,
Than to arrive at the blaze without water or hose.*

*And we would likely consider to be quite drunk,
A pachyderm who traileled without his trunk.*

*Or a giraffe who forgot his lengthy esophagus,
He wouldn't be able to eat, or even to cough at us.*

*We boo the ballplayer who forgets to hit or to catch,
Though we'd cheer outloud if he forgot to spit and to scratch.*

*And what of a jockey who forgot to cinch up the saddle?
He'd be tossed like a salad—and his innards would rattle.*

*And we would not think him so wise or astute,
The skydiver who forgot his own parachute.*

*So whether traveling to Toledo, Spokane or the Baja,
To Budapest, Hong Kong, Sydney or Praha,*

*For none can it be thought especially viable,
For a preacher to Go, without his Biabile . . .*

—Matt Hennecke

Sycamore Church Moves Into New Leased Meeting Place

After meeting in the Odd Fellows Hall for more than four years, the church in Sycamore, Illinois, has leased the lower level of the Planwealth office building.

The new meeting place, occupied June 1, is located on the west side of Illinois Hwy. 23 (just northeast of Peace Rd.) directly across from the Farm & Fleet store.

The new mailing address is: 1205 DeKalb Ave., Sycamore, IL 60178.

Voluntary Partners

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THINK

ON THESE THINGS

Philippians 4:8

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