

Sentence Sermons & Sermon Sentences

Some people try to live on a diet of "sentence sermons," complaining when the preacher "goes over." At the opposite extreme is the preacher who drags on so long that the congregation begins to feel like they've *been* "sentenced." My father's advice to preachers was:

1. Have something important to say;
2. Say it;
3. Sit down.

—Al Diestelkamp



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The Unfinished Work of Restoration

By AL DIESTELKAMP

Much attention has been given to what has been called the "Restoration Movement." That term is usually a reference to a period of time in our history that spanned the second half of the 19th century when many people were convinced to break ties with denominational churches and to reject their man-made creeds in favor of using the Bible as the sole guide in spiritual matters.

It was, no doubt, an exciting time! Especially effective in certain regions of our nation, this "back-to-the-Bible" appeal brought together people with widely differing religious backgrounds. Time would prove that they also brought with them varying degrees of commitment to the restoration principle, and thus division was inevitable.

Somewhere along the way some of the beneficiaries of this struggle began to think of the restoration as having been accomplished. Since then, any attempt to question the validity of doctrinal positions or the authority for practices already in place are resented. How dare we suggest that the "restorers" may have missed something!

Instead of looking at restoration as a time in the past, we should look at it as an ongoing process of spiritual growth. Furthermore, we need to rid ourselves of the notion that the church that Jesus built (Matt. 16:18) needs to be restored. Instead we need to recognize the fact that our task is to be busy restoring *ourselves* to Christ-likeness.

The church that Christ built needs neither renovation nor restoration. You can't restore what is already perfect. What we *can* restore is ourselves and the local congregations of

which we are members. In other words, the restoration process is not a brotherhood project.

Attempts to restore the church universally is essentially the same mistake the reformers in the middle-ages made, resulting in denominationalism. The wisdom of God is seen in the organization of the true church. As long as we respect that divine organization error cannot be imposed on the church universally.

The Lord adds to the church those being saved (Ac. 2:47) and only He has the power to remove anyone from that universal body. Local congregations have the obligation to expel from their midst all who "walk disorderly" (2 Thess. 3:6), but this action does not necessarily mean that their names have been blotted out of the "Book of Life" (Rev. 5:5).

Likewise, we may determine that we cannot be part of some congregations because we believe them to be practicing error, but Christ is the only one who can remove the lampstands of congregations (Rev. 2:5). At exactly what point the Lord takes this action, we cannot determine with any degree of accuracy. I wonder how many of us—had we lived during the first century—would have insisted that we have no "fellowship" with the "few names" in Sardis, considering how much the Lord had against the congregation of which they were members (Rev. 3:1-6).

Please do not interpret what I have said in the previous paragraph to mean that we should refrain from trying to teach or influence brethren in other congregations to cease teaching and practicing that which is unauthorized. In fact, we have an obligation—as we have opportunity—to exhort

those we consider erring brethren to restore themselves and their local congregations according to the pattern in the New Testament. Beyond that we have no authority.

I've already mentioned the responsibility local churches have to practice corrective discipline in order to maintain doctrinal and moral purity among them. However, this does not authorize one congregation to discipline another congregation.

Occasionally I will hear of one congregation sending out letters stating that they have "withdrawn fellowship" from another congregation. That concept is completely foreign to the New Testament. As digressive as some of the first century congregations had become, no apostle even hinted at the idea of "marking" another congregation.

There have also been times when editors of gospel papers or officials in colleges operated by brethren have attempted to police the entire brotherhood. Certainly these brethren have as much right as anyone to teach and admonish, but when they call for inter-congregational action (such as calling for quarantines or "disfellowshipping" of whole congregations) they err. I hasten to note that editors and school officials are sometimes *falsely* accused of trying to police the brotherhood whenever they dare to speak out against error. This is unfair and counter-productive to true restoration.

Restoration, instead of being a "movement" that sectarianizes, is a process that must be ongoing. There will always be a need to restore ourselves to be more like Jesus. Likewise, there is the perpetual need to restore local congregations in order to be worthy to be described as churches which are "of" Christ.

"And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him" — Col. 3:17

Of Mice & Men



By MATT HENNECKE

As I bent over to scoop up sunflower seeds for the bird feeder I noticed the mouse. Instinctively I recoiled, jerking back fast enough to drop the scoop. My pulse increased as I contemplated the furry creature. In the back of my mind I wondered how he'd gotten into the sealed container which held the fifty pounds of sunflower seeds.

I leaned closer, taking note of the cute little fellow: light brown fur, beige colored tail curled in a gentle "S," and quite *dead*. That's right. His eyes were open and he looked very well-fed but, sure enough, he was dead. Taking a pair of pliers from my toolbox I picked up the mouse by his tail and tossed him into a snow drift just outside the garage door.

How ironic, I thought. The little mouse probably thought he'd struck gold when he discovered all that sunflower seed. I can picture him happily gorging himself. I can almost imagine him thinking, "I'm rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing." Of course what the mouse didn't realize is that eating *requires* digestion and digestion *requires* water. In the midst of all his riches and wealth the little mouse died of thirst.

That little mouse got me thinking about those of us living in the United States. As a nation we are blessed beyond compare. We have riches in abundance. A trip to the local grocery store is an amazing journey into the profusion of foods available to us. Yet, even in the midst of riches, many are dying of thirst. Our bodies are filled, but our souls are parched and dying.

John said it well: "Because you say, 'I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,' and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor..." (Rev. 3:17).

We are like that little mouse who began to feel poorly while surrounded by plenty. We need "water." We cannot live without "water." Our souls long for it and will die without it. Are you thirsty? Jesus said, "the water that I give shall be a well of water springing up into everlasting life" (Jn. 4:14).

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EXCEL STILL MORE

By RICK LIGGIN

When am I religious *enough*? Or when am I spiritual *enough*? Is it enough that, as a Christian, I am a moral person? Is it enough that I am involved in the work of the Lord? Is it enough that I love my brothers and walk in a way that pleases God?

When Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, he observed that they already were actually walking in a way that pleased God (1 Thess. 4:1). And when it came to "love of the brethren," they had no need for further instruction, because they were already practicing it "toward all" (1 Thess. 4:9-10). Yet, regarding both their God-pleasing walk, as well as their love for one another, Paul urged them to "excel still more" (4:1; 4:10 - NASV). And later, Paul used the same word that translates the expression "excel still more" to tell the Corinthians that they needed to be "*abounding* in the work of the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58).

It would seem, from these texts, that the answer to our question about how much is "enough" would be: we cannot do *enough*. No matter how pleasing our walk may be to the Lord, no matter how much we love our brothers, and no matter how hard we are working for the Lord, we can—and must—"excel still more!"

Standards Less Than Excellence

There are two common philosophies by which carnally minded people of the world live. The first is to do the bare minimum! This philosophy asks, "What is the *least* I can do?" and its standard is the absolute *minimum*. The second philosophy is that of comparing oneself to others! This philosophy says, "At least I'm better than most!" Its standard is the *actions* of others.

These philosophies should not affect the people of God, but far too often they do! There are times when we settle for the bare minimum in ourselves or in our families, and there are times when we expect only the bare minimum of one another. But worse than this, there are times when we fall into the trap of comparing ourselves or our families with others, and we take comfort in the fact that at least we're "better than most." But worst of all is the fact that, at times, we (who claim to be the people of God) do not even measure up to the standards of the world! How can we possibly expect to please God when we're acting like this?

Listen! When we settle for the "bare minimum," we bring God's standard down to the level of barely adequate—and that is spiritu-

ally dangerous. And when we settle for the "status quo" of everyone else, we bring God's standard down to a substandard level—and that is spiritually deadly!

Neither of these philosophies is acceptable to the Christian. The true Christian will not be satisfied with living up to the status quo of others. He understands that when men "measure...and compare themselves with themselves, they are without understanding" (2 Cor. 10:12). Thus the true Christian will also not be satisfied with the bare minimum; he will want to "excel still more" (1 Thess 4:1). When the only standard we accept is *excellence*, the standard is not lowered at all. Rather, what happens is that we bring ourselves up to the standard of God—and that is spiritually safe!

The Pursuit of Excellence

The pursuit of excellence is clearly what God expects of His people! According to the apostle Peter, God has made us special! We are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession" (1 Pet. 3:9). But why has He made us so special? It is so "that you may proclaim the *excellencies* of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (3:9). Our God is morally excellent. He is virtuous, and He wants His own special people to reflect and proclaim His moral "*excellencies*"—His virtues—to the world.

Peter also tells us that, by His "glory and *excellence*," God "has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises," so that by these we "might become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust" (2 Pet. 1:3-4). Peter then adds: "But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue..." (1:5—NKJV). Please understand that "virtue" does not refer to the "moral *status quo* or *norm*." Nor does it refer to "moral *minimums* or *mediocrity*." It refers to "moral *excellence*." This is what we are to add—with all diligence—to our faith; this is what God expects of us!

You must understand that when you choose to do good, you reflect well on yourself. And when you choose to do better, you reflect well on the church. But when you choose to do the best (to excel still more), you reflect well on God! Settle not for the status quo or even for the bare minimum! Instead, in all you do, pursue *excellence*—choose to "excel still more!" Anything shy of excellence simply is not *enough*!

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Catering to the Community

By **ANDY DIESTELKAMP**

Maybe you've never stopped to think about it, but churches get junk mail too. We get these cellophane wrapped packages of 3x5 cards hawking everything from candy canes to diplomas. As I write this there is a card sitting on my desk that offers me answers about our community. It claims to be much more than demographics. It implies that not only will their company tell me what kinds of people live here, but what they want in a church! The company offering this is in California, but they're going to tell us in Illinois who we are, what we believe and what we want. Is this possible? Unfortunately, it might be.

Certainly it is sensible that business owners in the wholesale and retail markets who have products to sell would want to cater to the needs and wants of the majority. This will result in more sales and profits. Polling the masses will go a long way toward accomplishing this goal.

Many have assumed that using these successful marketing strategies for churches is the way to accomplish growth. If church growth is measured by the physical numbers of people filling a building, then no doubt some of these carnal methods will work.

The mega-church approach is to put a finger to the wind to determine what people want in a church and then provide it in a "Christianized" format. This is nothing new. The idolatrous knew how to appeal to the masses, throw a party and call it worship. Under the banner of the cross, crusades were justified and pagans were "invited" to convert. This conversion process was facilitated by taking the pagan holy days and giving their traditions and rituals "Christian" meanings. Today, everything from aerobics to zwiebacks need only have "ministry" tacked on the end of them and some church will justify using them "to reach out to the 'un-churched' and lost."

I know. I sound like a party-pooper, but in a culture that needs to repent but demands to be entertained the last thing churches ought to be providing is entertainment. The Christians that we read about in the scriptures were not busy polling the Roman Empire to see what everybody wanted. Truth was the only thing being offered, and it wasn't liked any better than it is today. Is the gospel still God's power to save (Rom. 1:16), or does it need to be spiced up with just a sprinkle of carnality? Paul wrote, "I...did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:1,2).

Our culture has come to shun serious study of God's word. Many join churches like they join clubs, and their loyalty is to their social affiliation and not Christ. In truth, many are lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power (2 Tim. 3:4,5). Yes, many are eager to identify themselves with a church, but how many could give any scriptural basis for their choice? The doctrine in scripture is too important to place it behind things like personal tastes, traditions and denominational loyalties.

How does a company in California know what we want in our churches? It will ask people like you and me questions such as,

"What kind of music do you prefer?" "What kinds of ministries, services and programs would you like to see offered?" As if the opinions and tastes of the majority have any relationship to what is right, good and acceptable to God, we custom design churches to "meet the needs of the community."

The real question we need to be asking is, "What does God want in a church?" It is then the obligation of the community to conform to the will of God. We have spent enough of this lifetime catering to the will of the community. Let's get back to doing God's work in God's way.

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Articles From the Days Gone By



Signs of Progress

By **LESLIE DIESTELKAMP**

We are led to believe there is real progress in a church when:

There is real unity of action

This is not just a passive unity wherein there is no strife, but it is the unity that prompts Christians to *really* work together. This spirit is manifest when each one is doing his or her part with regard to:

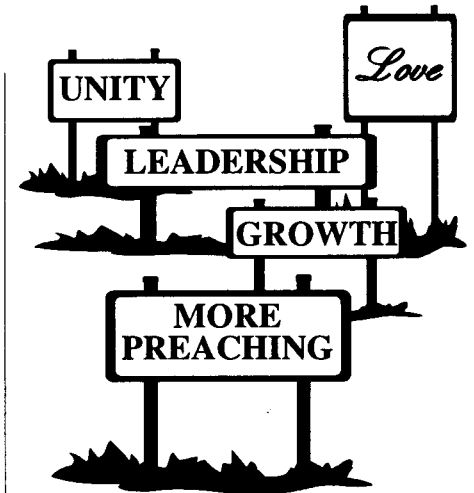
- Giving — 2 Cor. 9:6-14.
- Studying — 2 Tim. 2:15.
- Praying — 1 Thess. 5:17; 1 Tim. 2:8.
- Attending — Heb. 10:25.

There are capable leaders

When elders, with the help of deacons, teachers and other devoted followers of the Lord, sustain the work with diligence and devotion.

There is evidence of spiritual development

This includes growth in knowledge (and in the application of that knowledge) among Christians. This is not only evident when there is a fervent desire on the part of members to study God's word, but also when moral standards are higher and concentration in service is more complete.



Truth is preached more often

That is, when more and more opportunities are afforded to teach the truth, and when unadulterated gospel truth is appreciated and supported by more and more Christians. Compromise in the pulpit, classroom or the pew is a sure sign of deterioration.

There is real love for the Lord

Of course, this includes love for His word, the brethren and the lost. When this kind of love is made known by decisive, scriptural action, then that church is definitely making *real* progress!

This article first appeared in the *BERWYN BULLETIN*, September 7, 1957

Booklet Published in Response to Wayne Jackson's 'A Divided Church'

By AL DIESTELKAMP

A booklet bearing the title, *A Church Divided*, by Wayne Jackson has been published by Courier Publications, Stockton, California, and is being distributed by some congregations. Sub-titled, *Revisiting the Church Cooperation & Orphan Home Controversy*, this booklet attempts to deal with these and other issues that divided churches in the decades of the 50's and 60's.

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We are very grateful for every donation we have received to help defray the costs of this paper. This issue is expected to cost approximately \$515, which would leave a deficit of \$122.56.

Since we have no way of knowing how widely this booklet has been distributed—or will be in future months—it is only prudent to make available a response. I have written and printed, in booklet form, just such a response.

In his booklet, brother Jackson identifies and provides arguments involving four specific issues. They are: Church Cooperation; The Corporate Orphan Home; The "Saints-Only" Doctrine; and Eating In The Building.

I have titled my booklet, *A Brother At Our Door*—a reference to brother Jackson's stated intent to "revisit" these issues. Unfortunately, by the time we knew he had been "at our door" he was gone, leaving his booklet "on our steps." In it he clearly states that he has no interest in "further verbal or written 'combat' with those who may disagree."

Though brother Jackson's booklet is written in a "kinder, gentler" tone than some of the writings of others in years gone by, his arguments contain what I believe to be error, as well as some misrepresentation of the beliefs of those he calls "antis."

My desire is to make this response as available as possible. I wish I could offer it free to anyone who requests it, but that is not feasible at this time. The booklet contains 16 pages plus covers and will be sold for \$2 per copy, plus shipping. Single copies when mailed will cost \$2.60. For orders of more than one copy (as well as orders by phone or e-mail) I will be happy to enclose a bill with the booklets.

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Technology & Preaching



By AL DIESTELKAMP

Technological advances have changed just about every aspect of our lives, including our expectations. Everything must be faster and more exciting.

All this "technophilia" has had an effect on our hearing the gospel preached. Our attention spans have been stunted! If a preacher doesn't have a colorful overhead transparency to "wow" his listeners, he is likely to "lose" his audience.

Don't get me wrong! I'm not opposed to the use of well-planned visual aids. On the other hand, it *is* refreshing to occasionally hear a sermon that has been effectively delivered without visual stimulation. I hope we don't get to the point where we can't appreciate preachers like the apostle Paul, about whose speech some thought to be "contemptible" (2 Cor. 10:10). He even admitted to being "untrained in speech" (2 Cor. 11:6) but was still able to keep people's attention with his knowledge of the will of God.

We have seen the evolution of visual aids from blackboards, to "bedsheet" charts, to overhead projectors—and now—computer-generated projection systems, allowing preachers to change the image from a computer. Preachers now have the potential of adding animation, special effects and even sound effects to their sermons.

At the risk of being called "technophobic," I hope that preachers will "display" moderation in the use of this new technology. Skill at creating a professional visual presentation is good, but it's a poor substitute for being—like eloquent Apollos—"mighty in the scriptures" (Ac. 18:24).

THINK ON THESE THINGS

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