



THINK ON THESE THINGS

Philippians 4:8

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Reaching the Lost

By AL DIESTELKAMP

Christians are always looking for ways to reach the lost with the saving message of the cross. While the unchanging gospel is still the only “power of God unto salvation” (Rom. 1:16), the methods employed to convey it have changed over time.

One need only look at the record of evangelism in the book of Acts to see that even first century brethren had to find alternate ways of reaching the lost. On the day of Pentecost, and for a time thereafter, public “street preaching” was done with great effectiveness. They even held the equivalent of protracted gospel meetings, preaching “daily in the temple,” as well as teaching “in every house” (Ac. 5:42). However, as we read on in Luke’s account we see less public preaching in favor of more person-to-person evangelism being done.

After the dispersion that resulted because of increased persecution following the stoning of Stephen, we find the scattered disciples going “everywhere preaching the word” (Ac. 8:4). It seems that in Samaria preaching to large groups was still an effective tool used by Philip (Ac. 8:5-6), but he was also available to preach Christ on a one-to-one basis (Ac. 8:26-40).

Peter, who had been effective in public preaching, traveled quite a distance intending to teach one man. However, when he got to his appointed destination he found that Cornelius had gathered many friends and relatives to hear the word (Ac. 10:24).

Ananias, a disciple in Damascus, was called on to go preach the gospel to a terrorist who had dedicated himself to stamping out the message of Christ. Saul of Tarsus, immediately after his conversion, began preaching Christ in the synagogues. In fact, as the apostle Paul, that approach became his “custom” (Ac. 17:1-2), as well as debating idolaters (Ac. 17:22-34), and teaching

from “house to house” (Ac. 20:20), until his arrest forced him to do his teaching while under house arrest, with prospects having to come to him to be taught (Ac. 28:30-31).

Then there was also the written word. In order to reach the lost of every generation, and to insure the integrity of the gospel message, the Holy Spirit inspired men to evangelize through that means. Thus we see that our first century brethren used whatever means were available, depending on the circumstances, to preach the gospel.

I am convinced that through the middle centuries there was a remnant of God’s people who did what they could to advance the cause of Christ, but just how they went about it, I would not dare speculate. However, we do have a glimpse into the methods of brethren in modern times, from the 18th century up to the present, and again, the methods have changed with the times and circumstances.

Pioneer preachers in the era that is sometimes referred to as “the restoration movement,” used most of the same methods employed by first century Christians. They preached with great success in large public outdoor gatherings that brought out literally thousands of persons, most from sectarian backgrounds. This led to public debates that also proved to be effective in reaching those in religious error. Not unlike the apostle Paul, who went into the synagogues to teach, it was not uncommon for gospel preachers of that era to go into the meetinghouses of Baptist, Methodist and Presbyterian churches to present the unadulterated gospel.

Our nation’s Civil War in the mid 19th century put a damper on evangelistic efforts for the time, as did controversies regarding the organization of the church and the use of instrumental music in worship. By the onset of the 20th century the resulting division had pretty well taken its course.

By the mid-20th century brethren were

able to utilize some evangelistic methods and tools that had not been available in earlier times. Congregations with ability would purchase airtime on local radio stations or place teaching ads in newspapers. At the same time, congregations usually hosted at least two week-long gospel meetings each year. Often, these meetings would result in conversions. I remember a meeting in which we went to the creek about every night (one night witnessing eleven baptisms).

Especially in the late 1950s and early 1960s an emphasis on personal evangelism was revived, encouraging small group studies (also called “cottage meetings”), or one-on-one studies utilizing self-made outlines or the use of purchased charts or filmstrips, resulting in moderate success. Congregations continued to have gospel meetings, but over the years these efforts have actually become more focused toward edifying Christians than reaching the lost. This is not a criticism. After all, you can’t preach to people who aren’t there.

Enough about the past! What about now? We have even more avenues of reaching people, including direct-mail, professionally produced videos and church websites. Even so, we’re finding it difficult to find people willing to give God’s word a chance. The congregation I work with has done an unusual amount of direct-mail advertising over the past year, reaching virtually every home in our community. We have had a number of initial responses, but none who will continue to attend our assemblies or accept an invitation for private studies.

Of course, we must press on and not give up on our efforts. In the meantime we can rejoice that in some parts of the world the gospel is being received more readily than here in our nation. Interestingly enough, the places the gospel is having the greatest impact are some of the poorest of nations.

Hmmm. Maybe we need to pray for God to humble our nation economically!

APOSTOLIC TRADITIONS VS. TRADITIONAL LIBERTIES

By ANDY DIESTELKAMP

Confronting the traditions of men is never easy. Yes, those having a rebellious spirit may take some perverse pleasure in being counter-cultural and dunking the heads of the ignorant in the fountain of truth; but those whose desire is to “win the more” will more often find themselves becoming “all things to all men” (1 Cor. 9:19-22), in meekness correcting those who are in opposition (2 Tim. 2:25), and taking them aside to show them the way of truth more perfectly (Ac. 18:24-26). Yet, it is also true that sometimes the stubbornness and/or hypocrisy of men requires sharper rebukes in order to call attention to dire and damnable circumstances (Gal. 2:11-14). May we learn to discern when each is most appropriate.

When Jesus spat on the ground, made mud by mixing and kneading dirt and spittle, and then applied that mud to a blind man in the process of healing him (Jn. 9:6), Jesus *intentionally* violated the traditions of those who had taken it upon themselves to define work that was forbidden on the Sabbath. (We know that making the mud was unnecessary to healing the man because by this time Jesus had already demonstrated His ability to heal with just a word—e.g. Matt. 8:16.) Jesus did not intentionally violate their traditions because He was against traditions but because many of the scribes and Pharisees were more enamored with their traditions than with the truth. What’s more, their traditions had blinded them to the truth. I find this sobering as I reflect upon our own traditions.

In this article I am using the word *tradition* as it is most often used in Scripture: in reference to routine behaviors that have not only been accepted and handed down to subsequent generations but are often expected by a particular

group of people. Certainly, the Holy Spirit inspired the handing down of traditions through the apostles and prophets of Jesus Christ, and we are under divine obligation to keep and follow these (2 Thess. 2:13-15; 3:6-15; 1 Cor. 11:1,2). These must *not* be discarded as mere traditions of men. It is imperative that we are able to distinguish between the traditional patterns revealed in Scripture and those which are not. The latter can range from the relatively harmless traditions formed by the repetitive exercise of liberties to harmful departures from and contradictions to the revealed word (Col. 2:6-8). Yet even the repetitive exercise of liberties can become that which is expected, bound, and, ironically, may actually interfere with keeping the commandments of God (cf. Matt. 5:1-9).

Over eight years ago the congregation of which I am a part decided to break with the tradition of assembling a second time in the afternoon/evening of the first day of the week. This was not done to make any kind of statement about the traditions of men (like Jesus did by spitting on the Sabbath). It was not done to avoid the controversy of “the second opportunity to take the Lord’s Supper.” (That relatively modern tradition of men had ceased in the Pontiac, Illinois, church before I ever moved here twenty-seven years ago.) It certainly was not done to start a trend. It was done for expediency and to accommodate the needs/wants of the local congregation.

Every church does this when it originally establishes its customary times of assembly. There are reasons that most modern churches do not assemble at sunrise or routinely extend their services till midnight (cf. Acts 20:7), and most of them have to do with preference and comfort. Often the needs/wants of a local church change over time due to a variety of influences, and the local church should not feel itself bound to “the way we’ve always done it” in matters of liberty that are no longer expedient or to traditional “brotherhood” expectations. Yet, this often happens for fear of what others will think.

Sometimes brethren jokingly refer to “unscriptural” times of assembly or song-books or seating arrangements or the order in which things are done. What makes these remarks humorous is the acknowledgement that often doing something in a different way “seems wrong” because it is uncomfortable to break a habit or tradition. Yet the value in breaking human traditions is that it avoids raising up a generation that religiously binds those traditions and, by so doing, actually increases the likelihood of that generation rejecting the commandments of God because of its ignorance of

what is and is not authorized according to the Scriptures.

Of course, patience is a quality of the fruit of the spirit and should be shown in any effort to correct the misconceptions of brethren with regard to what can be discarded as a traditional liberty. Conversely, those who find themselves resisting change simply because it’s “the way we’ve always done it” should not exaggerate matters of preference to matters of conscience and test the patience of their brethren when they have no sound scriptural argument for their objection.

Yes, there are some among the churches who are wolves in sheep’s clothing seeking to undermine apostolic traditions and patterns. Many of them will begin by questioning traditional liberties and the ways we have always done things. This is cunning, for this mode of operation in the true law of the jungle—like a roaring lion—attacks the weakest in going for the kill.

The proper response, however, is not to characterize all who question the expediency of cherished traditional liberties (times of assembly, church buildings, the identification “Church of Christ,” etc.) as predatory change agents but to teach the difference between traditional liberties (which may or may not be expedient any longer) and apostolic traditions and patterns which we are not at liberty to alter, regardless of cultural changes or prevailing opinions. For if we fail to acknowledge, teach, and even modify our behaviors based on this distinction between traditions, we set up ourselves and our children to eventually reject even apostolic traditions.

We cannot protect apostolic traditions with a hedge of traditional liberties that serve as a litmus test of soundness. It didn’t work for the Jews. It won’t work for us. I believe that there is general authority for a church to assemble as often as it deems expedient (cf. Heb. 10:25). However, multiple assemblies of a church on the first day of the week is without example in the Scriptures and may have its origins in a variety of misconceptions (e.g. Christian Sabbath). Again, neither the lack of scriptural example nor the possible misconceptions that led to the idea of multiple assemblies make assembling twice on Sunday wrong; but woe unto those who judge their brethren as weak, carnal, or predatory change agents simply because they do not keep a traditional liberty of dubious origin. Beware, because there may be “many such things [we] do” (Mk. 7:8) when our own traditions become as or more important than God’s traditions.

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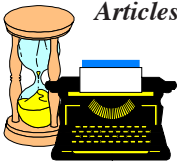
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FIRST LOVE

By **LESLIE DIESTELKAMP** (1911-1995)

It is thrilling to see the zeal of a young preacher who loves the Lord and lost souls. No task is too hard for him to try, and no sacrifice too great for him to bear. He constantly tries to convert the lost, strengthen the weak and encourage the strong. But as he matures and his ability becomes greater, so often his zeal becomes less.

Sometimes materialistic problems crowd out his former love. But whatever the cause, he loses his first love—a love that had sent him out into the highways and byways, seeking the lost. He becomes content to preach to the captive crowd inside the four walls of the local meeting house. And he soothes his conscience by insisting that he is keeping the congregation “sound.”

Sometimes we hear of an experienced, mature preacher who leaves the security(?) of a strong congregation, and able eldership, a fine church building and a good preacher’s house to go out into the new or difficult fields. But this doesn’t happen very often. Usually, for some strange reason, we still have the false concept that demands the best preachers for the strongest churches. This consigns the young, inexperienced ones to the newer, harder fields where the strongest men ought to be.

Contemplate with me: What would happen this year if every mature preacher who works with a well-established church that has elders would spend 50% of his time—or even 25%—in new or destitute fields? Souls would be converted, congregations would be established, struggling groups would be encouraged. And, significantly, the strong churches that would send the preachers out would become much stronger internally because they would have to take up the local work themselves.

With a little encouragement from all of the Christians, many preachers might actually regain their first love!

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MOVING?
Don't forget to send us your change of address

A Future and a Hope

By **NATHAN COMBS**

In the context of Jeremiah 29, the nation of Judah was in its death throes. The wicked and worthless grandson of the righteous king Josiah, Jeconiah (also known in scripture as Coniah and Jehoiachin) had been taken captive by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon in 597 B.C. Along with him went his mother, the important officials, and the skilled craftsmen of Judah, leaving the rest of the country crippled and impotent. Jeremiah wrote a letter to these exiles, telling them that their stay in Babylon was not going to be a temporary arrangement and that they would experience exile for seventy years (vs. 10). Therefore, they would need to build houses, plant gardens, marry, and bear children. In vs. 11, probably the best-known verse of the chapter, God tells the exiles that His ultimate plan for the people was not destruction and discouragement but “a future and a hope.” In this text, we see both the dangers that threatened to prevent the Jews from having hope and the blessings that would accompany the fulfillment of this hope.

The primary danger the exiles faced was believing the lies of false prophets. In the Bible, false prophets frequently manifested their dishonesty by painting rosy pictures that had no foundation in truth. For example, Ahab’s prophets falsely told him that God would give Ramoth-Gilead into his hand (1 Ki. 22:12). During Jeremiah’s ministry, the prophet Hananiah told all the people of Judah that God would bring back the temple vessels and all the exiles within two years (Jer. 28:2-4). And apparently in Babylon, just as in Judah, there were false prophets spreading erroneous messages about the length of their exile. In vs. 21, we learn the specific names of two false prophets, Ahab the son of Kolaiah and Zedekiah the son of Maaseiah, who spoke lies to the exiles (as well as sleeping with their neighbors’ wives!) and met a gruesome end as a result (vss. 21-22). Such lies posed a danger because rather than building their lives on the bedrock of God’s promises, they comforted themselves with empty hopes.

Do we harbor false hopes? Do we rest in comfortable assumptions that have no basis in Biblical reality? The expectation that my Christian life will be carefree and without pain or friction in my relationships is false (2 Tim. 3:12). So is the expectation that my Christian community revolves around me and my needs (Matt. 20:25-28), or that I can live a secluded, secretive life and not allow other Christians to help me with my spiritual struggles (Jas. 5:16). The

expectation that I will be able to schedule and compartmentalize my relationship with Jesus so that it is contained and doesn’t demand too much of my life is false (Lk. 9:23-24). The danger of false messages of hope lies not only in trusting words that are not from God but also in neglecting the *real* promises that God actually did make and ignoring the requirements He sets to participate in their fullness.

In contrast to the lies of Ahab and Zedekiah, Jeremiah told the people the truth about the duration of their banishment and the horrific punishment that would swiftly come to Judah and “all the kingdoms of the earth” because they didn’t pay attention to God’s messages. However, the prophet not only gave a sweeping declaration of doom but also focused on the blessings that would come from God in this coming future. For example, in contrast to other statements in the book about God ignoring their belated cries for help in the day of punishment (Jer. 11:11), in this future God’s people would be able to pray and He would hear them and answer them (vs. 12). God promised to be found if sought by the exiles with their whole hearts, which strongly correlates to promises that Jesus made to His disciples in the New Testament (Matt. 7:7-11). God also vowed in this passage that the Jewish captives would eventually be brought back from their exile (a promise which he kept) and strongly hints of a future time when he would unite His people under the banner of the Messiah, Jesus.

Do we possess a strong hope in the accessibility of God—that He is not distant from us if He is sought diligently? Do we constantly search for Him in prayer in order to deepen our relationship with Him, or do we only cry out to Him after facing the pain of our sin? Do we find ways to remind ourselves of the promise that God will someday set His broken creation to rights by bringing us back from our exile in sin into a promised land of rest where we will be united together with Him throughout eternity? Such promises provide a firm foundation in the midst of discouragement, punishment, or pain.

Godly hope is never unrealistic or untrue. Godly hope is not based on our desires, wishes, or whims but is firmly anchored in the reality of promises that God makes. Rather than tempt us with sugar-coated lies which conceal our true spiritual condition, God exposes the horror of our own sin to us in order to bring us back from spiritual exile. Surely the reality of hope is infinitely more satisfying than the delusion of sin!

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10th Annual Men's Overnight Bible Study

DECLARING GOD'S STRENGTH TO THE NEXT GENERATION



SEWELL HALL



L.A. STAUFFER



KARL DIESTELKAMP



BOYD SELLERS



JOE NOVAK



AL DIESTELKAMP

The 10th Annual Men's Overnight Bible Study will be held Friday and Saturday, September 27-28 at Illinois District Camp in Wapella, Illinois.

This year's theme, taken from Psalm 71, is *Declaring God's Strength to the Next Generation*, and will feature the following lessons taught by six gospel preachers representing "the older generation":

FRIDAY NIGHT

BOYD SELLERS

"Declaring God's Strength to the Next Generation"
(Psalm 71)

SEWELL HALL

"Continue in the Things You Have Learned"
(2 Timothy 3:14-17)

AL DIESTELKAMP

"Hold Fast the Pattern of Sound Words"
(2 Timothy 1:13)

L.A. STAUFFER

"Committing These Things to Faithful Men"
(2 Timothy 2:1-4)

PSALM 71:17-18

*"O God, You have taught me from my youth;
And to this day I declare Your wondrous works.
Now also when I am old and grayheaded,
O God, do not forsake me,
Until I declare Your strength to this generation,
Your power to everyone who is to come."*

SATURDAY MORNING

JOE NOVAK

"Exhortations to Young Men"
(Titus 2:6-8; 1 Timothy 4:12-16)

KARL DIESTELKAMP

"Desiring the Position of an Overseer"
(1 Timothy 3:1)

BOYD SELLERS

"Shepherd the Flock"
(1 Peter 5:2)

AL DIESTELKAMP

"As Christ Loved the Church"
(Ephesians 5:22-33)

SATURDAY AFTERNOON

L.A. STAUFFER

"Things Being Neglected/ Camels Being Swallowed"
(Matthew 23)

KARL DIESTELKAMP

"Preach the Word!"
(2 Timothy 4:2)

JOE NOVAK

"Pressing On"
(Philippians 3:12-14)

SEWELL HALL

"Finishing Well"
(2 Timothy 4:6-8)

This event is organized by Christians in the northern and central Illinois area, and is not the work of any congregation. The goal of the weekend is to educate, equip and encourage men to fill their unique roles in the kingdom of Christ.

Registration will begin August 1. There is a modest per-person fee to defray the costs of the campsite and meals. Consider joining us as we learn together about the necessity of declaring God's strength. For more information and online registration, go to: www.mensstudy.org.

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