



The Reflector

Published and edited monthly in the interest of calling people back to the Bible
by Edward O. Bragwell, Sr.

August 2009

An article for young preachers.

Preacher Pitfalls

Edward O. Bragwell, Sr.

Paul references Isaiah in declaring that the feet of those that preach the gospel are beautiful (Romans 10:15; Isaiah 52:7). I know of no higher calling for a young man to pursue than that of preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. While all Christians should preach the gospel commensurate with their abilities and opportunities, there is a dire need for young men who are willing to fully devote their time and energy to preaching. There is a world of lost souls to be saved. There are struggling churches that need to be edified. There are strong churches that need to be reinforced with sound doctrine. One does not have to be a Solomon to figure out that there is more work to be done than there are workers willing and qualified to do it.

Each man who desires to publicly preach the gospel must decide whether he will “live of the gospel” (1 Corinthians 9) or make his living at something else while he preaches. Each has its advantages and disadvantages. Each course is equally scriptural. Each one must decide which course is most expedient for him in his situation and how he can best benefit the Cause.

My remarks in this article are directed to those young men who have chosen or plan to choose the option of fully “living of the gospel.” (1 Corinthians 9:14) Choosing this option provides wonderful opportunities for the preacher. Without the need to “make a living,” time and energy are freed up to be used to study the word, to find more opportunities to teach it, to better prepare his sermons and classes, to have more private

studies, etc. Along with these opportunities there are pitfalls that one needs to be aware of.

Professionalism

“Professionalism” has a variety of connotations depending on the kind of work under consideration. It is usually considered a compliment when one refers to another’s professionalism in his chosen field. However, when it is used of gospel preachers it is not a good thing.

Usually when the term is applied to gospel preachers it is referring to the way that the preacher and those with whom he works look at the work of preaching. They have a “professional” view of preaching in that they consider preaching a “profession,” “job,” or “career” comparable to similar work in the secular realm. Far too many preachers are victims to this pitfall.

This pitfall is largely due a to basic misconception of the nature of scriptural gospel preaching. A young man finishes school and now is the time for him to choose his career and look for a job in his chosen field. Or he may not have a particular career in mind, he is just looking for a job to put food on the table and roof over his head. He knows some preachers who seem to be eating regularly and have adequate or above housing and are often thought of as community leaders. He has a pretty good gift of gab and enough social skills to work with people, at least so he thinks; so given all these positives, he decides that would be a pretty good job to have. He begins to check around for “job openings” in this field. He finds a church that is willing

to “hire” him and he becomes employed to do the job the church wants done. His “career” is now launched. His present “job” may not be the ideal or the ultimate one he envisions for the “preaching profession.” But, he feels that if he does a job that would look good on his resume, he will before long be able to land a better position – either in pay or working conditions. This “job” becomes just a stepping stone to an advancement in his career by landing a better job either preaching for another church or a secular job for which his talents and experience now qualify him.

The above description may seem extreme to some, but it is pretty typical of the concept that too many have about the “work of an evangelist.” One of the most misunderstood relationships is the one that scripturally exists between the preacher and those who are supplying his financial support. The New Testament concept of the supporting/supported relationship is that of a partnership (fellowship) between the two parties with a common interest – preaching the gospel. It is not a matter of the organization (church) “hiring” a man to “get the job done” that they want done – much like a corporation hires a CEO (expert) to do its bidding. Or, like a university hires a football coach to “get the job done” that the university and its alumni want done. Nor is it like a professional who moves into town, strikes a bargain with a local organization (church) for his pay, hangs out his shingle and begins to offer various free services to the community – during office hours and/or by appointment, of course.

The relationship of the apostle Paul and those who supported him as a gospel preacher was that of partnership in the gospel. He said the Philippians “communicated” (had fellowship or partnership) with him in the gospel. (Philippians 1:5; 4:15). Paul was not a “hired” professional of the church at Philippi. He, along with Timothy, were “servants of **Jesus Christ.**” (Philippians 1:1). Jesus Christ was their “boss” and not the brethren at Philippi. Paul would have preached the gospel whether or not he received funds from the church. (Cf. 1 Corinthians 9:16). The relationship between Paul and Philippi was that of a partnership

Preach a Sermon Preacher

Preach a sermon preacher, make it short and sweet,
 Our stomachs strike at 12 o'clock a hungering to eat.
 Preach a sermon preacher, with words both smooth and fair,
 For psychology we are thirsting, for scripture we don't care.
 Preach a sermon preacher, punctuate it with jokes,
 Fill it with your yarns and tales and entertain us folks.
 Preach a sermon preacher, we care not what you say;
 As long as you leave us alone and fire the other way.
 Preach a sermon preacher, but don't get too specific;
 As long as you will generalize we think you are terrific.
 Preach a sermon preacher, make it good and plain;
 But don't you dare get close enough to call sin by its name.
 Preach a sermon preacher, preach it round or flat;
 We love to play at hide and seek and guess just where you're at
 Preach a sermon preacher, make it what we like to hear;
 We'll pat you on your spineless back, while you scratch our
 itching ear.

Author Unknown

(sharing or fellowship) in the great work of gospel preaching. Under this arrangement both Paul and Philippi received benefit. Paul received needed funds and Philippi had fruit to abound to their account in the gospel. (Philippians 4:17).

When a church and a preacher view their relationship as a mere employer/employee relationship it is easy for the preacher to become a servant of the church rather than a servant of Jesus Christ. He becomes a hired professional bent on doing the job he is hired to do. His “work of an evangelist” is defined and laid out by the church rather than the Lord. He becomes the “results oriented” employee of the church. Often his “job description” includes many items that have little or nothing to do with evangelism. His “office hours” may be dictated by the church. If not then he feels that as a hired professional that he should advertise his “office hours” that he plans to keep (enough to earn his pay)

and if anyone wants to talk with him or to have a Bible study they can make an appointment during those hours (contrast with Acts 20:31). Both he and the church look at his work as so much “preach” for so much “pay.”

Young man, if you feel the need to give your life over to preaching, do what it takes to be properly trained for that work. That may mean hours of personal study and/or hours of study with someone with a high level of Bible knowledge and experience in preaching. Such study should major in study of the Bible text. It should also involve study about how to prepare for classes or sermons and how you can best present what you have prepared. You follow this course because you are determined to “preach Christ and him crucified” whenever and wherever, both “publicly and house to house” (Acts 20:20) as you are given opportunity – whether or not you are supported by the church or will need to “work with your hands” to supply your living.

If you think it would be best for you to “live of the gospel,” then find someplace where you feel your work is needed and where you can effectively “preach the word,” then make arrangements with a church or churches to be partners with you in the great work of preaching. That place may be some local church that needs you to help edify them and help them spread the gospel in their community and are able to supply all your “wages” (2 Corinthians 11:8). You enter into a partnership/fellowship arrangement with them to supply your support while you do your work (not their work) of preaching to them and anyone else who will listen. Or that place may be someplace where there is no church or a very small one. You may then need to partner with one or more churches to have fellowship with you while you do the “work of an evangelist” at the place you have chosen. If this is neither possible nor advisable then you may need to do as Paul did on occasion – work with your hands to supply your needs. At any rate you are determined to “preach Christ and him crucified” whether or not supported by the church. Maintain this attitude toward gospel preaching and you are not likely to fall victim to professionalism.

Populism

“Populism” and “populist” as defined in the dictionary are not necessarily bad things. *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* defines populist as follows:

1 : a member of a political party claiming to represent the common people; *especially often capitalized* : a member of a United States political party formed in 1891 primarily to represent agrarian interests and to advocate the free coinage of silver and government control of monopolies

2 : a believer in the rights, wisdom, or virtues of the common people.”

Just a casual look at the word should be a clue that it has something to do with the people or populace. If all one means by “populist” is “a believer in the rights, wisdom, or virtues of the common people,” then there would be no problem. But as it is sometimes used in a political context it is not so good. Around the time of World War II, it was often used in connection with fascism. In more recent years it has been used in political rhetoric to denote a politician who “puts his finger to the wind” to determine his stand on an issue rather than standing on principle.

An example of spiritual populists were the prophets in Jeremiah’s day. (Jeremiah 5:31). They prophesied falsely and the people (populace) loved to have it so. They seem to have been catering to the populace rather than trying to please God. They have their counterparts in the church today in preachers whose obvious aim is to please the people – especially those people who are providing their financial support. It is an easy pitfall for preachers to fall into. One does not have to necessarily “prophesy falsely” to be guilty. Everything he teaches may be the truth. He just does not preach all the truth – especially that truth that might be offensive to those who support him or that which might affect his popularity in the brotherhood at large.

Paul said if he sought to please men he would not be a servant of Jesus Christ. (Galatians 1:10). He also told the Ephesian elders that he kept back nothing that was profitable to them. (Acts 20:20). He told Timothy to “preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and

instruction. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths. (2 Timothy 4:2-4 NASB).

Another aspect of pleasing men is that of catering to some supporters who want those in opposition to be publicly “skinned alive.” Maybe we could all profit from Paul’s instruction to Timothy:

“The Lord’s bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will” (2 Timothy 2:24-26 NASB)

Young brother, when you put yourself up as a preacher of the gospel, remember whose servant you are and preach accordingly. Like the apostle Paul, be as accommodating to others’ customs and traditions as you can (read 1 Corinthians 9:19-23) without sacrificing truth, but do not accommodate yourselves to the desires of those who want to have their ears tickled.

Partyism

Partyism is devotion to a party. If one believes there are no brotherhood parties or cliques then he must be either very naïve or has been on a long journey to some faraway place. I am not saying that there is necessarily anything sinister about the formation of such parties/cliques. Most of the time they are just drawn together by some common special interest. It may be a common interest in a school, a paper, camp or some other enterprize operated by fellow Christians. It may be a common special interest they may have in some issue among Christians. It may be that it is just that several people have just naturally formed a rather wide friendship circle over a period of time. None of these are necessarily wrong within themselves. It is just that one has to be careful not to develop a party spirit. The party spirit either consciously or unconsciously causes

one to defend those who are part of his party no matter what. It also causes one to have an elitist view of his particular group. It can also cause one to overlook the faults of those in his party that he would not overlook in others.

Young preachers are particularly vulnerable along this line. They are just beginning their public work among brethren. They seek to be known and be accepted by other brethren. They see their getting close to one of these “special interest” circles as a way to broaden their horizons. Again none of these groups may be sinful unless they foster a party spirit. And there is not anything necessarily wrong in sharing a interest in the things around which these parties may be formed. Just do not let the interest cause you to become a “party man.” Do not look at those who may not have the same special interests that you have as kind of “second-class” Christians. Do not defend those who share your special interest nor the object of that interest no matter what they do. Do not sweep the sins of those who share your special interest under the rug while being vigilant to duly expose those not in your interest circle. As a servant of the Lord you must not put yourself in a position where you would be tempted to not preach the truth, the whole truth, without either fear or favor of any man. Your loyalty to the Lord must always take precedence over any other loyalty – whether it be loyalty to a party, a person, or even a local church.

So, my young friend, if you want to preach the gospel of Christ for the right reasons and if you want to do it “full-time,” I highly recommend it. I have been trying to do it for well over 50 years. Life has been good. Just be aware that there are pitfalls to watch out for into which we all may have fallen from time to time.

