



The Reflector

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

May 2008

Essentials to Doing God's Will

Edward O. Bragwell, Sr.

It would be extremely difficult to over emphasize the essentiality of doing God's will. Jesus, himself, declared that he "came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me." (John 6:38); and that only those who do "the will of my Father" will enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 7:21).

Before one can do God's will, he must first ascertain what it is. It doesn't matter how much one might want to do His will, he cannot until he knows what it is. Once he knows, then he can act upon that knowledge. In this article we will notice three essentials of doing God's will:

Accurate Information

All that anyone knows about God's will is that which has been revealed by God. (Cf. Deut. 29:29). The Apostle Paul declared that "the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God." (1 Cor. 2:11). Only the Spirit can reveal the mind and will of God. That He did through a few men chosen for that purpose. The Old Testament prophets spoke as they were "moved by the Holy Spirit." (2 Pet. 1:20-21). The New Testament apostles and prophets were given the "mind of Christ" by the revelation of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 9:9-16; Eph. 3:5). These men not only spoke that which had been revealed to them to those of their generation, they wrote that revelation, guided by the inspiration of God, for the benefit of not only their generation but for all generations to come in the Holy Scriptures (writings). (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Hence, all we can know about God's will is found in the Scriptures.

One may speculate, guess, or surmise as to what would please God – but the only accurate source of information as to what God's will is will have to come from the Scriptures. It is in them that we find all the spiritual information that we need to believe, teach and practice. It is there that we find "the faith once (for all) delivered unto the saints." (Jude 3).

So, before we can do God's will we must first receive the accurate information by "searching the Scriptures ... to see if the things are so." (Acts 17:11). Want to know what God's will is for the church – it's mission, organization, worship, etc.? Want to know God's will about morality and living as a Christian? Want to know God's will about Marriage and Divorce? Want to know God's will about local church co-operation? Want to know what should a Christian's and the church's relationship be to secular and religious institutions? Don't rely on what brethren may or may not have said or done about these things in the past. Don't rely on what some who may "seem to be somewhat" among us today say. No matter how much these brethren (past or present) may be respected by brethren or how much influence they may wield – the only guaranteed information on these vital subjects is found in the writings of men who were "moved by the Holy Spirit."

Accurate Interpretation

It is a bit too simplistic to say, "The Bible does not need interpreting, but believed." Reminds me of some Bible classes that I have sat in where one is asked to read a verse and is then asked, "What does the verse mean?" The answer comes back, "It means what it says." To say that no interpretation is needed is to say that no explanation is needed. The definition of "interpret" in the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* is: "1. To explain the meaning of: *interpreted the ambassadors remarks*. See synonyms at explain."

God made us with minds and he expects us to use them to discern the true meaning of the words of His revelation. Sometimes one may not fully understand a scripture passage and need one with more knowledge to explain it (or help him with the right interpretation of it). What if, when the Ethiopian in Acts 8 asked Philip the meaning (interpretation) of Isaiah 53, Philip had said, "It means what it says – end of story."

Some scriptures may require more interpretation than others. For example, it would be hard to understand passages like: “No man putteth a piece of new cloth unto an old garment, for that which is put in to fill it up taketh from the garment, and the rent is made worse. Neither do men put new wine into old bottles: else the bottles break, and the wine runneth out, and the bottles perish: but they put new wine into new bottles, and both are preserved” (Matt. 9:16-17), without doing some interpreting in the light of the times in which it was written.

But this does not mean that “everyone is entitled to his own interpretation” or that one should blindly accept another’s interpretation. Everyone has the obligation to “rightly divide” or “handle aright” (“to dissect (expound) correctly” - Strong) the word of truth. A given passage has only one right interpretation. If there is a difference – someone or all have *misinterpreted*.” So, when one reads any passage, he should reflect on the what he is reading and be sure that his is not misinterpreting what the writer had in mind by the words and phrases that he uses. So, when we say that accurate interpretations is essential to doing God’s will, we are simply saying we need to be sure that we are not giving the words of the text a meaning that the writer never intended.

Accurate interpretation involves a number of things such as:

1. One must pay *close* attention to the *very wording* of what is said. The words of Jesus were misinterpreted because some did not pay close attention to His wording concerning a disciple Peter asked about: “Jesus saith unto him, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? follow thou me. Then went this saying abroad among the brethren, that that disciple should not die: yet Jesus said not unto him, He shall not die; but, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? (John 21:22-23).

2. One must determine what the writer meant, not what he can make the words mean. Have you ever heard that an Old Testament prophet prophesied of the automobile? “The chariots rage in the streets; they rush to and fro in the broad ways: the appearance of them is like torches; they run like the lightnings.” (Nahum 2:4 ASV). Fits the automobile to a “T” – or does it?

Some will take a word in the text and look in a dictionary and find multiple usages of the word listed and pick one that suits them, rather trying to determine what the writer meant by the word. I went to a “Christian school” and the boys would sit around the dorm asking

silly questions like, “Did you know that Paul was a golfer?” Proof text: “I have finished my course.” I have heard serious attempts at interpretation that are not much better. I once heard a man object to another man’s being an elder because he was a “striker,” and the Bible says an elder is to be “no striker.” It seems a few years before the elder had worked at a plant and was a member of the labor union at that plant. The union went out on strike – so he was a “striker.”

3. One must consider all contextual information, immediate and general, surrounding a text. Someone has said that “a text out of context becomes a pretext.” A good example of a passage taken out of context is: “But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him” (1 Cor. 2:9). This has been a favorite text at many funerals as one talks about the glory of heaven. But this is lifting it out of context. In context it is talking about the things revealed to Paul and the other apostles.

4. One must consider the historical background of a text. The historical and geographical setting at the time a text was originally written must be considered. Then take into account when the English translation you are using was translated. For example, if you use the King James Version (as I do mostly) you need to know that “prevent” in 1611 meant to go before (pre = before and vent = to go) or precede. (See Psa. 119:147; 1 Thess. 4:15). One of the meanings of “let” in 1611 was to hinder (See Rom. 1:13).

5. One must take all the Bibles says on a subject before reaching a conclusion. “The entirety of Your word is truth ... (Psa. 119:160 NKJV). If there is more than one account of an event, like in the four gospel accounts, each account must be interpreted in the light of the other accounts. A passage that speaks of “salvation” (or the “forgiveness of sins”) must be combined with all other passages speaking of them before one can fairly explain what salvation is all about. One verse may connect faith to salvation, another repentance, another confession and another baptism. Each verse must be interpreted in the light of all the other verses.

Accurate Application

Once one has the correct information and has correctly interpreted the data, then he must make an accurate application to the subject, question, or issue at hand. If one fails in any one of the three (information, interpretation, or application) he cannot do God’s will.

One cannot be skillful in the “word of righteousness” unless he able take that word as a basis and “discern good and evil.” (Heb. 5:14). He must be able to accurately apply the word to the situation at hand.

Satan correctly quotes scripture to Jesus and then tempted Him by misapplying them to His situation (Matt. 4:6-7). Satan does not seem to care how much scripture we may know and understand as long as we misapply it. Many of the major issues that have divided Christians have been fought over matters of application.

The institutional/sponsoring church issue was mostly fought over application – especially in the early years of it. Both sides used the same collection of passages and correctly interpreted them to mean that local churches were autonomous and sufficient to do the work assigned to them. Both sides seemed to understand and preach these principles but had problems with correctly applying them. Neither side seemed to have any problem applying the principles to the “missionary societies.” With a few exceptions most of us at first did not question the benevolent institutions and small scale sponsoring church arrangements. As benevolent organizations and sponsoring church arrangements proliferated and began more and more, along with some schools, soliciting funds from churches some thinking brethren began to realize that the teaching that we were using against the “missionary societies” should also apply to these other things as well. They violated the scriptural teaching concerning the autonomy and sufficiency of local churches and the

activation of the universal church.

So, what happened? Many were forced by conviction to change their practice (application) to conform to their preaching. In time, others choose to change their preaching to conform to their practice. Consequently the gap between the two sides has widened over the years.

It is not enough to dismiss differences between brethren on vital issues as being minor or of little consequence by saying we only differ in matters of application. As we saw in past issues that often the vital difference was over matters of application. Misapplication of Bible principles can be just as damaging as getting the information and interpretation wrong.

We admit that some things taught in the Bible are harder to understand than others (cf. 2 Pet. 3:16), or may not be as “cut and dried” as others – hence, it may be difficult to know what the accurate application should be. Usually there is an application option that is right and leaves little room for doubt that can be followed by those who seek peace among brethren.

One has no more right to misapply the scriptures than he does to misinterpret them without suffering the consequences.

So, in order to get it right, we must get all three essentials right – information, interpretation, application. Let us pray for wisdom to “handle aright the word of truth” so that we can do God’s will.

edbragwell@edssermonsandthings.com

“Our Colleges”

Frank Driver

The good accomplished through colleges operated by Christians, and their potential for the future are settled facts, taken for granted. The sacrifice and pure motives of those responsible for existence and maintenance of such schools are remembered with appreciation. But surely not even the most zealous worker for such a worthy project can with good reason object to caution and criticism that is set forth to them. If we contend for the right to build and maintain such institutions, we must respect the right of those whom they affect to investigate, analyze, and criticize their movements. It would be a good sign if some in the administration, faculty, or among the distinguished supporters

of such colleges would themselves point out some dangers and questionable tendencies that inevitably develops in anything that men build and maintain. They are in the best position to know the facts, and see these dangers in their earliest stages. In fact, there was a time when such questions and criticisms were indeed raised from this very source. The purpose of these articles is not to oppose the existence of colleges of course, but to point out some of the dangers we are facing here now, and suggest some safeguards we should observe.

Church Dependency – The growth of colleges and their number, and the good accomplished by them in the past, is resulting in an increasing sense of the opportu-

nity they can utilize. The false notion is becoming more general all the time that the colleges are a vital factor in building the church, that the church is dependent on them and obligated to them. I can remember when it was contended that colleges were designed to aid the home and extend its work, but now much is being said of how the college helps the church. One brother said the college is not church owned but is "church related." He didn't explain what he meant by this, but it certainly isn't the way brethren a few years ago would have described the status of the college.

One of the outstanding marks of distinction between the church and denominations has been its complete separation from human and secular institutions, and its reliance on its own resources for its growth and accomplishment of God's purpose. Are we in the process of destroying this difference? There is nothing colleges can do for our children that we cannot do for them ourselves, if we would do it, other than give academic credit for Bible, and shield them from the world partially, and only temporarily. Far too many parents, even leaders in the church, are not giving their children the training, guidance, and spiritual direction they should, and much of the value of colleges is projected on this neglect. The church too is falling down, for with the organization God gave it, it could do much in training and developing its potential, but is depending on the college to do it. Even though the college can fill its place well, it is wrong, contrary to scriptural principles, for the church to look to the college for help, and depend on it for growth. Too many Christians have the idea that interest in the church and interest in the college is identical. If colleges must have the liberty to exist, they should also accept the responsibility to declare themselves entirely free and separate from the churches in every respect.

Raising Money – One of the first considerations in the beginning and maintenance of "our" colleges is raising the money. Our sense of the importance and worthiness of the work, the tremendous amount of money required, and the difficulty of raising it, all combine to create a temptation to use means of soliciting funds that we otherwise would not favor, and thus set a precedent for later departures more serious. The use of the church building, and even services, to promote the interest of colleges may well make it difficult

for many to keep the distinction clear in their minds between the divine church and the secular school. Very frequently brethren are prevailed on for contributions to a college as though it were their duty as a Christian. I have even heard scripture quoted, urging people to give. It is a tragic error into which we have fallen, to bind upon brethren, obligations to a secular institution, that God bound upon us only in regard to the church.

There is a compromising attitude in "our" colleges toward issues of controversy among brethren that arise from time to time, that is not good. The perpetual need for money makes it the "wiser" course to stay "neutral" and please everybody. Even though spiritual values are featured as a need for "our" colleges, the material too often becomes far more important than it should. The support a college receives from its community is considered a valuable source. Is there the danger the college may be inclined to put too much stress on the importance of community good will, and to the compromise of the truth? It is significant that the church, God's institution, does not need the favor of the community to grow and prosper, but the college does!

The expense of operating a college is beyond description, on our present basis. Even besides the expense of attending being so much greater than other colleges, the appeal for financial aid continues without end. Of course the good accomplished cannot be measured in money, but the same is true of the church, yea even more. How can a brother give to the Lord as he is prospered if he gives so much of what he has to give to the college? Few would deny an individual liberty to make a contribution of his own to any good cause, but he should realize his first and greatest duty to God is in the church and not in the college. I know little about operating and financing a college, but I do know enough about the Bible to know that the church is divine and able to accomplish all God wants accomplished, and that the college is human and no part of the work of God. If we had more faith in God's wisdom and His church, we would strengthen its usefulness, and bring its potential into reality, and recognize there is truly a power for good that can be exerted to the glory of God. We would not only be honoring God in His institution, but we would realize less the need of those made by men.