

## "What Ails You?"

### A Message of Hope to Struggling Churches

This special issue is being sent to numerous churches of Christ across America. Of these approximately 13,000 a cappella churches of Christ, roughly half have fewer than 55 members. Powerful feelings of inadequacy are overwhelming some of our people who compare themselves to mega-church models. In fact, we hear of more church closings than beginnings. In this and future issues, I invite readers to explore with me another, more biblical, model. If you are a preacher, elder, or leader in the church interested in greater member involvement, then you will find these discussions stimulating and possibly challenging.

The book of Judges offers a critique of human nature. Churches of Christ longing to restore the New Testament church can learn insightful lessons from this book which documents multiple restoration efforts. Sadly, the book shows how easily God's people forget him and apostatize. So often, what we learn from history is that we do not learn from history!

*Judges Chapters 17 and 18* reveal a young Levite who became the sole priest for a man named Micah. Clearly a clergy-laity distinction was maintained in the Old Testament with priests coming from the Aaronic lineage. However, Micah's religious impulse was one of convenience conjoined with pride since he wanted a nearby shrine instead of having to travel to Shiloh. One of his idols was the product of his own greed, and his priest was a son whom Micah consecrated himself!

With the opportunity to acquire the services of a "real" priest, Micah quickly dispensed with his son and plead, *"Dwell with me, and be a father and a priest to me, and I will give you ten shekels of silver per year, a suit of clothes, and your sustenance" (17:10)*. The young priest compromised God's plan to satisfy the felt needs of Micah. Micah provided him with state of the art religious paraphernalia: ephod, idols, carved images, and molded images. The young priest provided Micah prestige and spiritual comfort.

In time, a renegade Danite expeditionary force sought a greater inheritance. Discovering the priest, they pressed him about his presence. The young priest replied, *"Micah hired me. I am his priest" (18:4)*. Eventually, Micah's priest was persuaded to abandon him in favor of serving greater numbers and presumably receiving better wages. Micah was forlorn, and his countenance revealed it. To see him, prompted the question, *"what ails you?" (18:23)*. Micah was forced to accept the loss of his "gods" and of his priest. His distress was real, and he evidently saw no spiritual alternative.

Like Micah, there are many small churches of Christ longing for the talents and ministerial services of a young priest. While I am not suggesting a strict allegorical interpretation, it is interesting to see how "search committees" find talented preachers and how talent gravitates in career moves to larger congregations. I cannot find any references to hirings and firings in the New Testament. Instead, I find congregations led by elders sending evangelists to plant congregations and to assist small congregations.

Admittedly or not, many congregations have adopted a clergy or pastor system and question their very legitimacy and future existence if they are unable to hire a preacher. Growing up in western Kentucky, I had great Bible training. There were over twenty congregations in our county alone. If a congregation did not have a regular preacher, then we perceived it had fallen on hard times or internal strife. Having a good man in the pulpit was considered one hallmark of an effective church. Despite my good Bible training, it never dawned on me that there might be another model of church involvement. Even today, there are many godly people in churches of Christ who have never studied the biblical basis for and the practical applications of mutual ministry. The accepted paradigm is to grow to the point where a minister or several ministers can be hired.

Many churches of Christ are at a crossroads, though. They cannot hire a preacher even if they wanted one. Some will close their doors in despair. The truth of the matter is many congregations who do have regular preachers have

fallen on hard times. Having a regular preacher does not necessarily mean increased membership. In fact, the amount of personal work in a community and not the amount of eloquent sermons is the greatest barometer of sustained church growth. And it is amazing to see what church leaders will tolerate, including doctrinal error, to keep the popular and talented pulpiteer.

Do these struggles sound familiar? Having preached full-time myself in Louisiana, I know firsthand the pressures placed on preachers. I am persuaded that there are churches as well as preachers looking for answers.

What does the story of Micah and the young priest teach us? The story illustrates the danger of isolationism. There was no one nearby to assist Micah or the city of Laish. This special issue is offered in the hope of establishing a dialogue and in helping struggling churches and stressed preachers. That does not mean that I have an exclusive claim on truth. Even this September, the church in Kirksville, Missouri, where I am an elder is being assisted by members of churches of Christ from all over the United States. I am persuaded that they know something of personal work and biblical evangelism that could benefit us.

The story also provides an explanation as to how idolatrous worship was so easily introduced later into Dan by Jeroboam with the division of the kingdom. Of course, Judges reminds us repeatedly that *"in those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (17:6)*. The story further provides some justification for the centralization of power, both in terms of church and state, in Jerusalem. Today, we must make sure that what we are doing is right in the eyes of Jesus our King.

## When You All Come Together In The Church

From a study of *1 Corinthians 14:26-40*, several things become apparent:

1. Corinth was experiencing confusion in the Lord's day assembly, hence Paul's instructions, and his admonition: *"Let all things be done decently and in order" (40)*;
2. Many members customarily played a public part in the Lord's day assembly: *"How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation" (26)*; and
3. Paul had no intention of depriving them of this mutual ministry-he intended only to order it: *"For you can all prophesy one by one, that all may learn and all may be encouraged." (31)*.

Clearly, Paul was pleased with a plurality of participants in the assembly. Despite the fact that such an arrangement came with potential hazards, he wrote nothing to discourage the Corinthians from their mutual edification. Instead, he communicated a few helpful guidelines, thereby affirming its practice. An assembly in which many had the opportunity to bring a song, offer a teaching, or exercise a miraculous gift was, in the eyes of the apostle, a good thing.

Sounds strikingly dissimilar to the practice of many of today's churches, doesn't it? What are we to make of it? Were Paul's instructions to the brethren at Corinth unusual? No. Paul stated four times in his letter to the Corinthians that what he taught them he taught everywhere else (*1 Corinthians 4:17; 11:16; 14:33; 16:1*). Perhaps, Corinth was an isolated case, then, and stood out among the New Testament churches because of her mutual ministry meetings? From a careful examination of the New Testament Scriptures, we can offer a definitive "no" on that question, as well. What was true at Corinth, was true elsewhere.

*"Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers..." (Acts 13:1)*. As at Corinth, God had inspired more than one individual. And, as at Corinth, along with the prophets, there were multiple uninspired *"teachers" (1 Corinthians 14:26)*. Even when an apostle was present there, many members shared the role of edifying, as evidenced by *Acts 15:35: "Paul and Barnabas also remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also."* It was not Paul's-nor the church's-prerogative to put the "best man" in the pulpit, if even there was a pulpit. There were many with the ability, so many participated.

The same practice existed at Ephesus. Though Timothy, the evangelist (*2 Timothy 4:5*), was there, he shared the work of public edification. Paul began his first epistle to Timothy by stating, "*remain in Ephesus that you may charge some that they teach no other doctrine*" (*1 Timothy 1:3*). His job wasn't to do all the teaching, but to make sure that others' teaching was sound. The same idea is emphasized in Paul's second epistle to this young evangelist: "*And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also*" (*2 Timothy 2:2*). Was Timothy the resident exhorter? Did the brethren come every Sunday morning to hear him? The Scripture doesn't lead us to that conclusion.

Finally, there is the cumulative message of various other passages. In *Romans 15:14*, Paul declared, "*Now I myself am confident concerning you, my brethren, that you also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another.*"

To the Ephesians, he wrote, "*speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head -- Christ-- from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.*" (*Ephesians 4:15,16*).

Paul also said that members possess the gifts of teaching and exhorting (*Romans 12:7-8*). According to Peter, those who possess gifts are to use them: "*As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies, that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.*" (*1 Peter 4:10,11*). The assembly is one place to do just that (*Hebrews 10:25*).

With all of the above in mind, can there be any doubt that the apostolic church permitted and encouraged multiple persons to be involved in its assemblies?

## **Involvement:**

### **God's Practical Prescription for Spiritual Health**

The caption on our weekly bulletin in Kirksville reads: "Every Member a Minister, Priest, and Saint". Christians need to belong to a body of believers. They need to study the law, serve the Lord, and sacrifice for the lost. Mark it down: To the degree that you are involved, you will grow spiritually and be happier. To the degree that your local congregation is uninvolved, members will become lax and disgruntled, finding fault with others. There is little time for complaint when we focus on outreach and developing our talents.

Even the church growth experts admit that small churches are leadership producers. I used to imagine that large churches were strong churches until I saw how weak many of their members were, untrained in scripture and unequipped to serve. Now, small churches are not immune from such a scenario either, but the setting allows talent and spiritual growth to emerge, howbeit, sometimes by necessity. Maturity comes to "*those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil*" (*Hebrews 5:14*). And what churches grow more exponentially than any other? New church starts, where enthusiasm and outreach are present, grow the most of any!

Along the way, we have succumbed to the idea that we need a "professional" for every aspect of work. "We need an eloquent Pulpit Preacher. We need an Associate, Youth Minister. We need to hire a Children's Minister (often a woman). Our singing would be so much better if we had a professional Worship Leader. And believe it or not, if we only had a paid Involvement Minister, this church would move mountains." Brethren, are we only motivated to serve by money? Where is the priesthood of believers? Where are the biblical examples to justify these wants? Where are the teachers (*Hebrews 5:12*)?

Of course, the retort could come that I am being idealistic. I am actually being more pragmatic than you might imagine. Can smaller groups really work? If not, why are so many large congregations abandoning evening services and replacing them with small groups; in fact, there is less need for a single pulpit minister than ever before! But, the question remains, can the rotation of preaching work? Surely. Look at the Mormons who practice mutual edification through the volunteer services of their men who take turns preaching. The Mormons put these freed-up funds into evangelism, personal work, benevolence, church buildings, and media advertising. There is no secret to their growth!

I don't know anyone who is opposed to an evangelist working with a congregation for extended periods of time, even years (*Acts 20:31*). We are not quibbling over located or dislocated preachers. But that evangelist should be under the authority of an eldership, should be accountable, and should be working to develop the talents of the congregation so that elders and deacons can emerge. It is the responsibility of those elders and deacons to feed the flock and to provide leadership opportunities for other members. In turn, they should be motivated by grace enough to put additional workers on the frontlines, talent where it is most needed by sending forth evangelists. Isn't that God's plan? Lest anyone miss the point, we need full-time evangelists. We need tent-makers like Paul, too, who can do evangelistic work without burdening churches. We need elders and deacons who lead and serve. We need churches who claim to practice mutual edification in the assemblies to practice personal work in their communities! We need to heed God's practical prescription for spiritual health.

Occasionally, people point to the church at Jerusalem and proclaim it the model of church growth. Look closer. There was great benevolence need in Jerusalem because many of those who became Christians on the Day of Pentecost desired to stay longer and become grounded in the apostles' doctrine. Lack of outreach started to erupt into internal strife over the neglect of feeding widows. Through persecution the church in Jerusalem was forced to become evangelistic and went everywhere preaching the word as members were scattered (*Acts 8:1-4*). God doesn't desire a hub, but asks us to go to every hut.

So examine your circumstances. Perhaps the Lord is nudging your congregation, and you, to greater depth of service. Study the law. We have been sanctified through our adherence to the perfect law of liberty (*John 17:17, 1 Peter 1:22, James 1:25*). The day that we allow others to study the word for us is the day we slip toward apostasy. Serve the Lord. Old Testament priests and attendants served in various capacities with their duties foreshadowing our service. As they weekly ate the showbread (*Leviticus 24:5-9*), we eat the Lord's supper. As they offered incense, priests today offer prayers (*Revelation 5:8; 8:3-5*). As they played instruments of music in the temple, we sing and make melody in the temple of our hearts (*Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16*). Sacrifice for the lost. While we trust the ultimate sacrifice of Christ, we are called to make spiritual sacrifices (*Romans 12:1*). In the Old Testament the clergy sustained themselves through the tithes and sacrifices of others. Today, self-sacrifice in the form of time, talents, and treasures must be seen in modern priests. We have a great mission: to seek and save the lost. When we teach others, we save them from the fire (*Jude 23*). At the very minimum, by our access to the throne of God, we should pray, even now, that the lost might seek God. In Jesus' name, Amen.

### **Are We Passing the Buck or the Bucket?**

On Sept. 18, 1895, Booker T. Washington addressed the Cotton States Exposition in Atlanta, Georgia. Speaking to a racially mixed audience, he related a story about a ship lost at sea following a storm. With drinking water gone, the distraught captain was overjoyed when he spied a friendly ship. A signal was sent: "*Water, water; we die of thirst!*" To his dismay, the answer came, "*Cast down your bucket where you are.*" Surely there was a miscommunication thought the captain, and the same urgent message was sent. Again the reply came, "*Cast down your bucket where you are.*" After sending two additional messages and receiving the same reply, the furious captain finally complied and found-not ocean water, but fresh water from the mouth of the Amazon River! In the speech Washington masterfully employed the same injunction numerous times as he coaxed both races to turn to each other in the task of reconstructing the South.

The task of restoring New Testament Christianity requires similar cooperation among believers of different backgrounds. In *Galatians 3:27-29*, Paul wrote of the elimination of barriers: salvation is for all! Another barrier that has been dismantled is a clergy/laity distinction. Christians comprise a priesthood of believers with Christ serving as high priest (*1 Peter 2:5-10 & Hebrews chapter 5-10*). As a people, we need to be reminded of the duties of priesthood and not trade our religious freedoms for the ease of being told how to act or what to believe. *We have the responsibility of letting down our buckets where we are*. Different from babes born into a Jewish family, those born into Christ's kingdom have a requisite knowledge of their relation to God and the New Covenant (*Hebrews 8:8-12*).

Responsibility requires effort, though. Hence, *passing the buck* becomes a convenient temptation. An eloquent preacher whose sole job is filling the pulpit, we rationalize, can study for me, can teach me, can inspire me. Brethren, faith must be placed in God's word because man will fail us. Few churches have remained faithful to the Lord longer than 200 years, and schools of advanced learning associated with the Restoration Movement in America have had much shorter periods of allegiance. *Hebrews 11:6* was written to every member, not just church leaders: **"But without faith, it is impossible to please him, for he that comes to God must believe that he is and that he is a rewarder of those that diligently seek him."** Wise elders will equip the saints (*Ephesians 4:12*), not increase their dependence on mercenaries! Instead of hiring a preacher, congregations need elders worthy of double honor (*1 Timothy 5:17*): able to teach, to preach, to ordain and oversee evangelists.

Churches of Christ today are very much like churches were at the turn of the 20th century. We are facing multiple challenges as to whether we will stay committed to the New Testament pattern. Many preachers are abandoning the restoration plea of returning to the New Testament for authority. Many large churches are imploding as elders allow unscriptural practices in a vain and secular attempt to reach more people. Institutions built on the generosity of Christians have become Towers of Babel, symbols of pride and agents of apostasy. *May we desire living water (John 4:10). May we trust what God says rather than hoping in what he may allow*. Let us exercise wisdom and discernment before drinking deeply and fully from any source, whether new or familiar. Search the scriptures (*Acts 17:11*). Test the spirits (*1 John 4:1*).

F.D. Srygley in 1899 similarly expressed alarm at the willingness of members to relinquish priestly responsibilities. In a lengthy commentary on "professional preachers" he wrote: *This weakens the confidence of the people in their ability to read and understand the Bible without the help of the schools*. The effect of this is to discourage efforts among people who cannot attend such schools to study the Bible for themselves, form their own conclusions as to what it teaches, and preach the gospel exactly as it reads in the New Testament. Instead of robust individuality in Bible study and independent vigor in faith, people accept the doctrine promulgated from the schools, even though it is contrary to what seems to them to be the plain teaching of the Bible. They gradually come to have more confidence in the dictum of the schools than in their own *understanding of the Bible*." (*Gospel Advocate, Vol. 41, p. 97*).

Now is a crucial time to reflect on the roles and training of evangelists, elders, deacons, and members. Judgment begins at the house of God (*1 Peter 4:17*). *The buck must stop here!* The church at large is only reaping what it has allowed to be sown. Ignorance has destroyed many a people (*Hosea 4:6*) and cannot be tolerated (*Acts 17:30*). Mutual edification, the sharing of teaching responsibilities among local members, helped preserve the church in the midwest from much of the apostasy of the 19th century. Those congregations that depended on seminary graduates and adopted the pastor system of the denominations soon embraced other denominational errors and went the way of the Disciples of Christ or the Christian Church.

In Kirksville we encourage our members to find a ministry-to let down their buckets where they are. When it comes to the ministry of preaching, principally the elders and deacons take turns preaching in the worship assembly, personally that usually means one exhortation a month for me. The outline is given to the Wednesday night teacher who extends and seeks practical applications for the Sunday sermon in our midweek class. Sunday evening we have a children's class in the front of the auditorium followed by an adult class. Our teachers generally volunteer on a quarterly basis. We try to develop preaching talents of members by giving them opportunities in teaching or assistant teaching, scripture reading, extending the invitation, and making announcements which we couple with

song leading. As a speech teacher and elder, I take great satisfaction in seeing members develop their talents and have often met with members to help them prepare and practice their talks.

So you don't have a regular pulpit preacher? There is no need to be forlorn or to be so cast down. *Cast down the bucket!*

## Mutual Edification

*"Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification." (Romans 14:19)*

mutual: adj. 1. Felt, expressed, or performed for or toward each other; reciprocal

edification: n. Intellectual or moral enlightenment and improvement.

The Old Testament contains the stories of blessings and failures of men to do GOD'S COMMANDMENTS. Through all of this, at no time did GOD relinquish His authority over His creation. All men of note served at the pleasure of the LORD. Their power was doing what the LORD told them to do. In the fulness of time, GOD sent forth His Son an example to man and to become the sacrifice for the sins of man. Jesus by doing His Father's will was given the power and authority to judge man for salvation. Jesus brought forth the new rules and plan for His church, God still has never relinquished His final authority over His creation or church.

Men serving to the pleasure of the LORD wrote the stories and commandments which serve as our guide to salvation. These stories have been preserved for us in what we now know as the New Testament.

The church was organized on the chosen ones of Jesus, traveling and teaching about Jesus and salvation to many disciples where the disciples would then spread the Word. Thus the Word spread through the world just as leaven spreads through dough. The powers that be at that time, as all governments are, were the last to get on board. Over time, they organized the church to reflect the organization of government, which they understood well, forming unscriptural places of status and privilege in the church of our Lord.

Thus it became the custom for each congregation to have one individual who delivered the message and would oversee the functions of the church. These persons were often well educated and trained to do these assigned jobs. But this custom has its shortcomings as stated before. These persons are mere men with all of the human foibles. These persons have to earn a living, so to earn enough to live on, a large church is often required. This brings on other requirements. One thing builds on another and sometimes get out of hand. The congregation often becomes passive. And what if there is no large congregation? What to do? The money is not there to hire one man to fill the pulpit. Regardless of the size of a church, the LORD wants each individual to do His work. In a large congregation it's difficult to get each individual involved and there are those who will slide by (But not by the Lord).

This is where mutual edification comes into play and the wisdom of God is clearly seen. It is well-suited for the church of our Lord. Mutual edification in our assemblies is where men of the congregation prepare and deliver a sermon on assigned days, on the topic of their own choosing usually, but according to the Scriptures.

An evangelist will be happy to meet with the people, to teach, put forth an organizational plan and supervise the services. Eventually a cadre of persons delivering the LORD'S message and conducting the services is developed. The church is on its way with each individual fulfilling the requirements of the LORD (*1 Timothy 3:1-13*).

One thing to point out in this arrangement is that all the eggs are not put in one basket. The worship service does not depend upon one individual. There is a saying that if you want to learn something, teach it. It not only increases the

knowledge of the GOSPEL but that of other skills, gathering information, organizing that information, and presenting that information.

People hear, see and understand differently. Each depending upon culture, experience, and genetics (*Acts 2:45*). A person will develop a sermon from different perspectives. This perspective may get through to the understanding of an individual, where another may not. If you notice, even writers in the New Testament can describe the same story differently.

Also all the responsibility will not fall on one shoulder so some of the human foibles can be eliminated. (Each horse will be pulling the wagon) A person may get an idea from the perspective of another. Should an assigned person not be on hand for a service, another can fill in and the service can go on without much of a hitch.

I wish to point out that this does not preclude service outside the church. Just the opposite, the training and confidence developed inside the church building will enhance the abilities outside that building, which is just as important, if not more so. Mutual edification should be our way of life.

Many of those individuals who develop and present a sermon in their own church are invited to give that lesson in other churches, thus forming a fellowship with other congregations for the benefit of all. We are all members of Christ's church.

True, some individuals are better at developing and delivering the GOSPEL but that should not prohibit others from doing so. Disabilities may preclude some from such activities but there are other ways to do the work of the Lord, such as writing this article. (*Luke 23:33-46*) Just think of what Jesus did for us and compare. (*Acts 5:42*) And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.

**THE KING HAS NEVER ABDICATED HIS THRONE. --**

## **Building God's Temple:**

### **Consider Your Ways**

I had the good pleasure of participating in the annual gospel meeting hosted by the Ozark and Nixa congregations in Missouri. The assigned topic was an examination of **Haggai**, the first of the post-exilic prophets. In 38 short verses, we see the phrase "*thus saith the Lord*" or similar phrase 26 times! Straightforward, plain and blunt, Haggai urges, "*consider your ways*" (*1:5,7 & 2:15,18*).

Haggai encouraged the rebuilding of the temple, a symbol of God's presence among the "Jews," a term itself emerging in the Babylonian exile. Although 70 years of captivity had come to an end, a captive mindset lingered! Considering the circumstances of an enslaved people returning to a war-torn area, we begin to understand their complacency in erecting the temple. Likely, many who returned were young people who now tasted ownership for the first time and were tempted by materialism. Building their own houses became their chief enterprise: God's work was left unattended.

Haggai's message resonates even today (*Romans 15:4; 1 Corinthians 10:11*) as we consider building up-edifying-one another. The construction metaphor is intentional. Christ was present at the creation and likely trained as a carpenter. Well acquainted with construction, Christ must be the builder of our lives, our marriages, our congregations (*Psalms 127:1*). What has he built? The earth and all therein are his! He built the temple of God in 3 days (*Matthew 26:61 & 27:40*). Yes, through the resurrection he was declared to be the son of God with power (*Romans 1:4*) and through our resurrection from the watery grave of baptism we are declared the children of God (*Galatians 3:26, 27*). He has built the church (*Matthew 16:18*), and has promised us a better abode when our earthly tabernacle fails (*2 Corinthians 5:1 & Hebrews 11:10*).

Contrast the carelessness and calamity of building on others. Some reject the words of Christ and are like the foolish man building on the sand (*Matthew 7:24*). So hardened are some that Jesus becomes a stone of offense, but to Christians he is the chief corner stone (*Acts 4:11,12*). Some build monuments and tombs to honor godly relatives or prophets (*Matthew 23:29; Luke 11:47*), but fail to consecrate an altar in their hearts. Some return to the Old Law for authority and build inappropriately (Gal. 2:18). Still others build only secular, worldly ventures—more barns (*Luke 12:18*) with no concern for God. Indeed, people will be building when the Lord returns (*Luke 17:28-30*).

Christ expects us to be caretakers of the community he has built till the end (*Hebrews 3:1-6*). Not only are we a part of God's building—**we are it**—and must maintain it. We are being built together (*Ephesians 2:19-22*) and serve as a temple of God both singularly and collectively (*1 Corinthians 3:9-17; 6:19; 2 Corinthians 6:16*, note the plural second person and singular temple). As living stones (*1 Peter 2:4-10*) we demonstrate our love for Christ in every aspect of being: heart, soul, mind, and strength. To follow Jesus means to count the cost of building (*Luke 14:28*). He can rebuild your life and keep you from falling if you build your faith (*Jude 20; Colossians 2:7*). God can quicken us, transforming us from lifeless stones (*Matthew 3:9*) to living stones with purpose. He wants us to build up one another, support one another—not stone one another, not demolish one another. **Does he rock your world?**

**Consider your ways.** We are established by words of sound doctrine (*Acts 20:32*). Are you present, physically and mentally, in the assemblies of the church (*Hebrews 10:24-25*)? Do you seek to participate in special gospel meetings like the one mentioned above in southwest Missouri? The development of faith accompanies public and private Bible study (*Romans 10:17*). One children's song uplifts and indicts: "*Read your Bible, pray every day, and you'll grow, grow, grow. Neglect your Bible, forget to pray, and you'll shrink, shrink shrink*." More "incredible shrinking saints" fit in a pew, but they eventually vanish!

**Consider your ways.** While self-actualization is important, we should aspire to edify others (*1 Corinthians 14:2-5*). The pleasure of hearing our own voices must be tempered by the benefits they provide or deprive others (*1 Corinthians 14:13-18*). "*Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies*" (*1 Corinthians 8:1*). Wise teachers seek wide, student participation. Gracious brethren, careful not to monopolize discussion, allow others to have input (*1 Corinthians 14:26-33*).

**Consider your ways.** Although a vital aspect of growth, edification is not limited to the assembly. Have you encouraged anyone to be a better Christian, Bible teacher, evangelist, elder, deacon? Mutual ministry—unconditional positive regard and service—may mean self-denial (*1 Corinthians 10:23-24; Romans 14:19*) in order to empower our brothers and sisters (*Romans 15:2*) and not embolden them to violate their consciences (*1 Corinthians 8:10*). It may mean comforting (*1 Thessalonians 5:11*) through a positive word, conversation, hug, smile, touch, card, meal.

*Haggai 1:12-15* records the positive response of the people: "*they came and worked on the house of the Lord of hosts, their God.*" May God bless our efforts to exalt him and build a spiritual temple.

## **Worshipful Listening: Essential For Edification**

In the early days of the American republic, Benjamin Franklin gave a stirring speech in favor of ratifying the Constitution. A heckler reportedly yelled, "Aw, them words don't mean nothin' a'tall! Where's all that happiness you say it guarantees us?" Franklin with his famous wit replied, "My friend, the Constitution only guarantees the American people the right to pursue happiness. You have to catch it yourself!"

The same could be said of listening. Jesus frequently admonished, "*He who has ears, let him hear.*" Although we commonly speak of the five acts of worship—proclaiming the word, giving, singing, partaking the communion, and praying—listening is somehow neglected and at best viewed passively.



When I think of worship, I visualize Michelangelo's painting in the Sistine Chapel, The Creation of Adam. In that great ceiling scene, God the Creator reaches down with hand and energetic index finger to touch and quicken Adam. The gap between deity and humanity represents the power of creation. From man's perspective, the hand of Adam could describe our efforts to relate to God. The five fingers correspond to the five acts of worship-the media, the channels-whereby we reach back to God. God is the audience of our worship, but we speak to one another in song, pray for one another, and exhort one another. Acceptable worship necessarily involves active listening. When we worship God, we stand in awe of Him. To be acceptable, we must worship in spirit and in truth (**John 4:24**). I like to imagine that Adam's other hand cups the ear to hear every sound, follows verses and songs line by line, reaches deep in pockets to give, takes notes, breaks the bread, raises the cup, and lifts in prayer. The gap between humanity and deity, this time, is worship.

For the most part, however, we listen with partial discrimination. Listening experts estimate we remember about 50% of message content. Why? First, our hearing mechanism is not perfectly efficient. Research reveals that our attention to sound is broken every 2-5 seconds. Second, we have spare time to think while we listen. While most Americans speak around 150 words per minute, the brain deals with words at lightning pace. Instead of investing in the speech, we often waste the luxury in time to daydream. Third, we may be unprepared emotionally to listen-unable to listen because we are emotionally drained or unwilling to listen because we know we need to make changes.

What are the implications of these physiological capabilities? The break in concentration need not be an inherent disadvantage. Slight breaks remind us of our obligation to evaluate what we hear; momentary interruptions provide a safeguard against being mesmerized. Further, the breaks enable us to note other stimuli about us that might alert us to immediate danger. As for the speech/thought differential, the spare time provides a potential advantage, allowing us to scrutinize claims and evidence. Alas, "**the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak**" (**Matthew 26:41**). Overcoming psychological resistance, though, may be the greatest obstacle to worshipful listening: if the spirit is not willing, we may not even get to the pew!

Consider these suggestions the next time you gather with the saints to worship:

Worshipful listening exercises control (**Matthew 11:15; Revelation 2:7**). Resist the temptation to sleep, to turn to other stimuli, to daydream. Prepare to listen by getting a good night's sleep prior to worship. Contemplate the words of the songs you sing, and meditate on the prayers led. Sit close to the front to limit distractions, and refuse to turn to see who came in or was carried out! Be an example of the believers, young people; when together, adore (worship) your Father, not your date.

Worshipful listening empathizes with communicators. Make a special effort to view the ideas from the speaker's perspective. Judge righteous judgment by overlooking delivery errors and by being open-minded to a different view. To empathize with a speaker does not mean adopting or endorsing a position, only that you have agreed to share and consider it for the moment, suspending evaluation until later (**Matthew 13:10-17; 2 Peter 1:19-21**).

Worshipful listening evaluates content. Test evidence and speaker claims in light of the Scriptures (**2 Timothy 4:2-5; 1 John 4:1**). Turn to the passages mentioned. Mark those Bibles. Note the organizational pattern. Take notes, not as a courtroom stenographer, but instead capture major ideas. Avoid message manslaughter by suspending final judgment until you have the full picture. Interpret emotional language rather than react to it. Capitalize on the fact that thought is faster than speech.

Worshipful listening encourages congregants. The sound of pages turned, of amens uttered-the presence of affirming smiles and approving nods-enhance the atmosphere for worship and glorify God. No one is guaranteed an exciting worship experience. You have to catch it yourself! Speaking accomplishes little if there is no listening (**Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16**).

Worshipful listening evokes change. While the acts of worship prompt you to think, in the final analysis, conversion only takes place when individuals internalize the messages and respond. An introspective look at self depends on

active listening (*Hebrews 3:7, 15; 4:7*). If we actively listen, multiple responses, both private and public, will occur.

In Puritan churches, they used to have ushers who would rudely awaken with long poles those dozing. We remember Eutychus (*Acts 20:9*) because he fell to sleep in church services, fell out a window, died, and was raised to life. Perhaps the Apostle Paul, who had spoken to midnight, felt a special degree of mercy in addition to long-windedness. There are New Testament examples for both sleeping and lengthy preaching in worship, but there are perils for each. The noble Bereans practiced worshipful listening (*Acts 17:11*).

Don't turn a deaf ear to the demands of the Divine! Don't be guilty of saying, "I didn't catch that." Instead, glorify your Father through worshipful listening.

## Leap into Action

As Neil Armstrong stepped onto the moon, he commented, "One small step for a man; one giant leap for mankind." A transmission error omitted the "a" from the now famous quotation. Grandeur is God's province. Greater than astronauts are God's proclaimers of the word! God especially looks with favor on the feet of those who bring the gospel (*Romans 10:14-15*). To accept the role of an evangelist is a humble step for a man, but a giant advance for the brotherhood. Since we are to walk by faith and not by sight (*2 Corinthians 5:7*), congregations of faith will encourage others to become evangelists, elders, and deacons.

Every generation is responsible for training and encouraging others to proclaim the word of God. Actually this is true of any ministry or area of service: we need good mentors to model both behavior and attitude. If there are no mentors, there are no successors. The Apostle Paul exhorted the young evangelist Timothy: "*And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also*" (*2 Timothy 2:2*).

It seems we also have had a transmission error assuming that evangelists receive a special call. We are **all** called by the gospel (*2 Thessalonians 2:14*), and when we obey the gospel we call upon God, his authority and his grace (*Acts 22:16*). As was true in Jesus' day, so it is today, "*the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few*" (*Matthew 9:37*). What would prompt a person to choose any profession? Excellence in the performance of duties and a love for the work compel us to say, "This is my calling in life." Encouraging words along the way help in the determination. Honest and frank appraisals—from evangelists who train and elders who ordain—confirm decisions.

What would be impediments in even considering the work of an evangelist (*2 Timothy 4:1-5*)? Open and constant complaining, especially in front of children, about all that is wrong with the church will not motivate people to enter full-time ministry. In fact, it may not motivate them to stay in the church at all! Further, any laborer is worthy of his hire (*1 Corinthians 9:7-12*), and one must be able to support his family (*1 Timothy 5:8*). Hanging on my study wall is a nicely stitched reminder that: "Working for the Lord doesn't pay much, but the retirement plan is out of this world!" Astronomical expectations and demands on evangelists must be evaluated in the light of scripture.

What are we doing to encourage and prepare evangelists, elders, deacons, and teachers? Let me offer some practical actions for congregations and individuals.

Elders, please realize that the rate of governmental travel in Missouri is \$.29 a mile. To compensate fairly a man for even the wear and tear on his car for a 300 mile roundtrip would be \$87.00. Most evangelists, even if asked, are reluctant to set a figure for compensation in a special meeting: a low guide might be \$100 per lesson. We need elders sensitive to the financial burdens of an evangelist. For a young man, serious about becoming an evangelist, it might even mean assisting with educational expenses. While private home ownership is generally best, elders might consider providing housing for an evangelist. Few congregations who receive this paper have sent out and support full-time evangelists. Elders, make it a goal to appoint an evangelist and begin now planning for the financial

obligations. Remember, by U.S. 2002 census standards, a married man making \$18,000 with two children is considered in poverty! Emotional support is important, too. I am so glad we were able to host a reception in honor (**Romans 13:7**) of Bro. Bill Hensley last April and present him with a plaque for his years of radio work in northeast Missouri.

We need elders to provide opportunities for young people to develop their talents. This might mean paying their way to a VBS in the Philippines or helping with travel to a special gospel meeting. I am so heartened to see the emphasis on youth at the February meetings at Norwalk, California, and in Kirksville, my home congregation. In this leap year corrective to our calendar, we are examining spiritual applications and correctives of "leaping." Encouraging young men to develop their talents and deepen their understandings will raise up another generation of leaders. Young people, talk to your elders about your spiritual goals.

Members, to call upon a man to travel 300 miles to conduct a funeral, please reference the paragraph above. When was the last time you had an evangelist in your home or remembered a special occasion of his family? When was the last time you thanked a leader for his service? I began preaching around 16; one of my special memories is of a family that bought me a suit. Evidently, women played a special role in financing the work of Jesus (**Luke 8:2-3**). I knew one group of women that met on a regular basis to quilt and would give a quilt to an evangelist. Could it be that quilting and generosity are lost arts?

Most evangelists are not motivated by money. I never refused to go to a place because of payment. In fact, I have preached many a place with no compensation. I once had to point out to a grumbling evangelist who complained about the long distance he had to travel and the amount of compensation (previously agreed to) he received, that Jesus himself had a great distance to come from Heaven to Earth! For a while, I thought the evangelist believed his journey was greater! An independently wealthy man, and a godly man, he apologized.

But this does raise another point, Paul was a tent maker and a teacher (**Acts 18:3 & 19:9**). He used his skills and education to support himself and not burden others. When I served as an evangelist, my home congregation only supported me financially in overseas ventures because my university teaching position supplied my everyday financial needs. We need fully-supported evangelists, but we also need evangelists who can support themselves through secular livelihoods. This February, **leap into action!**

## **The Place and Permanence of the Evangelist**

Upon His ascension to the Father, Christ *"gave gifts to men"* (**Ephesians 4:8**). Among these gifts were four functions necessary to the church's welfare, designed to promote development and discernment in her members: *"And [Christ] Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers (i.e. 'teaching pastors'), for the equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting"* (**Ephesians 4:11-14**).

Concerning the first two functions (apostles and prophets), Christ employed a policy of planned obsolescence, removing them from the Divine economy as the need for their bodily presence dissipated (**Zechariah 13:1-5; 1 Corinthians 13:8-10**) we now experience them through the written word, as the Jews did *"Moses and the Prophets"* (**Luke 16:29**). Concerning "evangelists" and "pastors and teachers," however, all indications point us to the conclusion that these were roles intended to last the life of the church. Of "evangelists," particularly, this has been repeatedly brought into question in large part due to the erroneous notion that evangelists were only personal representatives of the apostles, and hence could not have outlived them.

In response and refutation, several facts may be cited:

1. The "*work of an evangelist*" (2 Timothy 4:5) preach the word, establish churches, set in order the things that are lacking, etc.) still exists. The work is perpetual; therefore, the function also must be perpetual (after all, could a non-elder justifiably do the work of an elder?).
2. From the beginning, evangelists were commissioned by churches, not apostles. Timothy was set apart to the work of an evangelist by the "*laying on of the hands of the eldership*" (1 Timothy 4:14), likely at Lystra and Iconium (Acts 16:2-3). This was a separate experience from the laying on of Paul's hands, at which time he received a miraculous gift (2 Timothy 1:6). The church at Antioch, also without the aid of an apostle, commissioned men to work as evangelists (Acts 13:1-3).
3. "Evangelists" exist in the same category with "pastors and teachers" insofar as they are not part of the foundation of the church. Paul wrote of "*the foundation of the apostles and prophets*," in part alluding to their temporary existence (are not foundations laid, then left?). No such statements exist concerning evangelists.
4. History records evangelists working after the death of the last apostle. Eusebius; (260-340 AD) records evangelists working during the reign of Trajan (98-117 AD):
 

"...they performed the office of evangelists to those who had not yet heard the faith, while with a noble ambition to proclaim Christ, they also delivered to them the books of the holy gospels. (3)

After laying the foundation of the faith in foreign parts as the particular object of their mission, appointing others as shepherds of the flocks, and committing to these the care of those who had been recently introduced, they went again to other regions..." (Ecclesiastical History).

## II. The Qualifications of the Evangelist

Although no lengthy list of qualifications exists for evangelists as is the case with bishops (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9) and deacons (1 Timothy 3:8-13), Scripture is plain that evangelists are to be of a certain sort. Both Philip the evangelist (Acts 21:8) and Timothy the evangelist (2 Timothy 4:5) were men with good reputations before they were ordained (Acts 6:3-5; 16:2). In addition to that, several statements in the evangelistic epistles (1 & 2 Timothy, Titus) speak to the necessity of personal purity in an evangelist: "*be an example ... in purity*" (1 Timothy 4:12); "*keep yourself pure*" (1 Timothy 5:22); "*keep this commandment without spot, blameless*" (1 Timothy 6:14). Paul also wrote that an evangelist "*must not quarrel, but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, in humility correcting those who are in opposition*" (2 Timothy 2:24-25). Other qualifications exist, as well (1 Timothy 6:11; 2 Timothy 1:13, 2:22; Titus 2:7-8).

## III. The Work of the Evangelist

Paul told Timothy to "*do the work of an evangelist*" (2 Timothy 4:5). A careful study of the books of Acts, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus reveal what that work is. (The following is not an exhaustive list.)

1. "*Preach the word*" (2 Timothy 4:2). The evangelist seeks opportunity to speak the truths of God. To the saved and unsaved alike, he is a herald of the good news of Jesus Christ.
2. "*Appoint elders*" (Titus. 1:5). Timothy the evangelist was given a list of the qualifications of elders/bishops (1 Timothy 3:1-7), just as Titus was, indicating that their ordination was his responsibility. Saul and Barnabas, working in the capacity of evangelists (Acts 13:1-3), appointed elders in the churches of Asia (Acts 14:23). Eusebius' account of second century evangelists (cited under point I) confirms that evangelists continued to ordain elders even after the apostles' deaths.
3. "*Commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also*" (2 Timothy 2:2). The evangelist is a temporary instructor in the local congregation, building it up and educating its members, so that his presence will no longer be necessary. In a sense, he is working himself out of job; he is working to make congregations self-sufficient.

4. **"Speak these things, exhort, and rebuke with all authority" (Titus 2:15).** Evangelists possess authority that must be exercised in certain circumstances. Four times Timothy is told to command that truth be observed (*1 Timothy 1:3, 4:11, 5:7, 6:17*). An evangelist may be called upon to exercise his authority when false teaching arises (*Titus 1:10-14*) or when an elder fails to behave in a manner befitting his position (*1 Timothy 5:19-20*).

## WANTED:

### God's BFOQs for Evangelists

The world looks at appearances, but God looks upon the heart (*1 Samuel 16:7*). The world would not choose David, but God would. The world rejected Jesus of Nazareth, but God exalted him (*Acts 4:10-12; Philippians 2:9*). A worldly point of view might adopt the following *bona fide occupational qualifications* (BFOQs) for an ideal evangelist:

The successful candidate for our ministerial (pulpit) position will be between ages 30-50, married with school-age children, and educated in a Christian college. Picture required.

In the business world, employers set BFOQs in order to establish job criteria. These criteria, if legitimate and non-discriminatory, are used to deny employment, and trained interviewers carefully avoid asking non-BFOQ questions. Of course, churches may set guidelines that reflect doctrinal understandings. The fictional ad above is unfortunately the norm in many churches of Christ. Not even the secular world would treat people this unfairly! To deny a man the opportunity to preach on the basis of marriage, age, children, or looks borders on the criminal! Let's speak as the oracles of God (*1 Peter 4:11*). Let's be about the Father's business (*Luke 2:49*).

For some, there is the belief that having one full-time preacher will attract people. Realistically, using the worldly model, small churches cannot afford to hire the best, and therefore if they hire anyone at all, they are at risk of hiring men with character or personality flaws and limited abilities-otherwise these men would have climbed the ladder of success to the largest congregations! Hence, a small congregation often hires a man that will be largely unsuccessful in achieving what they hired him for in the first place! What they get is trouble and division.

Consider Nashville, Tennessee. A body of believers was established in 1828. The elders and many of the members took turns preaching. They started nearby congregations and appointed two evangelists, Tolbert Fanning and Absalom Adams, to spread the word. David Lipscomb noted, however, when they employed a full-time preacher, the spirit of evangelism weakened, and their ranks were decimated by the apostasy of a one man pastor, Jesse Ferguson. Ten years later when Philip Fall worked with them, "*not a member would pray at the communion service in public worship*" (**James R. Wilburn**, *The Hazard of the Die: Tolbert Fanning and the Restoration Movement*, p. 155).

The expectation of one man exclusively filling the pulpit was not readily accepted by the brotherhood and cannot be scripturally defended as God's role for an evangelist. Consider the words of J.W. Shepherd in *The Church, the Falling Away, and the Restoration*, a classic work *still* being reprinted by the Gospel Advocate Company:

"From the letters to Timothy and Titus it appears that the general work of an evangelist was to preach the Gospel in other fields than the congregation in which he held his membership, establish churches and take care of them, appoint elders and deacons when such work was appropriate, and to labor for such congregations as needed assistance, whether with or without an eldership." (p. 48).

At our congregation in Kirksville, we have many preachers-men who read from the Scriptures and teach. We have even more ministers-people serving God and man through individualized ministries. Indeed, we attempt to qualify the called. However, no one presently has been appointed to do the work of an evangelist.

Elders need to give earnest heed to the preparation and appointment of evangelists. Preparation, including both formal and informal education and training, is a legitimate concern. Sadly, elders in many areas of the country take a lax approach to evangelistic preparation. Timothy was urged to give diligence, to study (*2 Timothy 2:15*). First Century leaders were aided by inspiration to give the early church a miraculous start; God expects 21st Century men to use perspiration! Elders cannot expect and should not rely on institutions to train evangelists. Higher education can help prepare a man, but only elders can determine readiness and appoint.

In my own preparation as an evangelist, I never had an elder to sit down with me and suggest courses to take in school or to provide guidance. My interest in preaching was seen simply as my own vocational choice. The unstated assumption was that if I was good enough, likeable, and scriptural that I could land a job. **And here lies the problem:**

**the biblical role of an evangelist has been removed from an appointment by caring elders who partner with a brother and relegated to a hiring by committees who negotiate a job description with a man.** In my experience, I have seen full-time preachers abused and made the scapegoat for congregational problems. I am persuaded that churches and elders will one day give an account for this profane abuse! The very fact that God has been so specific about qualifications for elders and deacons illustrates that God expects these men to be the leaders, principal feeders, and care-givers of his flocks.

When it comes to the work of an evangelist, some hold forth questionable criteria for his selection, preparation, and duties. God expects an evangelist to convince, rebuke, and exhort (*2 Timothy 4:1-5*). There is not a word said about marriage, age, children, looks, or exact manner of training. God expects a man to be prepared to preach to one or many. He should study and learn from other evangelists and be an example of the believers (*1 Timothy 4:12-16; 2 Timothy 2:2*). God expects an evangelist to work well with people, to be patient. God expects evangelists to be appointed by elders and respectful of their guidance. Unlike a worldly view, God's design is to put the most talented on the front-lines of battle, providing small churches evangelistic support until the time they can develop elders and deacons. We better mind God's BFOQs.

## Old Thrashers' Reunion?

Old thrashers' reunions are popular in rural America. Throngs gather to see the bells and whistles of early steam-powered harvesting farm machines. Preservation combines with nostalgia for a simpler time, but is anyone really interested in more than gawking? I imagine some view renewed interest about mutual edification as an old thrashers' reunion! "Why should we consider ideas thrashed about years ago and long abandoned?" Living in a Bible belt often means belting people with Bibles, giving them a good thrashing, and-sadly, sadly-never really opening the Bible!

Easily dismissed as the extreme ideas of Daniel Sommer, Carl Ketcherside, or Leroy Garrett, mutual edification is given scant attention in restoration movement histories. Admittedly, these men had their attractors and also legitimate critics on other doctrinal matters. Readers of church history are often amazed to learn that David Lipscomb viewed a located preacher (one man preaching exclusively for a congregation) as a sign of worldliness. Through his influence, churches in Nashville, Tennessee, unlike other urban areas, largely resisted the trend of hiring one man to preach as late as 1930 (*Michael W. Casey, Saddlebags, City Streets, and Cyberspace: A History of Preaching in the Churches of Christ*, p. 77). Mutual ministry as a New Testament practice does not stand or fall on the basis of personalities, whether liberal or conservative champions.

Renewed attention has been given to the concept by *F. LaGard Smith* in *Radical Restoration: A Call for Pure and Simple Christianity*. His chapter on "*Pulpit Ministers: Patent Pending*" elegantly pleads for mutual ministry. I believe this work to be an excellent way to dialogue with others disillusioned with elders who no longer shepherd and culturally trapped into believing they must have Bro. Charisma lead them. For some time I have thought that we needed to put before the brotherhood a rationale for mutual ministry. I began reading his book anticipating

substantial disagreement, but found 90% concurrence. So if, dear readers, you wonder how much more can be said about the subject, realize I am not a hobbyist but a poor author working on an installment plan!

**Perhaps it is also time and fair to consider objections to mutual ministry.**

1. **"Say what?"** Most members of churches of Christ are unaware of mutual ministry. In part this has been our fault by not writing or talking with others (*Romans 10:14*). Different does not mean wrong, but may make one feel uncomfortable. Evangelists need to be receptive to pleas of assistance throughout the nation. It can be frustrating to work with a congregation that feels its chief obligation is to hire a minister, but it can also be rewarding to see them receptive to another, more biblically-grounded model.
2. **"I see now: it is only cultural."** The tables are now reversed: we may feel uncomfortable with congregations that employ a preacher. This perspective promotes tolerance, but also dismisses the validity of biblical examples and the existence of any pattern. It is true that we may develop traditions that comfort and perpetuate traditions that once had purpose. Consider the daughter who always cut her roast in two parts because mother did. Mother only did it because she did not have a big enough roasting pan! Consider the folding sheet ceremonies that sometimes accompany the Lord's supper: they were begun to protect the emblems from flies. There is nothing wrong in either tradition. There is something wrong with a preaching tradition that weakens the strength and maturation of members and redefines the role of an evangelist (*Matthew 15:6*). Neither is mutual edification a mid-western phenomenon. I have spoken several times at the Spring Avenue congregation in Decatur, Alabama. They are a young church whose members enjoy mutual ministry and are free of the restraints of keeping a preacher or the worry of getting one.
3. **"This is an old issue, decided long ago."** I am a lover of history. I wrote my Master's thesis on George W. DeHoff who happened to debate Leroy Garrett in 1954 on the topic. Bro. DeHoff gave me an autographed copy of the debate proceedings. He argued that if elders had the authority to pay an evangelist for a gospel meeting they had the authority to pay a man to preach on a weekly basis. Much of the debate unfortunately dealt with compensating preachers, a point willing conceded (*1 Corinthians 9*).
4. **"Proponents of mutual edification have been radical and taught error."** Some evangelists in the past have abused their authority, divided churches and taught error, but that does not invalidate truth. Every teacher must stand before God and give an account (*James 3:1*).
5. **"Mutual edification limits growth."** It is probably true that congregations that practice mutual edification are smaller. This is a pragmatic argument that contends that bigger is better. Bro. Smith suggests that the informality of smaller groups is refreshing and that congregations beyond 150 members should consider church planting. For instance, I know that the Gregory Boulevard congregation in Raytown, Missouri, has assisted with two church plantings.
6. **"Services are rarely edifying."** We must study, or we will have superficial lessons (*2 Timothy 2:15*). I love great preaching, but I appreciate more the congregation that rises to meet the level of preaching powerfully about a Great God.

Having preached full-time myself, I find the rotation of preaching liberating. In some instances I hear a sermon 2 or 3 times by meeting with brethren and helping them prepare lessons.

7. **"It is a matter of semantics. The same two or three men give lessons instead of one."** As with any effort, greater participation is appreciated. Elders and deacons should take a lead in teaching and preaching and empower others to do the same.

The old paths (*Jeremiah 6:16*) and ancient landmarks (*Proverbs 22:28*) are being sought, but we still need to redig the wells (Genesis 26). Do you think they are packed with old thrashers?

## Simple Elegance VS. Professional Splendor

In San Francisco for a convention, I was walking to McDonald's for breakfast when a beggar approached me for money. I invited him to eat with me, and instead received a rebuke, "I am a *professional* beggar, and I prefer cash." My choice of dining should have given him a clue that I was an *amateur* giver, and I politely declined. Professionals are not always what they are made out to be!

Occasionally I will offer extra credit to my public speaking students to visit a church service during a gospel meeting and write a critique of the evangelist's sermon. Invariably, many are often drawn more to the simple talks surrounding the Lord's Day communion service. Brevity could be a reason, but lasting impressions are not always tied to impressive professionals.

All of us should be professionals in the sense that we *profess* our love for Christ every day. For example, our attire will be proper if we *profess* godliness (**1 Timothy 2:10**). If we *profess to know God*, our works will reveal it (**Titus 1:16**); otherwise *He will profess* not knowing us (**Matthew 7:23**). The Greek noun *homologia*, "same word," is better rendered confession in **Hebrews 3:11, 4:14, and 10:23**. This confession made at our conversion (**1 Timothy 6:12, 13**) should be maintained throughout all our days. Neither is it limited to one location, even though my children spoke of the "*confession stand*" when they first started playing baseball!

All of us should desire to give the Lord our best efforts (**Hebrews 6:10; 1 Peter 4:10**). In the Christian age, one cannot hire another to perform priestly duties we should be doing ourselves. It is true there was a clergy system present in the old system, even temple singers, but the authority for a choir or professional priests has passed. The Apostle Paul even warned Timothy about *professing* false knowledge (**1 Timothy 6:20, 21**).

As one new Christian in Louisiana, converted from Catholicism, once told me, "I appreciate the simplicity of the church of Christ." Simple things are elegant. Parsimony, a simple, elegant explanation is appreciated in many arenas, including science. Efforts to make things complicated, formal, and professional, destroy the power inherent in simplicity. For instance, the natural artistic talents of George Caleb Bingham, Missouri frontier and riverfront artist, were ruined, by some accounts, by his study abroad. When he returned, he painted all his characters with a jolly Frenchman smile that lacked realism.

I want to develop and use all my talents for the Lord. I do not want to be part of a system that encourages members to bury theirs (**Matthew 25:25**). **The Lord never compares you to others. The one talent man was not faulted for having only one talent, but for not using it!** The Lord used simple men to establish a simple church. Let's appreciate the beauty of simple things:

*For the beauty of the earth, for the beauty of the skies,*

*For the love which from our birth over and around us lies:*

*For the beauty of each hour, of the day and of the night,*

*Hill and vale, and tree, and flow 'r, sun and moon, and stars of light:*

*For Thy church that evermore lifteth holy hands above,*

*Offering up on ev'ry shore her pure sacrifice of love:*

*Lord of all, to Thee we raise this our sacrifice of praise.*



Do you know that there were evidently "professional mourners" (*Jeremiah 9:17; Matthew 9:23*) in Jesus' day to insure that proper mourning accompanied funerals? Let the dead bury the dead and give me heart-felt, genuine devotion!

To talk about simplicity does not mean that everything is apparent (*2 Timothy 2:14-19; 2 Peter 3:15-18*). There are some difficult passages and issues (*Deuteronomy 29:29*). *Simplistic* (note the difference) explanations are inadequate. Consequently, brethren, preach what you know-what convicts you-not what you question. As the song suggests, "make the message plain." Indeed, the mark of an educated man is the ability to make things simple. The Greek noun *haplotes* is sometimes rendered "simplicity." **Simple means single-minded, focused.** Our mission is to please God, not ourselves. When this view of God is clear (*Matthew 6:22; Luke 11:34*), we become like him. We will give with singleness of heart (cf. *James 1:5 & Romans 12:8*), and we will work as unto the Lord (*Ephesians 6:5; Colossians 3:22*).

**Simple also means pure, unadulterated.** It becomes an ethical issue (*2 Corinthians 11:2, 3*), and consequently we must mark those who ruin the innocence of the church (*Romans 16:16-19*). Pictured as the bride of Christ, the church must remain pure. Pure and undefiled religion (*James 1:27*) is our desire.

**Finally, simple means devoted to good,** "without evil," *akakos*. Simplicity strikes an emotional chord with people. The adage holds true: *no one cares how much you know until they know how much you care*. To be simple is to be guileless, harmless, sincere, without pretense, unaffected by wrong and skepticism. That describes Jesus (*Hebrews 7:26*) who went about doing good (*Acts 10:38*). This simplicity is maintained by holding forth the word (*Philippians 2:12-16*). Christianity is simple, "unmixed" *akeraios*, if we stay with the book. The Lord's church is elegantly simple. Professional splendor may attract, but it does not endure. Never underestimate the power of simplicity nor be tempted to criticize the less eloquent brother. All of us love to hear great preaching, but we should rejoice more at the development of multiple speakers and teachers in our congregations.

## **Preaching Made Easy:**

### **Why Every Man Can Exhort**

Did you know that the sermon, a thematic discourse delivered to the church, is a relatively modern development, emerging around A.D. 1200 with scholasticism? It is true that we have New Testament examples of preaching by John the Immerser, Jesus, the apostles, evangelists, and deacons. However, have you ever stopped to consider that these examples are evangelistic in thrust, aimed at unconverted audiences? Further, in most of these instances, the lessons were taught-and the people obeyed-in private settings, not in public worship.

For all its complicated ceremony, return to the Old Law, and elevation of oral law above the sacred Scripture, the homily as practiced in the Catholic church may be surprisingly closer to the New Testament practice of weekly exhortation than we imagine! The homily is a simple application of a passage, usually brief in nature. Influenced by Protestant preaching, which tends to be longer and evangelistic in tone, changes are yet being made in Catholic services. Nonetheless, it may be worth re-examining if lengthy sermons might not better be replaced with multiple, perhaps shorter, lessons as exemplified in *1 Corinthians 14*. It makes sense that additional time would be given to visiting evangelists as when the Apostle Paul spoke to midnight (*Acts 20*).

These implications are profound for anyone interested in restoration of the New Testament church. First, it bears reminding that the early church is patterned after the synagogue where the congregation assembled to learn the Scriptures. Second, any man deemed competent in the synagogue could read and expound the Scriptures. Third, the focus of the assemblies was/is to celebrate shared values and meanings of a people already called out! In other words, while evangelism is important and while non-Christians may be present, the focus of assemblies should be on the risen Lord. An exaggerated way of saying this is that preaching is designed for the lost, not the church, and that exhortation is designed for the church.

Now, let me hasten to add that personal evangelism is the obligation of every Christian, and preaching/teaching the special obligation of evangelists. Somewhere along the line, faulty conclusions have emerged that since evangelists should teach the lost, they alone should exclusively do it from a pulpit. Show me a congregation with this mindset, and I will show you a congregation that has not seen a baptism in years. Evangelists, help these congregations by preparing a news release, flyer, and sample advertisement for them. Second, insist on time for personal work in the community, for one-on-one Bible studies. Third, preach the gospel. There is nothing sadder than an evangelistic meeting in which the gospel—the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus—is not proclaimed, nor the gospel response explained. Evangelistic or missionary meetings can be successful with proper planning. Elders, help your members learn outreach methods, model them, and plan systematic outreach.

Consider, again, the regular weekly assemblies. Why should we pattern ourselves after an artificial model that paid professionals can conceivably do better?

1. Let us capitalize on the strength of mutual edification! Multiple perspectives and presentation styles make services vibrant. To expect every brother to develop a 30 minute lesson is to set a high standard. Such a standard will discourage many from volunteering and is not developmentally encouraging for novice speakers. The 30 minute time, for example, can be divided among speakers.
2. Multiple speakers at an assembly involve more members. I know of one congregation that tries to schedule a younger and an older member to speak on Sunday morning.
3. It is far better to consider first century practice. Brevity need not be shallow. It does make sense that a speaker that is more mature or a visiting evangelist might be allotted greater time or even all the exhortation time.
4. Every man can exhort, can share how the Scriptures and Christ have changed outlook and actions. These lessons need not be long. No one should feel trapped or obligated to exhort. We want men who have something to say and not those who feel they have to say something.

Realistically, prestige has always been a temptation. *Michael Casey (Saddlebags, City Streets, & Cyberspace: A History of Preaching in the Churches of Christ, pp. 40-45)* relates that in the 1840s a cultural shift took place with many urban congregations hiring ministers to preach every Sunday. He cites Joseph Franklin and J.A. Headington:

In the days of log-cabins and clapboard-roofs and puncheon-floors, any earnest and fervid preacher, who was a godly man, was listened to with patient interest, regardless of ungrammatical language and uncouth gestures. But the refinements of social life, and the culture coming from schools, lectures, concerts, and general reading, made awkward pulpit manners intolerable. The people began to demand a cultivated ministry, and to despise the unstudied efforts of their "elders." (*The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin, St. Louis, 1879, pp. 257-58.*)

Casey argues that strict restorationists favored a "farmer preacher" model, developed a debating tradition, and resisted cultural assimilation (including instrumental music in worship). On the other hand, progressive restorationists advocated a "professional minister" model, adopted innovations such as the missionary society and instrumental music in worship, and went the way of the Disciples of Christ. Today, we see history repeating itself among churches of Christ.

For some, "preaching made easy" means hiring someone to do it! For shame! Every brother can exhort.