

Ethical Concerns of Godly Evangelists

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Godly evangelists of our day occupy a noble position. They stand at the present end of a long and continuing line of heralds for God stretching back into antiquity. Any man considering taking his place in this line should do so with great forethought. Those already therein ought also to ponder again the weight of their responsibility. The Holy Spirit warns: "Be not many of you teachers, my brethren, knowing that we shall receive heavier judgment" (James 3:1). "It would appear that there was a disposition on the part of the early converts to the word to desire the attention and influence which attended its teaching; and these, without sufficient preparation, were disposed to attempt that which they were not qualified to do" (Woods 154). Would-be, and present preachers, ought to consider carefully that they "will be judged more strictly," as brother McCord aptly renders the phrase.

Knowing the power of the preacher's influence, Paul wrote: "[B]e thou an ensample to them that believe, in work, in manner of life, in purity" (1 Timothy 4:12). The ethical concerns for a preacher are divided into two broad categories: (1) "take heed to thyself," and (2) "to thy teaching" (1 Timothy 4:16). When this charge is properly executed it results in the salvation of both the preacher himself and those that hear him (1 Timothy 4:16b). Conversely, when preachers err, they often "overthrow the faith of some" (2 Timothy 2:18b).

May we examine the preacher's ethical concerns under three main headings: (1) handling the Word, (2) handling non-textual information, and (3) handling personal matters.

Handling the Word

"Give diligence to present thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, handling aright the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15). "Study" is the rendering familiar from the King James translation. The original verb is accurately expressed by "diligence" and also by "zealous" as found in Galatians 2:10. Such exertion would include careful study and adequate preparation. This writer is concerned by the apparent lack of personal preparation on the part of some preaching brothers. A sample of e-mail requests may indicate a growing problem. What problem? – You ask! The practice of a preacher searching for a sermon outline, on line, on Saturday night! Cyber-space sharing of canned sermons without personal study and preparation may well be the ethical pitfall of the generation X preacher. The internet/e-mail medium is a wonderful tool that can be used to great advantage. Some of you may be reading this lesson via the electronic avenue. Many preachers however, discipline themselves to diligently make personal preparation and resist any urge to simply

regurgitate the material of others. What do great preachers such as J.W. McGarvey, N.B. Hardeman, Guy Woods, Roy Lanier Sr., and Hugo McCord have in common? They are all making great contributions to the kingdom from countless hours of personal study; some posthumously. May theirs not be a dying breed!

With the pressure of being called upon for Bible answers comes another possible pitfall. In order to avoid embarrassment the preacher is hesitant to ever answer with three honest words: "I don't know." Such an attitude is similar to those "desiring to be teachers of the law, though they understand neither what they say, nor whereof they confidently affirm" (1 Timothy 1:7). It is better to not answer at all than to "confidently affirm" what must later be denied.

While most preachers may be able to define the difference between *exegesis* (*bring out* the meaning) and *eisegesis* (*reading into*), they, through lack of diligence, may slump into the latter. For example, when faced with the need to "prove a point" he may go in search of "proof" to buttress a point already fixed in his mind. This "cart before the horse" mentality has resulted in debates among brethren, which could have been wholly avoided.

Back in 1990, brother Wayne Jackson had a trio of articles titled: "Defending the Faith With A Broken Sword." He explained the significance of this title as follows:

It is a commendable thing to want to defend the teaching of the Holy Scriptures. Such efforts, however, only serve the cause of truth when they are biblically sound and reasonably argued.however, some teachers, with the very best of motives, have nevertheless wielded a "broken sword" in their sincere attempts to contend for the faith (Jackson 6).

The examination was made of verses, which are used (or we should say abused) to support a teaching, which is of itself biblical. For example, when affirming the cessation of miraculous gifts, first Corinthians chapter thirteen is a legitimate text to use. The context clearly contrasts the miraculous/temporary/partial with the written/permanent/complete revelation. It is true that the adjective "perfect" of verse ten is a neuter gender in the original. But to say, "Neuter can *never* be used to refer to Christ!" – is to argue falsely. While it is not the usual, Luke 1:35 and 1 John 1:1 contain neuter words which refer to Christ. The "complete thing" of verse ten does not refer to Christ, but appealing to the neuter gender alone is insufficient.

A writer once wondered: "why we never use Zechariah 1:5 when teaching on the subject of demon possession." Brother Lanier Sr. responded: "I cannot speak for other writers, but I do not see anything in the verse about demon possession" (Roy Lanier Sr. 1:123). Obviously the querist was read to employ the verse in a discussion, which it had no bearing upon.

The specific *charge* (2 Timothy 4:1) given to the *evangelist* (2 Timothy 4:5) is to "preach the word" (2 Timothy 4:2). A balanced and regular diet of "the bread of life" (John 6:35, 48, 63) is vital for the health of a congregation. Sadly, in a world filled with flash and showiness, some preachers have resorted (in varying degrees) to using similar tactics. Within the brotherhood there is growing acceptance of *performance worship*, and the proclamation has not been unaffected. Some preachers

find themselves in competition for congregational attention from grand dramatic presentations. In a feeble effort to compete he begins to fill his lessons with ostentatious gestures, pomes, current events, and stories. Some conscientious listeners may wait, ready to turn in the Bible to the verse cited, but find themselves waiting, and waiting, and waiting. It is little wonder that many are “weak and sickly” (1 Corinthians 11:30) since “belief cometh of hearing ...the word” (Romans 10:17) and they are not hearing such word! Dear preacher, regain the fervor of heralds who declared: “thus saith Jehovah of hosts...” (Zechariah 1:3)!

Handling Non-textual Information

In his line of duty the man of god must constantly handle all manner of non-biblical information. His personal ethics and integrity herein are also put to the test. First of all, may we consider things spoken in confidence. His devotion to the word, logically equips the preacher to answer personal questions, which arise among the membership. There is no biblical ground for *auricular confession* (“Private personal confession, made ‘in the ear’ of the confessor...”, Attwater, 44) as required by Catholicism. Still, members often confide in the preacher, even sharing shocking personal sins. Proper personal ethics will restrain the receiver from “leaking” the information to others. “The words of a whisperer are as dainty morsels, and they go down into the innermost parts” (Proverbs 26:22). The preacher should not *assume* that his wife (or anyone else) is the unstated exception to confidentiality. He should tell no one without the direct agreement of the confider. The preacher is a true helper when he points both offenders and those offended to Matthew 5:23, 24 and Matthew 18:15-17 respectively.

Secondly, our attention turns to the use of material(s) produced by others. We have previously noted the sharing of materials electronically. But when does legitimate use of material cross the line and become plagiarism? Plagiarize is defined as: “to take ideas, writings, etc. from [another] and pass them off as one’s own” (Webster). And a plagiarist is: “one who plagiarizes; a literary thief” (Webster). If all such thieves were put on crosses, how vacant would our pulpits be?! There seems to be the rationale by some that, since “we be brethren,” it is share and share as you like.

Within the copyright laws there is the “fair use” provision. The *fair use* is included to allow for such legitimate uses as critiques, comments, news reporting, research, etc. Section 107 of the law sets forth factors which help determine whether a use may rightly be considered under the *fair use* clause:

- (1) the purpose and character of the use, including whether such use is of a commercial nature or is for nonprofited educational purposes; (2) the nature of the copyrighted work; (3) the amount and substantiality of the portion used in relation to the copyrighted work as a whole and (4) the effect of the use upon the potential market for or value of the copyrighted work. (Dobkin 1019-1020)

It is evident from such terms as “commercial nature” and “potential market for or value of,” that rightful *gain* is a primary consideration the law is striving to regulate. However, the child of God should be motivated by a higher concern. “Take thought for things honorable in the sight of all men” (Romans 12:17b). The practice of rewording some or all of a borrowed writing and keeping the source silent does not free one of plagiarism. The conscientious man will not hesitate to give credit where credit

is due. In his book on homiletics, John Broadus included a section titled: "Plagiarism and Borrowing." Sadly, the section is omitted in later editions.

There are two extremes. On the one hand, a mistake desire for originality and independence causes some able men to abstain from reading anything on the text of subject. ... The other extreme is that of reading instead of thinking, just cramming the mind with a medley of other men's thoughts, and constructing a discourse out of these (Broadus 90).

So as not to go overboard in citing sources, note: "Avoid, too, an ostentatious display of wide reading. Let the acknowledgement interrupt as little as possible the flow of thought..." (91). A good rule of thumb is offered – "never make use of another's contribution in a way that would be embarrassing to confess in public or that would be embarrassing if the author were present" (92). The *golden rule* (Matthew 7:12) would also motivate one to give proper credit when borrowing from the efforts of others.

Thirdly, there is the matter of reporting and presentations. The minister may give a report about a missionary campaign, periodically update his supporters, present a proposal to the elders, and the list could go on and on. In some instances, temptation may exist for the man to "shade the truth" so as to cast the information in a more favorable light. For example, some supporters of missionary efforts are so driven solely by numbers that they will only continue to support efforts which produce the number of baptisms which they deem fitting. Thankfully, God's demand upon us is to plant and water and He will give the increase (1 Corinthians 3:6). However, facing possible loss of support, the missionary may give *inflated numbers* in hopes of placating the supporter. Whether on paper or on the lips – lying is sin (Revelation 21:8). The initial lying of Ananias and Sapphira was to purposefully leave a false impression, which would make them look generous (Acts 5:1-3). They acted so as to cause people to think they gave all the proceeds from their sale. God's punishment for the sin was death (Acts 5:5, 10). Similarly today, one may utter a series of true statements, but carefully leave out some truth, thus purposefully leaving a misimpression – such is also sin.

Handling Personal Matters

Whether he likes it or not, the preacher is more often than not – scrutinized. His words, actions, decisions, and attitudes are observed. Knowing this to be true, Paul exhorted Timothy: "Let no man despise thy youth; but be thou an ensample to them that believe, in word, in manner of life, in love, in faith, in purity" (1 Timothy 4:12). This call to a pure personal ethic applies to all evangelists today.

First, we shall address abuses of his respected position. The man behind the pulpit is in a unique position. He is to "put the brethren in mind" of things (1 Timothy 4:6) and he must "reprove, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching" (2 Timothy 4:2). He must however, refrain from using the pulpit as a whipping post. When the preacher learns of one member's problem, often the wise choice would be to go, preferably with an elder, and talk to the individual personally. This choice requires courage and love. It will often bring about pleasant results. He has approached the person in the way he would want to be treated if he were in his shoes. However, to choose rather to mount the podium and hurl condemnation upon one, often fails to achieve the desired result. Yes, there are times when

public rebuke is needed. "Them that sin reprove in the sight of all, that the rest also may be in fear" (1 Timothy 5:20).

Another abuse of the position may come in his dealing with ladies. Often ladies like to give the preacher special attention. It may be expressed by cards of encouragement, baking some treat, or a personal visit. Such gestures make his work pleasant and are uplifting. However, much caution must be exercised by the man of God. He is to treat "the elder women as mothers; the younger as sisters, in all purity" (1 Timothy 5:2). The preacher is to treat the younger ladies "as" (*hos*) sisters, that is, as he would a sister in the flesh. "No sort of behavior will so easily make or mar the young preacher as his conduct with young women" (Robertson 4:583). Flirting is a sport that the minister must not play. And if he meets privately with a lady, he will do so with someone else at least in the vicinity.

The preacher must also refuse to abuse his position by pressuring other in matters of opinion. The preacher, if he is a man of conviction, will also have strong feelings about what he thinks is best in matters of judgment. Fervor in this area must be kept in check. Some congregations, with and without bishops, have preachers who are "pushing their agendas" and "ram-rod" relentlessly their personal preferences. Even when other men rally in agreement, and opinion may not be bound. Recall the incident with the apostle Paul. He thought it was "not good to take with them him [Mark] who withdrew them from Pamphylia" (Acts 15:38). So adamant was he that "there arose a sharp contention" (Acts 15:39). While Paul personally chose not to select Mark, he did not demand that others refuse to use him! Preaching brothers, make sure you do not take a hard stand against what you deem to be unwise. Make your firm stand against all that is sin!

A second area of personal concern must be his family. If the preacher is a married man, and especially if he has children, there is a pitfall peculiar to him. Namely, in his devotion to teaching and assisting others, he might neglect his own household. A bachelor may devote himself, without familial responsibilities, to the work of an evangelist. While the married man must rightly give some time and effort to "how he may please his wife" (1 Corinthians 7:33). And every father is to nurture his children "in the chastening and the admonition of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4). Elders, supporters, and members generally, must be educated to understand this point as it related to the minister. He must not only be allowed, but encouraged, to take some time for his family. In this we are not speaking of a once or twice a year vacation. Sadly, some have converted many, but lost their own children.

One more area in personal ethics, which should be discussed, relates to finances. Money matters matter! One obligation given to all believers is found in 1 Corinthians 16:2. While most English translations omit it, the word "every" (*kata*) is in the original text. Thus, brother McCord rightly translates it as an "every Sunday" obligation. The preacher is not exempt from giving every week. He should in fact, "be an ensample to them that believe" (1 Timothy 4:12) in dependability and generosity.

The preacher must also be honest in his financial arrangements. He must not leave a trail of debts (Romans 13:8). His personal monies and those of the church must be kept distinct.

He must also resist making decisions based upon financial considerations alone. "But godliness with contentment is great gain" (1 Timothy 6:6).

What are some closing remarks, which might be fitting for preachers? Surely some of Paul's last words to timothy would be appropriate. "But be thou sober in all things, suffer hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill thy ministry" (2 Timothy 4:5).

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