

Evangelism and Ethics

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“Avoiding this, that no man should blame us in this abundance which is administered by us; providing for honest things, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men”.

These words of Paul from 2 Corinthians 8:20-21 remind us that Paul knew there was a standard by which he must govern himself and his activity in serving the Lord. He knew the importance of ethical activity in all phases of the Christian life.

So many today seem to have the idea that whatever works is justified, with the “works” being judged by man’s subjective judgement rather than by the word of God. They don’t ask “Is it authorized?”, or “Is it right?” - only “Does it work?”. This is a dangerous philosophy to work by because it has no standard of authority other than that of the local situation at the time of the application. This is “situation ethics”, and it is wrong because we are never to permit the situation to govern what is, or what is not, ethical.

ETHICS DEFINED

Voltaire said, “If you wish to converse with me, define your terms”. This is always needful. The reason one cannot converse with Jehovah’s Witnesses, Christian Scientists, and even some of our own brethren, is that they have redefined terms to mean something other than what we mean. Webster defines Ethics as “The science which treats of the nature and grounds of moral obligations; moral philosophy, which teaches men their duty and the reasons of it; the science of duty”.

Ethics can refer to “social acceptance”. In a culture where bigamy is common it would be ethical to have two wives. In a culture where alcoholic wine is served with meals it would be ethical to drink alcoholic wine. However, I am of the conviction that when culture and scripture clash, the culture must change. We have a standard that transcends local social customs and habits. As Mason said to Dixon, “We have to draw the line somewhere”. And we draw the line where God drew it. Paul wrote to Timothy, “*But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth*”(1 Timothy 3:15). This was instruction relating to his conduct as a Christian. His ethical standard of living.

MORE FROM THE BIBLE ON ETHICS

In Titus 2:11-12 Paul wrote; *“For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared unto all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world”*. Peter wrote; *“But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men’s matters”* (1 Peter 4:15).

We are to follow the divine advice through James to *“So speak ye, and so do, as they that shall be judged by the law of liberty”* (James 2:12). Paul’s serious admonition in Romans 12:1-2 is to be taken to heart. Here he wrote; *“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God”*.

Why argue this point? Isn’t it common sense? Well, yes, it should be; but still there are some who have a warped sense of ethics and it is essential that we remind each other of the right and wrong of this situation. Case in point. After reviewing an article in his bulletin of July 6, 1983, James Robert Jarrell, then preaching at the Grandview Church of Christ, made this comment: “All this verbal twisting and squirming by the author of the above article would not be necessary if he would accept the teaching of the scriptures that we are justified by the principle of grace through faith, NOT by the principle of law keeping. God does not impute to the Christian his sins - ANY of his sins, whether they be sins of false belief, evil attitude, evil thought, evil deed, or sins of omission”. He then cites Romans 4:8 as his authority for that statement, which isn’t even a distant relative to what Paul was writing about. We twinge when we read such nonsense from our brethren, but we have much of this attitude being practiced in evangelism.

JUSTIFYING EXCUSES

Our brethren are masters at making excuses to justify false practices. When introducing his sermon on “Excuses” some years back the preacher said, “My brethren got up this lesson”. To justify the use of very intoxicating wine in the Lord’s Supper a brother in Brasov, Romania told us there was no grape juice available. We saw fresh grapes at the market. What does one get when one squeezes grapes? To justify using our sisters as translators they argue that no men are available to do the job, as though the absence of what’s right makes the practice of what’s wrong justifiable. To justify using known false teachers on a lectureship or in a gospel meeting brethren say his reputation as a speaker will draw a crowd and he has promised not to preach on “that” subject here. There’s more wrong with that than I have time in this lesson to deal with. Suppose there are no Bibles available to distribute. Should I distribute the Koran as a substitute? Suppose there is no money available to buy Bibles. Should I steal money in order to buy them? Do I need to continue the stupid examples to show the folly of what is deemed acceptable among our brethren?

FAULTY DEFINITIONS OF FAITH

I think sometimes the problem lies in problems with defining faith. A brother, now deceased so I won't give his name, wrote the following: "The efforts of some modernist teachers and writers to move the churches of Christ away from doctrinal matters under the guise of our responsibility to exalt Jesus Christ seems to me to be comparable to the practices of the liberal Disciples of Christ who engineered the innovations of affiliation with missionary societies and the introduction of mechanical instruments of music in worship during the latter part of the 1800's. To them it matters little what we do as worship just so long as the focus is on our faith in God and in His Son, Jesus Christ". What this brother said was true, except for the latter statement. If we do ANYTHING in worship that is NOT AUTHORIZED then our focus is NOT ON OUR FAITH IN GOD AND IN HIS SON, JESUS CHRIST. The same holds true with evangelism. We cannot justify evangelizing through error by saying our focus is on Christ. IT IS A LIE, PURE AND SIMPLE! Romans 10:17 makes it clear that you cannot do anything BY FAITH that is not authorized in the scriptures.

EXAMPLES OF UNETHICAL PRACTICES IN EVANGELISM

Any who have traveled much into other countries have experienced the strong demands for bribery payments. Such corruption is in nearly every level of some of the governments we have to deal with. Felix told Paul, *"when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee"*. Luke says that *"he hoped also that money should have been given of him of Paul, that he might loose him"* (Acts 24:25-26). Felix wanted a bribe but he got none from Paul. Bribery is extortion and we can neither engage in it nor give in to it (1 Corinthians 5:11).

Fund raising is another area that is very challenging to remain honest in. Some engage in "you for me, me for you" tactic which is deceitful. This is done by two men each raising funds for the other with the money going into a common account and being shared. It is easier to raise funds for others than it is to raise funds for one's self. The only redeeming thing in this tactic would be if the congregations know that this is the tactic being used. However, I would not be comfortable with it from any angle.

I am of the personal conviction that it is unethical to take money from a congregation that is either "liberal" or "anti". The same would sanctify stolen money if it was used in evangelism. The brother who took money from the Methodists to do mission work because he could not get it from brethren did wrong.

Another problem is the misappropriation of funds. Funds given for evangelism should be used for what they are given for. For instance, if I am given money for Bibles I cannot use that money for tracts (unless I get permission from the giver to do so). This is a major problem in some countries and we have a constant fight to get done what we send money for. A brother in the Philippines took money from me to print our tracts but used the money to print his own tracts. In my mind he was a thief. There is no way to justify such actions.

It is unethical for brethren to raise funds to print Bibles, then use that money to print versions of the Bible that are unworthy of being called Bibles. The Eastern European Missions, a Bible printing work in Vienna, is printing the NIV. Shame on them for doing so. The World Bible Translation Center is publishing the "Easy To Read" version. It has so many problems that it also cannot be honestly called

a Bible. Why do brethren do this? Why do brethren support this? I really don't know because it would be just as easy to publish a Bible that teaches truth as to publish one that does not do so.

False teaching is also a problem in our world today, as it has been since the days of the apostles. And, brethren, FALSE TEACHING IS NOT EVANGELISM! It matters not whether it is done by the denominations, or by our brethren, if truth is not being preached evangelism is not being done.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps the most unethical of all are the petty excuses being used for not evangelizing. It matters not how sound in the faith you may be academically, if you are not teaching it to others, you are not sound in the faith.