

# The Same Subjects, but New Applications

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## Introduction

Occasionally I review some of the sermon material I preached as a young man several decades ago (and am still preaching). I am often impressed with a striking phenomenon: Several of the Biblical principles which I fervently preached then to those who were outside of Christ are the very principles which we must now aim directly at our errant brethren. We will do well to review some of these dual application principles.

## Unity and Fellowship

For how long and how many generations have faithful brethren pleaded for unity among professed believers in the Bible! From the beginning of the efforts at the onset of the nineteenth century to restore the Scriptural church, godly men have urged and preached unity based on the New Testament. All of my preaching life I have publicly and privately emphasized that men ought to be and can be one in Christ. The Lord's prayer (i.e., the **actual** "Lord's prayer") for unity in John 17 specifically applies to the apostles and those who would obey the Gospel through their preaching, thus including us (vv. 20-21). However, that fact does not imply that the Lord desires that all other men be divided in religion and remain separate from His people.

Likewise, Paul's great plea for unity (1 Cor. 1:10-13) was addressed to the Corinthian saints who were divided. Their situation is the nearest thing to denominationalism one can find in the New Testament after Pentecost. It is sometimes referred to as "incipient denominationalism," indicating that its seeds were there, and if left to germinate, they would likely develop into denominationalism. If Paul rebuked a denominational spirit that resulted in division within the church, would he have had no concern about it among unbelievers? In days gone by, brethren almost universally rejected the idea that any kind of spiritual fellowship could exist between us and any of the denominations (2 Cor. 6:14-18; Eph. 5:11). The line was clearly drawn and maintained.

The denominations have repeatedly excused their separateness from one another (and from us) on the oxymoronic principle of "unity in diversity." In years past they often had their summer "union meetings" in which various churches (perhaps the Methodist, Presbyterian, and Christian churches) would join forces for a few days in a "revival," then all go their separate —

and different – ways. Billy Graham holds this same philosophy. He cares nothing about the denominational affiliation of those who respond at his crusades, either before or after they respond – “Go home and join the church of your choice,” he urges. The denominational “pastors” meet in their ministerial alliances, ignore their doctrinal and practical errors and differences, glad-hand each other, and thank God for their diversity.

Faithful men and women have for generations emphasized the evil of such a system and have cried out against it. However, we now have a large crop of “if-you-can’t-lick ‘em-join-‘em” folks in – but rapidly making their way out of – the church. They have obviously decided that sectarianism was right all along, and they have declared a truce with them. More than that, they are openly and actively joining fellowship hands with them and bidding them Godspeed. They are active in ministerial alliances and participate in interdenominational religious programs and observances (e.g., “Good Friday,” “Easter,” “Thanksgiving” services). They promote and participate in such things as the multidenominational “Promise Keepers.”

They urge people to attend the crusades of false teachers such as the late Billy Graham and Franklin Graham and serve as “counselors” for them. They meet year after year with the Independent Christian Church folk and emphasize only the few things we have in common, while relegating to insignificance crucial differences. They exchange local pulpits with Baptists, Catholics, Pentecostals – you name it – not to teach them the Truth or refute their errors, but to praise and “brother” them in their error. All the while, they castigate and condemn as “isolationists” all who rebuke their unabashed compromises. Most certainly, we must now aim strong, persistent teaching and preaching on the meaning of Biblical unity and fellowship – toward our brethren.

### **Moral Issues**

A few decades ago, when we preached and taught on such moral issues as divorce and remarriage, “social” drinking, wearing immodest apparel, dancing, and other such things, these practices were not very common among the Lord’s own. Most elderships wanted preachers to preach on and warn against these worldly traits. Most members appreciated (and expected) such lessons. Men who did not preach the Bible Truth on moral issues – and with some frequency – were notable exceptions and generally had a hard time finding a place to preach.

My, how things have changed! Many preachers refuse to preach on such subjects anymore, deeming them unimportant. Others do not preach on them because they know that to

do so would incur the wrath of a large number of members. I have heard the following sentiment expressed more than once: “If so-and-so preached what the Bible teaches on divorce and remarriage where he preaches, the church would lose a dozen couples who are living in adulterous marriages.”

Some preach on these subjects all right, but they do not preach the Truth. Many pulpiteers have adopted compromising and anti-Scriptural views on marriage, divorce, and remarriage. They profess inability to comprehend the simple teaching of Jesus on the subject (e.g., Mat. 5:31–32; 19:9), but remarkably, they are experts on what He does **not** mean! Understandably, the churches where they preach have become havens for those who live in adultery. Inevitably, such congregations will eventually appoint men as elders and deacons who are living in adultery. Some congregations knowingly support preachers who are divorced and remarried without Scriptural authority.

Many elderships do not want these subjects discussed from the pulpit – some for lack of Scriptural convictions in the Truth themselves and others for lack of courage to face the anticipated storm of protest from worldly members. Numerous preachers have lost their jobs – and many others their convictions – because of such pressures. Preachers in such situations must decide right away whether they will obey God or men (Acts 5:29; Gal. 1:10).

There are preachers who not only refuse to preach on divorce and remarriage, but on other moral issues as well. As with marriage, divorce and remarriage, some preach on such things as “moderate” drinking, disrobing in public, dancing, mixed swimming, and the like in order to justify rather than condemn them. These men are paying an awful price to remain in the employment of hedonistic, pleasure-mad members of worldly churches. They will pay an even higher price at The Judgment.

### **The Purpose of Baptism**

All of my preaching life I have emphasized that merely to be immersed in water as a religious act in order “to obey God” does not constitute Scriptural baptism. Several years ago, this emphasis was directed almost altogether toward denominations that administer immersion, but that deny the Scriptural purpose of it (i.e., to receive salvation/forgiveness through the blood of Christ). Now we have many in the church (some of considerable influence) to whom we must address the Truth on the purpose of baptism. Some of these errant brethren implicitly bypass baptism altogether, piously declaring, “Anyone who calls God his Father is my brother.”

Roman Catholics, Methodists, Presbyterians, and others who do not even honor the Scriptural action (much less the purpose) of baptism, “call God their Father.” If these are our brethren, then we may as well tear all of the passages on baptism (to say nothing of fellowship, worship, et al.) out of our New Testaments.

An even larger clique among us deny that a sinner need know the God-assigned purpose of baptism for it to be Scriptural. If this works on baptism, would it also work on the Lord’s supper? Can one Scripturally partake of the bread and the fruit of the vine “in order to obey God,” but with no knowledge of the Scriptural purpose of doing so? (1 Cor. 11:26–29 should settle this question.) Is it necessary to sing praise and pray unto God “with the understanding” of what we are doing and saying and why (1 Cor. 14:5), but unnecessary to be baptized “with the understanding”? Those who preach and who still love the Truth will do well to preach some fundamental lessons on baptism—including its God-ordained purpose—to their Sunday morning assemblies!

### **The Work of the Church**

In the past, as I would preach on the nature and identity of the New Testament church, I would contrast the various social, recreational, political, and secular emphases of the denominational churches with the singular great work of the church of Christ—preaching the Gospel in all of the world Mat. 28:19; Mark 16:15–16). Faithful men have also contrasted the various unauthorized money-raising projects of the denominations with the simple authorized means of free-will offerings each first day of the week (1 Cor. 16:2).

More and more in recent years we have had to direct these same sermons to many of the congregations with the name *Church of Christ* on their buildings. Numerous brethren have been caught up in the denominational craze to “meet every felt need” of everyone who comes along, almost from headaches to hangnails. Millions of dollars have been and are being spent on recreational facilities and social programs, which the Lord neither envisioned nor authorized for His church. I well remember working with a Texas congregation many years ago that rightly held a nearby denomination in great contempt because of its gymnasium. That very same congregation built its own gymnasium twenty years later!

Announcements in church bulletins of ingenious fund-raising programs have been growing over a span of several years now. These include teen car washes, “parking lot” sales (garage sales on the church parking lot), carnivals, “fairs,” and about anything else the sects are

doing. Bingo will probably be next. It was once unheard of for any radio or TV program we conducted to solicit funds from unbelievers, but some brethren now do this with no qualms.

### **Conclusion**

This list could be extended to many other subjects, but these few surely illustrate the point of my title. Why do we have to preach to our brethren about so many things that once we directed almost solely toward the denominations? The answer is simple (and unarguable):

**Many of our brethren have abandoned New Testament doctrine and practice for the precepts and practices of the denominations.** They are no longer concerned with doing only what the Lord authorizes (Col. 3:17). All of us who teach and preach must keep drawing the line in a clear and unmistakable fashion between Truth and error and between the church and all competing religious institutions. Many of those I described above are too far gone to reclaim, but we must do our best to salvage all others whom we can.

[**Note:** I wrote this MS, and it originally appeared as an “Editorial Perspective” in the March 2001 issue of *THE GOSPEL JOURNAL*, of which I was editor at the time.]

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