

What Ever Happened to the “First Principles”?

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To speak of “first principles” in any field of endeavor is to speak of things basic, elementary, fundamental, and rudimentary. The Hebrews writer referred to “the rudiments of the first principles of the oracles of God” (Heb. 5:12). While in the context he shamed the brethren for not progressing beyond them, he certainly never advised forgetting them. Brethren have generally recognized the “first principles” to be such things as:

- (1) inspiration of Scripture,
- (2) the virgin birth, Deity, and resurrection of Jesus,
- (3) the miraculous phenomena recorded in Scripture,
- (4) the plan of salvation,
- (5) the establishment and identifying marks of the church,
- (6) and Bible authority.

In the 1960s the cry began to go up from some in the church that there was too much preaching on first principles. There may have been an element of truth in the criticism (which, incidentally, just about paralleled the rise of an outcry against preaching that was “negative” and too “dogmatic”). In responding to such criticisms some quit preaching on the rudimentary truths almost altogether and others lessened theirs. The proverbial pendulum made its swing.

Disdain for “the basics” is seen in what is (and is not) regularly preached from pulpits, taught in Bible classes, and proclaimed in Gospel meetings and lectureships. Gospel meetings have been discontinued in many congregations in favor of weekend “seminars,” some of which are centered more on social than Biblical themes.

Some brethren no longer merely neglect the first principles. They have declared their intent to avoid preaching on them because they hold them in contempt. I heard one preacher apologize publicly for ever having preached on the New Testament’s identifying marks of the church, promising never to do so again. A few years ago a brother sent me the tape of a sermon in which the preacher ridiculed as “five- steppers” those who preach the Gospel plan of salvation. He charged that if the 19th-century preacher, Walter Scott, had possessed only four fingers the “five-steppers” would only be “four- steppers” (implying that Scott invented the plan revealed in the New Testament)!

The sermon standard of many preachers seems to be, “What can I say in fifteen or twenty minutes that will massage the egos of and entertain and please all who hear?” Not infrequently, rank and file brethren in various parts of the nation tell me that they know preachers who for months have not even mentioned the plan of salvation at the conclusion of their sermons, much less devoted any sermons to it.

Some preachers have quit offering an invitation of any kind at the close of their sermons. Of course, if they’re not going to tell people how to come to Christ, they may as well not invite them. Almost thirty years ago a “worship committee” where I preached pressured me to cease offering an invitation at the close of my sermons. I responded that as long as I was preaching there, I would offer the invitation. (I only stayed there seven months, but I offered the invitation and told people how to obey the Gospel every time I preached.)

Of course, we need to emphasize more than just the first principles, but we dare not neglect them. Why is this so?

Because They Are Fundamental

In the very nature of the case, any group that forgets the fundamental principles and practices upon which it was founded and upon which it rests will fail. This is no less true in religion than in sports, education, business, and other disciplines.

A congregation cannot remain committed to the Truth on baptism, worship, church organization, the nature of the kingdom, or other fundamental subjects if it does not hear them regularly emphasized. Such themes regularly characterized the subject matter of Gospel preachers, especially in Gospel meetings, until a generation or two ago. They still characterize the Gospel meeting preaching of some of us.

Several years ago, I observed a serious neglect of the pivotal hermeneutical principle of the significance of the silence of Scripture in ascertaining Scriptural authority. Subsequently I have made it my practice to preach on this subject in every Gospel meeting in which I was allowed to choose my subjects. More than once after preaching this sermon I have been told such things as “I have not heard a sermon on that subject in thirty years,” “I have never heard a complete sermon on that subject,” “That sermon really answered some questions for me,” and similar reactions. It is alarming to hear such statements concerning so fundamental a subject.

We must renew our emphasis on primary principles of Truth and continue to emphasize them simply because they are primary – and fundamental.

Because Men Forget

The Bible repeats certain major themes time after time. Jesus repeatedly taught the apostles and others some of the same Truths. In part, the Lord sent the Holy Spirit to the apostles upon His return to Heaven, as He told them, to “bring to your remembrance all that I said unto you” (John 14:26). Paul repeated instructions and reminded brethren of various things on several occasions (Acts 20:31, 35; Gal. 5:21; 1 The. 3:4; 2 The. 2:5; et al.). Peter wrote of the proclivity of the human mind to forget. Those to whom he wrote had certainly been taught the primary principles of the faith, but he stated his purpose to keep reminding them as long as he lived (2 Pet. 1:12–15).

Even spiritually mature saints can forget if their memories are not periodically refreshed. The three great laws of learning are still repetition, repetition, repetition. So I repeat: We must continue to stress first principles because men tend to forget.

Because of the Children

It is generally conceded that the public education system has tragically failed our nation’s children for several decades. While there may be many causes involved, it can hardly be gainsaid that the failure is due in large part to dilution (if not abandonment) of some of the most basic subjects. Add to this the replacement of tried-and-true teaching methods in favor of experimental ones and the predictable consequents followed. Many of the youngsters to whom the schools have awarded diplomas the last several years have severe difficulty reading, writing, spelling, and doing simple math (without a calculator), and who have hardly a clue concerning the history of our nation or of the world. Such are the sad fruits of neglecting and abandoning the first principles in education.

Moses commanded Israel in the wilderness that each generation of parents must emphatically and constantly teach its children the fundamental lessons concerning obedience to Jehovah lest they forget Him (Deu. 6:1–25). The beginning of their failure in this duty signaled their end. Apostasy, followed by numerous oppressions, finally led to their national destruction and captivity.

A large percentage of the last two or three generations in the church have now grown up without being grounded in the most fundamental tenets of the faith. Many of these were not brought up hearing Bible preaching, either because little of it was being preached, or, if it was, they may have been in a “Children’s Bible Hour” playing games and watching puppet shows at

the time. Even worse are the many “Christian” homes in which parents are too secular, carnal, and careless to teach their children the Bible and who refuse to attend the assemblies and bring their children more than an hour or two per week.

Do these things give us any hints concerning the source of many of the “progressive,” loose, and liberal trends in a host of congregations? Some of these fundamentals-deprived folk who are clueless concerning the distinctiveness of the Truth of the Gospel have decided to stay in the church and make it over as they want it to be. Is it any wonder that we face an epidemic of apostasy and digression in the kingdom? Christian parents who love their children will teach them the fundamental Truths of the Gospel at home. Also, they will insist on preaching that includes the great first principles. If they do not have that kind of preaching where they are, they will find a congregation that does.

Without consistent book, chapter, and verse preaching of “the first principles of the oracles of God” the church will not long remain the church.

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