

Proud of Two “Distinctives”

Dub McClish

The video opened with a guitarist moving away from the lectern and removing the floor mike he had been using for his performance. He and a fellow-guitarist moved about, stowing their instruments on their stands. The drummer arose from her drum set, and a couple of singers moved from their places; all the musicians exited the stage. As all this was going on, a middle-aged man in slouchy attire positioned himself behind the flimsy lectern, and began to speak. These events did not occur at a political rally or at a rock concert. They occurred during a Sunday morning assembly of the Fourth Avenue Church of Christ in Franklin, Tennessee.

The speaker began by announcing that the “senior minister” was ill and unable to speak that morning. Although he did not identify himself, the video’s printed data identified him as Trace Hebert (the church website lists him as one of the church’s dozen “shepherds”). He is also a department head at Lipscomb University (LU), a school that has in the past 30 or so years given Pepperdine University and Abilene Christian University a run for their money in the race to “out-liberal” each other among schools that were founded by brethren who loved the Truth and despised error.

“Reinventing” the Lord’s Supper

Had the prelude’s activities not done so, the speaker’s remarks soon fully displayed his theological liberalism. After reviewing some details about the “senior minister’s” illness and praying for him, he proceeded to the morning’s homily. Though he did not so title his speech, the foregoing heading is an apt description of the Hebert treatment of this sacred institution. His attempts at exposition and exegesis of Paul’s corrective discourse on the Lord’s Supper in 1 Corinthians 11 resulted in twisting and misapplying much of that passage. It was truly pitiful.

A clue to the speaker’s confusion and error was his favorable reference to the book, *Come to the Table: Revisioning the Lord’s Supper*, by John Mark Hicks, a religion professor at LU (*Reinventing the Lord’s Supper* would have been a more fitting subtitle). The Hebert speech was obviously influenced far more by Hicks’ heretical book than by the inspired words of Paul. According to the speaker, Paul did not condemn combining the Sacred Supper with a physical meal. Oh no, the apostle’s only interest was to make sure everyone got enough to eat and avoided getting drunk—never mind Paul’s clear injunction that their physical meals **should not**

be part of their assemblies, and certainly were **not** to be confused or combined with the Lord's Supper (vv. 22, 34).

"Shepherd" Hebert failed to understand that Paul's reference to some who were "drunken" (v. 21) very possibly does not refer to intoxication at all, but rather to their being filled, satisfied, or satiated—a generic meaning of *methuei* (so rendered in the LXX [e.g., Psa. 23:5; Jer. 31:14; Pro. 5:19]. Some commentators also thus indicate its meaning here (e.g., W. Robertson Nicoll, James Macknight). This is a natural understanding since Paul used *methuei* in contrast with *peina* (i.e., hungry, unfilled, unsatisfied) (v. 21). The speaker also ripped from its context Paul's reference to "discerning the body" (v. 29), asserting that *body* refers there to the church, rather than to the crucified body of the Lord (which horrible suffering the Lord instituted His Supper to commemorate).

He referred to the Lord's Supper as the "communal meal" and likened Corinth's observance of it to our ordinary "fellowship" meals. His frequent use of *the community*—a liberal buzz expression—in reference to the church, was further indication of his bias. He generously included denominational "believers" of every stripe in a reference to "the larger Christian community." In this frame of reference he mentioned the many and varied ideas concerning the Lord's Supper (e.g., day and frequency of observance, what to call it, what elements to use, who is eligible to partake, et al.). He blasphemed Biblical inspiration by implying a contradiction between the accounts of Matthew and Mark and that of Luke in the order of partaking of the bread and the fruit of the vine. He failed to comprehend that the "cup" the Lord gave the apostles to drink prior to instituting **His** Memorial Supper (with the bread and the fruit of the vine) was that of the Passover they had been observing and was not part of the Lord's Supper (Luke 23:15-18).

Upon citing the numerous divergent views, he agnostically threw up his hands, exclaiming, "So Who's right?" This would have been a good place for him to take his hearers to Colossians 3:17, telling us that all our words and deeds on all matters—including the Lord's Supper—must be measured by the authority of Christ (perhaps this erring brother may not have yet come across this statement of Scripture). Rather, he presumed upon the Lord and His Word by saying that if we could hear the Lord express Himself regarding these disagreements, all He would say is, "You have missed the intent." If I may be granted such presumption, based on His Word, the Lord would have much more to say to Shepherd Hebert and his fellow-

shepherds about many doctrines and practices at Fourth Avenue — not only about the Lord's Supper.

He concluded his speech by emphasizing that all are invited to “come to the table” at the Fourth Avenue church. From there he morphed into a description of what the congregation provides: a place of healing for those “beaten up by life or religion,” where freedom in Christ, a “safe haven,” and grace abound. The speaker interrupted his own words by telling the “praise team” leader to bring the “team” back on the stage (to rejoin their guitars and drums, of course) in preparation for the closing “concert.” He then concluded his words with not a hint of any part of the plan of salvation. Upon his final word, the assembly broke out in raucous applause.

Website Revelations

A church's Website (assuming it is maintained and updated) generally provides clues regarding its dedication to the Lord and His Word — or the lack thereof. A visit to Fourth Avenue's Website is certainly revealing in this respect. The following statement of “identity” is all one needs to know about this congregation's stance:

Every congregation of the Church of Christ is independent and you will find a variety of worship styles and organizational models among them. **Fourth Avenue Church has two distinctives: our worship is mixed — acappella and instrumental — and women play a larger role in the life and work of our congregation than they do in some others** [emph. DM].

The language concerning the role of women in the final sentence of the quotation above should read, “...than they do in the vast majority of others.” It is significant that several of its “ministers” (some of whom are women), “shepherds,” and other staff members have direct LU connections (e.g., employees, graduates, children are LU students, et al.).

I was shocked to see an old Freed-Hardeman College classmate, Albert Lemmons, listed as the “Pastoral Care Minister.” We were freshmen together in 1954. He was “Archie” then (his preferred nickname) to all his classmates. We sat side-by-side in the F-HC band (22 musicians strong), he playing his trombone and I my baritone. He preached the Gospel for several years — faithfully, as far as I know. He did not learn any hint of the radical liberalism in which he has been involved with this church since 2002 at the feet of H.A. Dixon, Frank Van Dyke, W. Claude Hall, Earl West, G.K. Wallace, or any of the F-HC lectureship speakers in those days.

The congregation boasts of its beginning in 1833 from the preaching of the restoration preacher, Tolbert Fanning. The church's Website quotes the following report from Fanning in the October 1, 1833, issue of Alexander Campbell's *Millennial Harbinger*, regarding his visit to Franklin in August of that year:

We commenced proclamation there on Tuesday evening and continued till Saturday morning.... We immersed seventeen for remission. Sixteen...disciples gave themselves to each other to worship according to the apostles teaching.... They promised to meet the next day, at the home of Brother Anderson, to attend to the ancient order."

Only those ignorant of both Bible and history could miss the utter hypocrisy of this congregation's pride in claiming Fanning's preaching for its "foundation of a rich heritage." Truth be told, today's Fourth Avenue folk despise the "rich heritage" of faithful men like Fanning. Should they be resurrected, neither Fanning nor any other stalwart preachers of his day would recognize this group as a restored church of Christ. Nor is it likely that such faithful men would be allowed on the Fourth Avenue stage (*pulpit* just doesn't fit), graced at times by the "preaching" of their women "ministers." The message of Fanning and of other men of his time was restoration of the New Testament church. The message of the Fourth Avenue "Church of Christ" is anti-restorationism, antinomianism, anti-patternism, grace-onlyism, and emotionalism. This religious body has embraced the very denominational attitudes – and their consequences in doctrine and practice – that Fanning and his contemporary Gospel preachers fought with all their might and often at great cost.

Observations Concerning Some Applicable Principles

Incrementalism

The devil is the originator and master of the *relentless-short-steps* policy, whether in politics, morals, or religion. He and his disciples never give up. They are very patient, content to advance their agenda just a little at a time, but never satisfied until they have total control of the individual or institution whose corruption they seek. They know that thrusting their eventual aims suddenly upon men would provoke rejection and revolt. They also know, however, that they can achieve their goals by gradually accomplishing small changes that cause most people no immediate alarm. This strategy has led to the moral corruption of countless individuals who, in small steps, became desensitized to the evils about them. That which at one time they could not tolerate at all, through continued exposure they not only came to tolerate, but to embrace. Thus close, continued association with evil companions (whether people, books, movies, TV programs, song lyrics, et al.) may indeed corrupt good morals (1 Cor. 15:33).

The strategy is equally effective on institutions. Liberals/progressives have certainly used it in politics, bringing our nation to the point of national suicide. As a nation we have – a little at a time – removed so far from our founding documents and principles as to perhaps be incapable of ever reclaiming them. It has taken a century of Incrementalism to bring us to this

point. The same course can be traced in the history of the national moral corruption that now prevails.

Likewise, no religious body ever moved from its founding principles overnight. The Methodist Church as late as fifty or sixty years ago, while in gross error in doctrine and practice, still possessed an institutional moral conscience. It formerly opposed such things as alcohol consumption, dancing, and fornication/adultery. It is now a “religious” body with no moral compass, not merely ceasing to oppose the aforementioned practices, but also now actually defending Sodomy and championing abortion.

So it has been with every congregation of the Lord’s people that has apostatized, whether in the first or the twenty-first century. In the 1960s a few brethren in places of influence (e.g., schools, papers, large congregations) began taking some short steps of change. Over the ensuing decades this process of Incrementalism has utterly refashioned many hundreds of congregations after human models rather than after the Divine model. Many hundreds of others are at various stages of this process of drifting into complete digression.

An entire class of broad-minded evangelists of Incrementalism has arisen, openly – and accurately – calling themselves “change agents.” Another one of my F-HC schoolmates, Lynn Anderson, wrote in 1994 what might be called their “manifesto,” *Navigating the Winds of Change* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press). He advocated pushing for changes in one’s congregation until said changes threatened to provoke utter rejection. Then it would be time to back away until calm was restored, which then signaled the time to push again (only for greater changes than before). By these modus operandi an alarming number of congregations that a few decades earlier were completely dedicated to the New Testament pattern for which Christ shed His blood (Acts 20:28) have been lost to the Cause.

There cannot be the slightest doubt but that the Fourth Avenue Church of Christ in Franklin, Tennessee, came to be steeped in error by just such incrementalism. By its own admission, its boasted “distinctives” make it different from most other churches of Christ – and from its own history as well. Many “short steps,” likely involving many years, preceded the “long steps” of including unauthorized instrumental music in worship and women in the pulpit and other leadership roles.

Another specific case that illustrates the destructive and deceptive nature of Incrementalism involves the Forest Hill Church of Christ in Memphis, Tennessee, and the Memphis School of Preaching (MSOP), which it sponsors. Since June 2005 incrementalism has

shown its ability to deceive and capture the hearts of those who once boldly preached and practiced the Truth and opposed error without compromise. Prior to June 2005 some gradual signs of fellowship-broadening had begun to surface in actions by the Forest Hill preacher as well as in a few of those whom the MSOP faculty invited to speak on the annual Lectureship. These earlier “short steps” seemingly paved the way for the much “larger step” involving the endorsement/defense of Dave Miller, an influential brother who adamantly refused to repent of his errors regarding the reaffirmation of elders and regarding marriage and divorce. The late influential director of the Memphis School of Preaching (MSOP) had, by his own admission, received both financial and “friendship” pressures to support this errant brother, which he did. He led not only his faculty, but also most of the MSOP students and alumni, to follow his fellowship compromise.

Soon after the MSOP faculty made its support of Dave Miller known, the Forest Hill preacher also made his support of this erring brother public. Further, he used the church bulletin to publish compromising articles, as well as his aim to keep broadening his fellowship “circle.” In the intervening years, the annual MSOP Lectureship has increasingly included men (and by implication, the institutions some of them represented) that demonstrated such compromises. Prior to 2005 the MSOP director and faculty had not only shunned, but also criticized said brethren and schools (and rightly so). Incrementalism is alive and well in Memphis, Tennessee – and in a very large number of congregations which are influenced by Forest Hill and MSOP.

My references to the brethren in Memphis, Tennessee, are not intended to imply that their departures are comparable to those of the Fourth Avenue religious body in Franklin, Tennessee. However, the same process that produced the gross errors now evident in that church were likely unimagined in either its elders or preacher twenty-five years ago. Given the compromises the Memphis brethren have already evinced, and given the devious nature of the monster of Incrementalism, unless they repent one can scarcely imagine what changes the next dozen years may bring, should the Lord delay His coming.

Let us remember that every warning against false teachers and their false doctrines is a warning against falling prey to this spiritual malady. Likewise, every directive to uphold sound doctrine, preach the Word, and defend the faith is an injunction to resist changes that effect fundamentals of the faith, whether by little or large steps.

Elders – Where the “Buck Stops”

The Lord so patterned His church that in each of its local units a plurality of men, variously designated “elders,” “bishops,” and/or “pastors” (who meet Scripturally-stipulated qualifications) should be appointed “over” that congregation (Acts 20:28; 1 Tim. 3:1-7; Tit. 1:6-9).

An oft-overlooked truth is that the qualifications are not arbitrary; rather, they are imminently practical relative to the responsibilities of their possessors. God gives these men not only the responsibility, but also the authority to tend to the spiritual needs of the church, particularly, exhorting in the sound doctrine and convicting/exposing those who teach contrariwise (Tit. 1:9–11; Heb. 13:17).

Where an apostate congregation is found, if it had elders during the process of apostasy, those men are responsible for its departure from the Truth, either by their design or by their dereliction of Scriptural duty. Unfortunately, many men have been appointed as elders more because of their popularity, their business acumen, or upon some other basis than because they exemplified the Holy Spirit's qualifications. Men are far too often appointed who are seriously lacking in their knowledge of Scripture. A self-willed elder of the perverse spirit of Diotrephes (2 John 9–10) can impose his will over a timid fellow elder or even a plurality of them. Paul warned of elders who would seek to introduce false doctrine (Acts 20:30). Such a man unrestrained can single-handedly be the doom of a church.

Elders are responsible for the man they employ and keep in the pulpit. An ever-growing class of preachers has arisen over the past half-century that studiously avoids preaching anything that may “offend” the most sensitive soul, leading to the avoidance of fundamental, essential, and distinctive themes of the Gospel message. Some elderships have tolerated pulpiteers with a “dumbed-down” message, fearful that asking the preacher to leave might diminish attendance and contribution figures. Other elderships have sought such preachers out and rewarded them handsomely while they led a Biblically illiterate congregation astray. By these or by other similar means, elderships have been responsible for churches that have, step-by-step, abandoned their original soundness in the faith and lost their New Testament identity.

The Fourth Avenue church is no exception. At some time in the past its elders, instead of preventing/stopping that first compromising step, allowed it to pass as “minor” and inconsequential. Doing so made it harder to oppose the next step in the wrong direction. The process of allowing/approving successive steps from that first one – over a span of years – gradually caused the metamorphosis into their present sad state. Having come this far, it seems safe to predict that they will go yet farther. The ultimate blame for this congregation's departure from the faith lies at the feet of its elders through the years who allowed it to occur. There is no weightier responsibility on any group of men than that upon those who serve as elders in the churches of Christ.

As with the Fourth Avenue church, the compromises I earlier discussed involving the Forest Hill church and the Memphis School of Preaching also demonstrate the terrible consequences of eldership negligence. Two decades ago the MSOP faculty and graduating class gave me the great honor of inviting me to deliver the sermon for their graduation exercise. I addressed and challenged the young men who had worked very hard to prepare themselves for a life of preaching the Gospel. All of the Forest Hill elders were present, and I addressed and challenged them as well. I specifically called attention to their weighty responsibility to fulfill Paul's charge to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:28-31) to guard carefully the soundness of the congregation and thus that of the school. I emphasized that the faithfulness of the church and the school depended upon their continued vigilance and dedication. Little did I think at the time that my admonition could turn out to be almost prophetic.

Undeniably, over the intervening years, this congregation has undergone changes in its stance concerning the Truth, and with those changes MSOP has undergone corresponding departures. The director and faculty of MSOP had some responsibility to inform and admonish the elders regarding the changes taking place, which the Forest Hill preacher was leading. However, there is no evidence that they provided either warning or counsel. Rather, it appears that they had also fallen victim to the subtleties of Incrementalism. Whatever the MSOP principals may or may not have done in this regard is actually beside the point. The responsibility for the present compromised state of both the church and the school rests squarely on the shoulders of the eldership. They alone must bear the blame for the loss of a once almost universal unblemished reputation among faithful brethren. Whether a church has gone radically awry or is demonstrating compromises that may lead to such radicalism, those who serve as its elders must at last stand before the Lord in the Judgment and answer for the condition of the church under their charge (John 12:48; Acts 20:28-31; Tit. 1:7-11; Heb. 13:17).

As in politics, so in religion: Liberals despise the boundaries and restrictions of objective authority. Just as liberalism has almost destroyed our nation, it invariably dooms every congregation where it prevails. The apostasy of the Fourth Avenue church in Franklin, Tennessee, is a prime exhibit of what occurs when men begin to take – and continue taking – what may only appear to be small liberties with that which the Lord authorizes. It is inexpressibly lamentable to observe the growing number of congregations that no longer seek a “thus saith the Lord” for all they preach and practice. It is hard to escape the gnawing fear that, even where Divine authority is a concern, the leaders in very many congregations do not know

the way to determine whether or not a given doctrine or practice is authorized. Paul's injunction for both churches and individuals has not been annulled: "And whatsoever ye do, in word or in deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Col. 3:17).

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