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TURN NOT TO THE RIGHT OR THE LEFT

Jim E. Waldron

The above command was given by Moses to the people on the east side of Jordan shortly before his death. The full statement reads, “*Therefore you shall be careful to do as the Lord your God has commanded you; you shall not turn aside to the right hand or the left*” (Deut. 5:32). This message was repeated in 28:14 of the same book, to Joshua personally in the book that bears his name (1:7) and by Solomon in Proverbs 4:27. Thus God made clear the danger of going to the opposite sides of the laws and ordinances which He had given. .

Another way that God warned the ancient people not to go to the right hand or to the left in keeping His commandments, especially in the making of the tabernacle, was to require that all things be made “*according to the pattern*” (Ex. 25:40), which was shown to Moses on the mountain. In the New Testament the Hebrew writer describes the tabernacle and its service as having been a copy and a shadow of the heavenly things which we now enjoy under Christ, then he reminded his readers (Heb. 8:5) that Moses was required to make all things according to that pattern (Gr., *tupos*). The apostle Paul was very specific when he reminded the young man Timothy that he was to “*hold fast to the pattern (hupotupois) of sound words*” (2 Tim. 1:13) in delivering the gospel.

The prophet Isaiah wrote of the coming service to God in the gospel age saying, “*a highway will be there and a road and it shall be called the highway of holiness, the unclean shall not pass over it*” (Isa. 35:8). Jesus Christ is that “*Way*” for He said. “*I am the way...*” (John 14:6; cf., Acts 9:2; 22:4). The above statements are clear warnings to God's people that there is danger in going to extremes, whether left or right in walking on the highway of holiness.

In the New Testament our Lord told Peter (Matt. 16:18) and the other apostles (Matt. 18:18) that their work was to be that of binding *and* loosing the things of the Godhead for His people in the gospel age. In those things they were to speak “*as the Spirit gave them utterance*” (Acts 2:4; cf., Matt. 10:19-20). If we are “*to keep the unity of the Spirit, in the bond of peace*” (Eph. 4:2) in our age it

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is imperative that we abide in the doctrine (teaching) of the apostles (Acts 2:42). And to do so we must, “*contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints*” (Jude 3) “*by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets*” (Eph. 3:5).

Some 200 years ago church leaders on the North American continent from various denominations began to seek the unity as taught by the Spirit. They had seen the failure of protestantism to reform the apostate church, thus they began to apply the apostles’ doctrine (Acts 2:42) in order to restore the church of Christ.

In doing so they became more and more aware of the necessity of not going, “*beyond what is written*” (1 Cor. 4:6) concerning any man or plan. Human creeds, church manuals, man made covenants, books of discipline, “confessions of faith,” latter day revelations and catechisms were condemned as abominable additions to the inspired word. That word was exalted as “the only rule and guide in faith and practice.” Following the apostolic example they became insistent that no one, not even an angel from heaven (Gal. 1:6-9) could add to or take away from *the* faith which had been once for all revealed through the apostles and prophets of Jesus (Jude 3; Rev. 22:18-19).

Among those who, so to speak, “boot strapped” themselves out of denominationalism was a Presbyterian minister by the name of Thomas Campbell. Campbell seeking to come out of the darkness of sectarianism summed up the simplicity of binding and loosing as the apostles had written by saying, “we must speak as the Bible speaks and be silent where the Bible is silent” (cf., 1 Peter 4:11). A brother, who came along in a later generation, J. D. Tant, is credited with saying, one does not have to get into either ditch (left or right) in keeping the commandments of God.

Due to the urgent need of restoring the apostles’ doctrine to men of their generation and the necessity of maintaining the unity required by Christ based on their word (John 17:20-21) godly brethren maintained that in matters of faith (i.e., the things written), there must be unity, in matters of judgment, liberty and in all things, love.

We of the 21st century who truly love our brotherhood (1 Peter 2:17) and earnestly desire the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4:3) must also affirm that the only unity for God’s people must be based on the words of the apostles, which will lead to the world believing that God sent Jesus (Note again John 17:21).

Yet, we see in our generation the church being divided by those pulling to the left (loosing what God has not loosed or adding what He has not authorized) and those on the right (binding or forbidding what God has not bound or forbidden). These things they do because they are not happy with the simplicity of the gospel as it relates to the work of the church, its worship or the plan of salvation. At this point we would do well to remember some poignant examples of such on our continent over the last two hundred years.

Note this astute observation by David Pharr concerning “Attitudes and Consequences” on the problem at the turn of this century:

Back “in 1945 Homer Hailey published *Attitudes and Consequences in the Restoration Movement*. The premise of the book was that the origin and progress of the restoration came from an attitude that was determined to conform to the pattern of the scriptures. As long as this attitude prevailed much was accomplished in bringing sincere people back to the ancient order of things. On the other hand, when an attitude developed that was less committed to biblical authority, the consequences were: willingness to compromise with what had previously been clearly defined as error; unscriptural innovations in practice; and widespread division. The present dying and somewhat meaningless Disciples of Christ denomination is a sad demonstration of the consequences of lax and indifferent attitudes toward the absolute authority of the word of God” (*Spiritual Sword* 1511 Getwell Road, Memphis, TN 38111, Vol. 31. No. 2, January 2000, pages 12-16).

The following quote concerning zeal for the truth gives a glimpse as to why the churches grew so rapidly in numbers and strength between and following the two great wars of the twentieth century, but it also speaks of the dangers from the left and the right following that time of unity and growth,

“Bible based and determined resistance to various false doctrines, religious hobbies, and extremism bent on dominating individuals and churches (such as premillennialism, opposition to Bible classes, opposition to individual communion cups, opposition to located preachers) steadily prevailed over such flawed views. By the mid-1950s, however, brethren were bracing to resist new extremes such as opposition to churches co-operating in evangelism and supporting orphan children from the treasury. Competent resistance to these latter extremes largely ended the belligerent attacks from these quarters, but newly minted extremes still harm and confuse brethren in various places” (William Woodson, *Ibid*, pages 8-11).

Brother Woodson continued these thoughts,

“Since the mid-1980s, a change agent movement has mounted an all court press upon targeted churches of Christ. Originally billed as only seeking unity with Christian Churches, this errant movement has penetrated numerous churches and several colleges among us. Disturbance and division occur wherever it gains a strong foothold” (*Ibid.*).

Above brother Woodson made mention of some things by forbidding brethren from the right, but it is the loosing philosophy of the left that is so bold with additions to the pattern in these days.

For example many on the left claim that the churches of Christ constitute an American denomination begun in the early 19th Century and advocate open fellowship and joint worship with man-made churches; and in the same vein they accept sectarian baptism and the receiving of the “pious un-immersed” into fellowship.

The promotion of a so-called “new hermeneutics” and rejection of pattern theology described in the “apostles’ doctrine” (Acts 2:42; Gal. 1:6-9; Heb. 8:5; 2 Tim. 1:13) is one of their favorite ploys. The pushing of teaching roles for women in mixed classes of men and women and leadership roles for them in the assembly is their delight; contrary to the Spirit’s charge (1 Tim. 2:11-14). Other changes are added to worship by putting the communion in weddings or on Saturdays or Wednesdays, etc., instead of the Lord’s day (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 11:20; 1 Cor. 16:1-2; Rev. 1:10).

Change agents delight in polluting sacred music by corrupting the singing (Eph. 5:19) through the addition of strings, pipes, drums, horns, etc., or the mimicking of such. They are overjoyed to degrade the solemnity of divine worship through hand clapping as though it were a theatrical production or a sports event.

Commercializing the support of the church, through business, like flea markets in their gym, car washes and such like, is their delight. The creation and promotion of national and international bodies such as the North American Christian Convention or a *World* Convention for “Christian Churches, Churches of Christ and Disciples of Christ” using an old tool of compromise, but with a modern web-page, which epitomizes 2 Corinthians 11:13-15.

Promoting worldliness is a plank in the platform of left leaning elders, preachers and youth ministers. Such is evidenced by the hosting of pool parties, dances, church theatrics, Christmas pageants, joint Easter Sunrise Services with the denominations, defense of social drinking, etc. Through such things they ignore the Spirit’s order to “*not love the world*” (1 John 2:15ff) and the need to deny “*ungodliness and worldly lusts*” (Titus 2:12).

At times, brethren who themselves oppose the left and are otherwise sound will take up an unsound position that falls in the category on the left. For example secularizing the work of the church in the business of athletics and sports through building gymnasiums and sponsoring ball teams, golf tournaments, etc. With some such has become “a keeping up with the Jones” past time.

The creation of numerous other “bodies” big and small, which solicit funds from the churches such as missionary societies and disaster relief organizations on behalf of the church, while ignoring the fact that unto “Him be glory *in the church* by Christ Jesus *throughout all ages, world without end*. Amen” (Eph. 3:21).

Others who are sound in the above reject the very words of Jesus on the universality of His law on marriage and divorce (Matt. 5:32; 19:6-9; Luke 16:18) through the denial that His law is for all descendents of Adam (Mark 10:6-9). Still others do such by maintaining that one arbitrarily divorced unscripturally “may claim” for themselves a mental divorce as long as they wait the proper time.

Still others with a neo-Pentecostal attitude claim that the child of God cannot bear fruit without receiving a “supernatural” and “direct” operation of the Holy Ghost.