

Stand!

By ED BRAND

Not long ago on our way to Brussels for a short meeting, we passed the town of Worms, Germany. I thought about something which happened there over 400 years ago, in a meeting called a diet. This meeting had nothing to do with losing or gaining weight, but was a formal assembly, called to deal with a recalcitrant priest, Martin Luther.

He had been called to answer for his rash behavior of refusing to accept the word and ruling of ecclesiastical councils and traditions. At this infamous Diet of Worms, he is reputed to have said, "Here I stand, God help me." As I drove past this historic place, I thought about the firm convictions which must have been in this stalwart man's mind. He was willing to defy the religious establishment for the sake of his own conscience.

"Stand!" Centuries before, another man wrote this word of exhortation to a young group of Christians (Eph. 6:11, 13, 14). He encouraged them to face a hostile world with resolution and courage. They had been provided all the equipment necessary to enable and motivate them to stand firm. New Testament language does not allow neutrality or cowardice on the part of saints.

Paul's exhortation is in danger of falling on deaf ears. The god of this world (2 Cor. 4:4) has hardened the hearts of too many saints. It is much easier to give way to error, compromise, and deception, than to oppose them; for one must take a stand to oppose them. Accommodation is so much less painful than thoughtful, firm opposition. We need to stand our ground, even if it appears we may be only few in number. We need the same spirit of faith Paul had, "we also believe, therefore we speak," (2 Cor. 4:13). Men and women of faith and conviction cannot remain silent when their voices and examples are needed.

Having said this, I close with a word of caution. It is possible for one to be so firm, vocal and unbending that even the smallest matters are magnified. Standing firm may become an apparent excuse for treating every disagreement over interpretation and practice as the "weightier matters" of faith and practice. Disagreements are not tolerated, and even the use of different words or expressions become highly suspicious.

One does not have to use abusive speech nor be inflexible in spirit to firmly stand where Paul and the Holy Spirit want us to stand; fully outfitted with God's armor.

Stand your ground.

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THINK ON THESE THINGS

Philippians 4:8

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The Convenient Church of Christ

By AL DIESTELKAMP

I don't know who it was, but someone has said that everyone, at least once in his lifetime, has come up with a revolutionary idea. All but a few of those ideas fail to ever be implemented.

I have noticed that some of the most successful business ventures are built upon convenience. If a business or product can make life more convenient, it seems bound to succeed. If it will save time or lessen effort, people will like it.

First there were drive-in restaurants, then came drive-in everything else from dry cleaning to banking. Now we're used to Automatic Teller Machines (ATM) on every corner, and we're getting acquainted with banking-by-phone and/or computers.

I got to thinking that maybe many brethren would be interested in my idea: The Convenient Church of Christ. The usual church buildings wouldn't be necessary—only drive-up windows not unlike the ones formerly used for photo processing. Forward thinking brethren might even issue Automatic Worship Experience (AWE) cards to their members and have several AWE machines throughout the community. On Sundays each member can just drive up at his convenience and insert his card in order to receive a taped sermon, the Lord's supper in a spill-proof container and a handy envelope

for his contribution. He'll be in and out in minutes and able to get back to what he wants to do.

Before you dismiss this idea completely, perhaps you ought to consider some other obvious advantages:

Solved—the problem of loving your brethren (1 Jn. 4:11,21). With no personal contact with brethren, there'll be little chance for friction (unless one tries to cut ahead in the drive-in lanes).

Solved—the problem of needing a preacher (Rom. 10:14). With taped sermons there'll be no need to sit through boring Bible classes and sermons. You can even listen while working, driving or fishing.

Solved—the problem caused by lack of diligence (Heb. 6:12). With this system, the work of the Lord has

been professionalized. There won't even be a need to clean a building.

Solved—the problem of neglecting to assemble (Heb. 10:25). With this type of service brethren will gladly come two or three times a week.

Somebody stop me! I'm afraid I'll convince some brethren to try it. Hopefully you realize that I have written this "tongue-in-cheek." None of us would want to be a part of such a church! Yet if that is true we ought to wake up (Rom. 13:11) and get busy in the work and worship the Lord has asked of us (see Rom. 12:11).

Remember, it wasn't "convenient" for the Lord to die for our salvation.



INTO A BAG WITH HOLES

By RENNIE FRAZIER

How many of us have ever placed money or something else of value in a place that we thought was secure, i.e., a pants' pocket, only to find later, in a panic-filled moment, that there was a hole in that pocket?

In a figurative sense, this is the very thing that happened to Israel. They placed their hopes, dreams, and aspirations "into a bag with holes" (Hag. 1:6). The postexilic Jews had returned to their beloved homeland after seventy long, arduous years in Babylonian captivity.

Oh, how they must have dreamt of and longed for the sweet release to come—the time when Jehovah would fulfill His promise of restoring His once wayward people to their place of preeminence among the nations. They, perhaps like many others during troublesome times, resolved to "turn over a new leaf" and serve the Lord with a fixed purpose and a greater fervor.

In 537 B.C., upon their return home, they diligently set their hearts and hands to the grand task of rebuilding the house of God—the temple. But their industry was to be short-lived. One year later, after the foundation was laid, the work of God came to a screeching halt. And for sixteen years the foundation of the temple lay as a memorial to a people whose repentance and "good intentions" were nothing more than a folded vesture of broken promises and empty dreams, all because they were consumed with the misguided attempt to live independently from the Lord, their God.

The prophet Haggai pleads with the people of God to awaken from their spiritual stupor and renew their vision and vigor for the Lord's work: "Thus speaks the Lord of hosts, saying: 'This people says, "The time has not come, the time that the Lord's house should be built." Then the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet, saying: "Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, and this temple to lie in ruins?"' (Hag. 1:2-4).

Once again the people of God had fallen into the self-imposed trap of being concerned only about their own likes and dislikes; their own time; their own desires. Rather than remaining faithful and God-centered they lapsed back into their old comfortable, self-centered, self-seeking ways. Isn't it interesting, and very telling, how that the time to do the Lord's work is never quite the "right time"? The excuses begin to fly fast and furious: "I'm too old," "I'm too young," "It won't work," or "We've done that before." But then, we always manage to make the time and find the energy to do what we desire to do.

The Lord, through the prophet, went on to show the utter folly and the completely

desolate condition of trying to live a life without Him at its center and as its circumference: "Now therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts: 'Consider your ways! You have sown much, and bring in little; You eat, but you do not have enough; You drink, but you are not filled with drink; You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; and he who earns wages, earns wages to put into a bag with holes... You looked for much, but indeed it came to little; and when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why?' says the Lord of hosts. 'Because of my house that is in ruins, while every one of you runs to his own house. Therefore the heavens above you withhold the dew, and the earth withholds its fruit.'" (Hag. 1:5-6, 9-10).

What a tragic view. No matter how hard they would try, no matter to what length they would go, all their efforts would produce nothing of any lasting or satisfying value. They would be as one who placed his hard-earned wages into a bag with holes.

What about us? Have we allowed the Lord's work of worshiping and praising Him, of spreading the gospel to the lost souls, of encouraging the saved to continue on with the Lord to go undone while we scurry about concerned with our own "houses"?

What is the most important thing in your life? Is it your possessions, your job, your family, yourself? Whatever it may be, if it is

anything other than the Lord's will and work, may I suggest as charitably as I know how, you have placed all that is important to you "into a bag with holes," and you are wasting your time. We must learn the vital lesson that making God's work the core of our existence helps us to distinguish between the worthless and the truly valuable things of life, and makes everything of any eternal importance shine brilliantly through.

The scriptures teach us to "seek first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness and all these things shall be given unto you" (Matt. 6:33). The command is to put God first, and He will provide. Putting God first means to allow Him to reign and rule over every aspect of our lives. This requires that we empty ourselves of self and let His way of living become our own.

We must allow His word to arrest each thought and motive and permeate our very souls. As David said: "Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day" (Psa. 119:97). The blessing is unmistakable and to be greatly desired. God will sustain us with all that we need. Rather than blowing it away, He will gather it in; rather than going away hungry, we will be satisfied; rather than a pocket with holes, our work will be crowned with His resplendent glory. Don't settle for a bag with holes. Put God and His work first and you will be eternally blessed.

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Running Amuck @ Online.com

By AL DIESTELKAMP

The computer, with internet and e-mail capabilities, has proven to be a mixed blessing. Like many other opportunities God has made possible, it has been used both for building up and tearing down; for good and for evil.

It has truly been a blessing that some computer-literate brethren have developed and maintained web pages as still another means to reach the lost and edify saints. Indeed, the more well-designed internet sites which direct people back to the Bible, the better. Perhaps home pages will be to this generation what church bulletins were in the past.

The opportunity for almost instant communication with large numbers of brethren at the same time has arrived via e-mail lists: Preachers have been able to share sermon ideas and illustrations with each other; congregations have been able to issue their own "Macedonian calls" for help (Ac. 16:9); news of interest to Christians everywhere has spread all over the world quickly, allow-

ing us to rejoice or weep with others (Rom. 12:15), and to pray for one another (Jas. 5:16); open-forum discussions of Bible topics have taken place.

It should be no surprise that Satan and his forces also take advantage of this avenue of communication. Besides the obvious use of the internet to peddle smut, infidelity and humanism, he has used it in a more subtle way to spread false doctrine and gender strife.

It seems, based on the discussions I've seen on the various e-mail "lists," that a few brethren are inclined to run amuck. I don't know—maybe there's something about sending comments over a modem that emboldens some to make outlandish arguments. Or, maybe arguments are being made while "on-line" and not enough thought and study has gone into them. The result is less than edifying.

I'm not calling for an end to discussions, nor am I suggesting any kind of imposed control—other than self-control. It would be good if we all would measure our words as we discuss the Bible among ourselves.

PROMISE KEEPERS

The following was originally published as a feature article in the Pontiac Daily Leader on Oct. 11, 1997 exactly one week after the Promise Keepers' rally in Washington D.C.

By ANDY DIESTELKAMP

With a prayer for understanding I have submitted this article for publication knowing that it will disturb some. However, like Moses, the prophets, and Jesus Himself, my aim is not popularity but the proclamation of truth.

If my goal in preaching or writing is merely to please you the listener or reader, then I would not be a servant of Christ (Gal. 1:10). I will derive no personal satisfaction if I anger you, but I am constrained to present the truth. Indeed, woe is me if I preach not the gospel of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 9:16).

Only in an affluent culture do we have the time and resources for "ministries of Christ" whose glitz and scope rival that which Hollywood is able to produce. From the clubs to the "crusades" to the cathedrals there is much time, effort and money appealed for and received from the masses who have been cajoled by the "calling" that some man professes he has received from God.

Imagine Jesus having a telethon to raise money! Picture Peter standing up on Pentecost with his white robes and rings and his wife next to him dolled up in a wig and heavy make-up. Can you see Paul calling for a million men to rally in Rome and making a huge (costly) production of it? These kinds of events are not the products of a church that has been tested and purified in the fires of persecution.

These types of "ministries" are hay and stubble that have been propped up temporarily by that which moth and rust will destroy and that which thieves will break in and steal (Matt. 6:19,20).

Last weekend hundreds of thousands of men rallied in Washington, D. C. to encourage each other to be committed to Christ, to be committed to their wives and children, and to take responsibility for leadership. What a sad commentary on our society and its churches that godly themes such as these are considered novel enough to produce a cross-country pilgrimage.

Could these men not travel to their local congregations and receive this edification? Sadly, the truth is that many could not. Thus, attempting to stand in the gap that secularized churches have left open is a man-made organization that tries to erect an umbrella over everyone who believes in Jesus without concern for the numerous doctrines that divide these men into their various denominations. This is doomed to fail. A house divided (morally or doctrinally) against itself cannot stand (Matt. 12:25).

Consider the composition of that crowd last Saturday. There would have been those who recognize the authority of the Pope over the universal church arm-in-arm with those who reject that authority. There would have been those who claim to have the Holy Spirit-given gifts of prophecy and miraculous healing hand-in-hand with those who deny that those gifts are given today.

There would have been those who believe that man is born totally depraved side-by-side with those who think man has free will. Men who reject the idea that Christ was actually resurrected in the flesh likely embraced men who insist that He was. Isn't that wonderful? No! It is nonsensical, and it profanes the truth (2 Cor. 6:14-7:1).

Unity is not accomplished by ignoring that which divides. It is not achieved by compromising truth. It is not accomplished by rallying around the recognition that God commands men to be spiritual leaders and, at the same time, ignoring the significant doctrinal differences that divide us. That is not spiritual leadership, but avoidance!

If the doctrinal issues are insignificant, then why is there division? If they are significant, then those doctrinal differences must be discussed with the same fervor and passion with which other errors have been readily acknowledged. Why is it noble to acknowledge the truth that we have raised up a generation of men who have been seduced by the ungodly to abdicate their leadership roles, but it is divisive to observe that many of the same men have rejected the truth of God on other significant matters of doctrine?

There is a fad-like zeal for men, en masse, to confess their failures as leaders, husbands and fathers. One wonders, however, about the sincerity of such when the same are invited to re-examine fundamental doctrines regarding Jesus, His church or salvation and there is a collective yawn.

Rallies may make you feel good and may seem cathartic and produce zeal, but if truth is not valued, expected and taught, then we accomplish little more than the Ephesians did by yelling, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians!" for hours (Ac. 19:34). Be assured, the Ephesians felt good after that rally and likely went home excited, but what good did it do them? Zeal without knowledge is impotent to save (Rom. 10:2).

Speaking of salvation, nothing better exemplifies the failure of many of these "ministries" to honor truth than what they teach sinners to do to be saved. People are told, "Ask Jesus to come into your heart" and then participants are assured that they are saved. Any one who would suggest that an invitation like that harmonizes with Jesus' "great commission" (Matt. 28:19,20; Mk. 16:15,16) needs to read that charge again,

and has missed what the first Christians taught those in sin (Ac. 2:38; 8:35,36, etc.). Getting people excited with large crowds, slick productions, neat T-shirts, and eloquent speakers reflects Madison Avenue more than Christ. That, combined with a watered down gospel, is a recipe for a form of godliness that is powerless (2 Tim. 3:5). Yes, it has power to attract, excite, and make noise, but it is devoid of saving power.

Let's return to that which has the power to make us holy, the truth of God's word (Jn. 17:17). Let's rely upon and not be ashamed of the unadulterated and unembellished gospel of Christ. It is God's power to save (Rom. 1:16).

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Putting 'Obey' Back in the Bride's Promise

By AL DIESTELKAMP

A few years ago I was asked to perform the wedding of a couple I didn't know. I usually turn down most such requests because, more often than not, one or both parties have been through a divorce. But such was not the case this time. Consequently we met at a conservatory in a public park where the bride, groom and a few friends gathered for the ceremony.

In the sermon, preceding the exchanging of the vows, I read the words of the apostle Paul comparing the husband-wife relationship to Christ and the church (Eph. 5:22-33).

When it came time for the vows everything went well right up to the point where I asked the bride, "Do you promise to love, honor and obey him so long as you both shall live?" An uneasy moment followed as the bride stood in frozen silence with a startled look on her face. Finally, she forced herself to say, "I do," and we finished the ceremony.

That taught me a valuable lesson. Since then I have discussed the vows with the couples before agreeing to participate.

Unfortunately, I've noticed that many preachers (even among our brethren) have omitted the promise to obey from the brides' vows. It is needful, in this age when there is so much resistance to women being in submission to any man, that preachers have enough courage of conviction to put "obey" back in the wedding vows. At the same time we need to help both bride and groom understand that this is not a matter of male domination, but of submission to God's prescribed order.

If You Didn't Receive This Paper

I recognize the absurdity in the headline above. I had to get your attention somehow. I don't know why, but one day I sat down at my computer to make some corrections in my mailing list and the entire file was gone.

Fortunately, I have made it a practice to "backup" my mailing list every once in awhile. That's the only reason you're reading this now. The last time I had made a backup copy was October 14 (which at the time was a little more than a month). I also have the habit of saving any changes of address cards I receive, so I was able to enter those changes without much problem.

What I didn't save are some requests from potential new readers asking to be put on the mailing list. Why I didn't save them, I don't know. The result is that there are several people who went to the trouble of requesting this paper who won't get it.

Why am I telling this to you? Perhaps it's therapeutic. It bothers me that some will think that I didn't honor their request. Or, maybe I have the delusion that people talk about this paper so much that they will say, "I wonder why I didn't get my copy," and you'll be able to tell them to write again.

Also lost was a reminder to myself about a church somewhere in Tennessee which is looking for a preacher. I told them I would put a small notice of their need in this issue. If the brother who called me will write or call again I will put it in the next issue.

I'll try to do better in the future.

—Al Diestelkamp

Humanism: America's 'State Religion'

By AL DIESTELKAMP

Secular humanism has succeeded in becoming the state religion of our nation. The word "secular" has actually drawn attention away from the fact that humanism is a faith system. For that reason it has been able to be promoted by tax-supported agencies such as the public school system.

It is ironic that humanists, who have been in the forefront in the separation of church and state controversy, have succeeded in ridding any hint of faith in God from school curriculums and activities while they propagate humanist doctrine at the same time.

We might wonder how they have accomplished this in a nation where most people believe in God. Perhaps one answer is that many people don't understand what humanism really is. I fear that some get the words "humanist" and "humanitarian" confused. Indeed, most humanitarians are not humanists. A humanitarian is one who is benevolent toward other people—especially those in dire circumstances. No one would quarrel with that attribute.

A humanist is one who believes that humanity, without supernatural help, is capable of determining proper behavior. It is a belief system which directly contradicts the biblical statement that "It is not in man who walks to direct his own steps" (Jer. 10:23).

From their own writings we can see that secular humanists are dedicated to the secularization of society and the destruction of any religious belief that involves an imposed moral code from a supernatural being: "We affirm that moral values derive their source from human experience" (*Humanist Manifestos I and II*, p.17). It is no wonder

that refuting God and His absolute standard is their No. 1 priority.

It is unfortunate that so many Christians do not take humanism as a serious threat. We need to open our eyes to the fact that it is a form of idolatry in which human judgment is regarded ahead God's will.

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