

Christ. Even when congregational singing is retained the emphasis is often placed on the quality of the musical aspects rather than the message of the song. Thus, the songs are selected for their appeal to the ear (and sometimes even to the foot) rather than to the heart. Some songs are so jazzed up by their musical writers with such complexity that it is virtually impossible to keep the pace of the music and concentrate on the words at the same time. The purpose of congregational singing is twofold: 1) "to the Lord" to praise him, and 2) "teaching and admonishing one another" (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16), rather than to entertain those in attendance.

The simple and unembellished

worship that was characteristic of early churches may not appeal to the carnally minded in the church who are often looking for the new and novel. But it will appeal to the spiritually minded who are there to offer sincere worship to the God who saved them and to build each other up in the faith.

By way of the Reflector, August 2008.



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NAVARRE MESSENGER

Volume 3 Issue 59

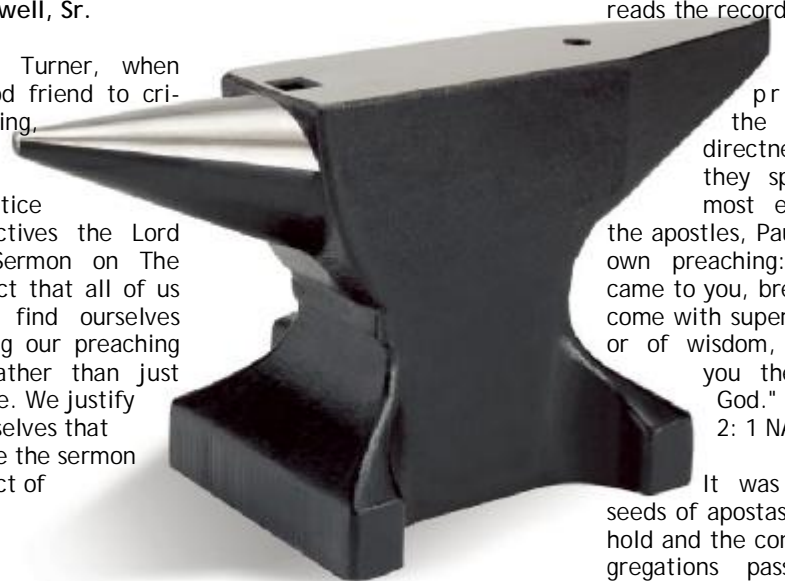
September 21, 2008

A Word or Two on Behalf of Simplicity

Edward O. Bragwell, Sr.

Brother Robert Turner, when asked by a good friend to critique his preaching, was reported to have replied, "Did you ever notice how few adjectives the Lord used in the Sermon on The Mount?" I suspect that all of us at times may find ourselves overly enhancing our preaching and worship rather than just keeping it simple. We justify it by telling ourselves that we do it to make the sermon or some other act of worship more impressive and meaningful to those in attendance. As a result many of our worship services have turned from simple straight-forward worship directed to God that also edifies the participants to elaborately enhanced productions bordering on pomp and ceremony to impress the audience.

It was said of Jesus, that "common people heard him



reads the recorded discourses of any of these men he is impressed with the simplicity and directness with which they spoke. Even the most educated of all the apostles, Paul, described his own preaching: "And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God." (1 Corinthians 2: 1 NASB).

It was not until the seeds of apostasy began to take hold and the control of the congregations passed from the hands of those common men who had been with Jesus, and those, who under their leadership had been given places of leadership, that the affairs of the church turned from the simple to the more complex. As time passed, the leadership of the church fell into the hands of men who were more worldly sophisticated than the earlier leadership. The simple congregation gladly." One reason for this may very well have been the simple and direct approach that he took toward teaching and worshipping and serving God. He surrounded himself, for the most part, with untrained and uneducated men (Acts 4:13). He chose from these men those who would go out and take his message to the world. When one

gational form of organization gave way to the more complex diocesan form. The simple New Testament worship gradually gave way to more ornate ritual with all of its pomp and ceremony. One only has to look at the workings of the modern Catholic Church to see the ultimate results of this evolution.

For a little more than 200 years, there have been those in this country, who have been calling upon those who profess to be Christians to return to the simplicity of the New Testament church. Generally speaking, this effort has been successful. There are many congregations, not only in this country, but around the world who worship God according to the New Testament order. This effort has not been without its problems. There have been those who have apparently believed that the simple New Testament order is inadequate to the needs of this modern world. When their innovations have been opposed divisions have occurred. It has been a constant battle to maintain our simplicity.

In view of all this I would like to put in a word or two on behalf of trying to maintain simplicity in our worship. It seems to me that in the past few years, that there has been a tendency in the church to try to "dress-up" our worship to make it "meaningful" and "exciting" to the modern worshiper. The doing of the "five items" in a simple and straightforward manner seems to have lost its appeal to our contemporary members, who think of themselves as being better educated and sophisticated than past generations. The facts of

the business is that some of the "enhancements" distract from the worship rather than enhance it. They tend to turn a simple act of worship and devotion unto God into a performance that shifts the attention from the meaning and purpose of the act to the quality of the performance of those leading the worship. It reminds me of two sisters talking as they were leaving the worship services one Sunday morning. One asked the other, "Did you understand what the preacher said this morning?" "No," came the reply, "but wasn't it just marvelous the way that he said it."

Preaching

When it comes to the act of preaching in our worship services, we have no objection to the use of aides that may not have been available to the first century preachers, or even to preachers just a few short years ago - especially visual aids. When I first began preaching the only visual aids we had were the old bed sheet charts, flannel boards and chalk boards. These eventually gave way to overhead projectors, which in turn gave way to PowerPoint presentations. These all have served preachers well, in presenting and illustrating the simple gospel story. As visual aids have become more sophisticated, I believe a word of caution might be in order. It is possible, and in some cases, I think I've actually seen these visual presentations become the focus of attention rather than the simple message they are supposed to be aiding. The presentation is so jazzed up

with animation and other gimmicks that real communication of the message from the preacher to the person in the pew is lost to a fascination with the "special effects" of the presentation.

Visual aids are not the only things that can be abused in the presentation of a sermon. Illustrations and anecdotes (humorous or otherwise) can be useful in clarifying biblical truth. But when they dominate the presentation to the point that little or no direct reading or quoting from the Scriptures is included, it is time to reassess their use by the preacher. Often these can tear at the heart-strings and tickle the funnybones of the audience and leave them well entertained and asking for more - and evoking their praise. The occasional use of humor and touching stories can be effectively used to illustrate a vital scriptural truth, but when they are used to the point that they become the core of the presentation they have little real spiritual value. They often leave one wondering what biblical text is supposed to be illustrated. There is no substitute for a simple and straightforward "book-chapter-verse" preaching with appropriate application by "reproving rebuking and exhorting long-suffering and teaching" (2 Tim. 4:1-4) with only a sprinkling of illustrative material as needed. Brethren, we need to take the Scriptures in hand, as did Ezra of old, and read them and "give sense to the reading." Let us strive to preach so that our audience will stand in awe of the God and his word that we are supposed to be preaching rather

than our ingenuity in presenting it.

Lord's Supper

I often hear brethren talk about how we can improve the observance of the Lord's supper and give it a more prominent place in our worship. There's no question that if there is a way to really improve our observance and give it its intended place in our worship we should do so. We hear suggestions that range all the way from preaching a separate sermon as a part of the observance to invoking a long period of silent meditation before or after or before and after taking each element. One may not be able to prove any of these suggested practices to be wrong of themselves. However, if we're not careful we will surround the Lord's supper itself with so much ritual that it will get lost in the midst of our "enhancements."

It is hard to beat the simplicity of our Lord's observance of the Lord's supper with his disciples:

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body." Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom." (Matt. 26:26-29 NIV).

This involved three simple acts 1) giving thanks for each element 2) eating and drinking the elements with 3) a brief explanation of the significance of each element. No elaborate discourse. No great pomp and ceremony. The disciples knew what they were doing and why they were doing it without the benefit of an elaborate ritual. To spiritually minded people, this wonderful memorial to the Lord's death will always have real meaning every time it is observed - even when it's observed in so simple a manner.

Prayers

Prayer has always been a great privilege for God's people in every dispensation - both public and private. It is a vital part of the public worship of Christians when they come together in the church. It is important that the words of a prayer be understood so that those in attendance may say "amen" if they desire. Care must be taken to avoid "vain repetitions." Likewise, one should be careful not to pray in order to be heard for "much speaking." (Matt. 6:7). One is impressed with the simplicity and directness of the recorded prayers in the New Testament. Homer Hailey, in his book on "Prayer and Providence," made the following pertinent observation on pages 8 and 9:

"Prayer, in all of its aspects is a spiritual exercise. It is not "saying a prayer" by rote; it is not a formal ritual which one practices from habit or tradition, even though one may have

set times in which he prays ... Prayers need to be only long enough to relate the need, desire or feeling to God. When the publican, standing afar off, prayed, he smote his breast, saying, 'God, be thou merciful to me a sinner' (Luke 18: 13). Also, when Peter attempted to walk on the water, but for fear lost his faith and began to sink, cried out, 'Lord, save me' (Matt. 14:30). Each came directly to the point; each expressed his personal need and the desire of his heart at the moment. There was no rambling from point to point and no effort to impress the Lord with oratory. This is not to suggest brevity to the point of being curt; but to suggest simply that we talk with the Lord in a frank and unostentatious manner, making known to him in a humble spirit the needs and desires of the heart."

Though public prayer is certainly seen and heard by men, that is not its purpose. There's a difference between being heard/seen of men praying and praying to be heard/seen of men. When we lead in public prayer we need to keep in mind that we're not only praying ourselves but for those who are worshiping with us. Therefore, let us strive to keep our prayers simple, understandable and to the point.

Singing

In denominational circles congregational singing has given way to special groups and "praise teams." I hear occasionally of this being done in some churches that claim to be of