## Teaching the Truth: An Act of Love

by Harry Osborne

A love for others will cause us to bring them to Jesus. In the first chapter of John's gospel, we see such a love at work in two individuals. Upon learning about Jesus from the preaching of John the Baptist, Andrew "first found his own brother, Simon" and "brought him to Jesus" (Jn. 1:35-42). After being called to follow Christ, Philip found Nathanael and brought him to Jesus (Jn. 1:43-51). When first century followers of Christ were so totally changed and blessed by coming to know Christ, they naturally shared that rich blessing with others. Failing to do so would have been unthinkable.

In the first century, the gospel was spread throughout the world within a few years. Was that solely due to the apostles who tirelessly worked in teaching the lost? No, the book of Acts tells of individual Christians carring that gospel to the lost wherever they went. When a great persecution arose against the saints in Jerusalem, we are told that many were scattered to other places. Did they leave the truth behind in Jerusalem? No, "they therefore that were scattered abroad went about preaching the word" (Acts 8:4). Following the well-known account of Peter taking the gospel to a Gentile named Cornelius, we are told about the action which had been taken by unnamed Christians who had also taught both Jews and Gentiles in other areas. The record says:

*Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only. But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus* (Acts 11:19-20).

With a deep love for Christ and the lost, the gospel was spread throughout the world within one century. Individual action played a major role in the effort.

While local churches have a responsibility in evangelism as they function collectively, we must not forget that much of the needed evangelism is our responsibility acting as individual Christians. Efforts by local churches to support evangelists in reaching the lost are scriptural and needed (2 Cor. 11:8; Phil. 1:3-8; 4:14-16). However, let us never forget that we have an individual responsibility in this matter as well (Gal. 6:6). When no teaching of the lost gets done unless the local church establishes a "personal work program," there is something lacking in our individual love for Christ and the souls of men. The best program in the world to convert the lost is for an individual motivated by love for Christ and a love for a lost friend or loved one to sit down with an open Bible and teach that lost person the gospel. That is the responsibility each of us has in our personal life as a Christian.

Just as we have a responsibility to share the truth with those outside of Christ, we also have an obligation to edify our fellow saints by sharing the truth with them. As we assemble together in the church, there is a clear instruction, "Let all things be done unto edifying" (1 Cor. 14:26). However, the responsibility of edification stretches beyond the assembly of the local congregation. In Romans 15, the same individuals instructed to bear the infirmities of the weak and not please self were also told, "Let each one of us please his neighbor for that which is good, unto edifying" (Rom. 15:1-2). Amidst other individual responsibilities required of the saints in Ephesus, Paul reminds them as follows: "Let no corrupt speech proceed out of your mouth, but such as is good for edifying" (Eph. 4:29).

In addition to directly providing edification to their brethren, first century Christians also manifest their love for brethren by urging them to receive faithful brethren who might aid in edification. An example of this can be seen in the case of the brethren in Ephesus. After Apollos was more accurately taught in the way of the Lord, the Scripture relates the following:

*And when he desired to cross to Achaia, the brethren wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive him; and when he arrived, he greatly helped those who had believed through grace* (Acts 18:27).

It is obvious that the church in Ephesus could not force an action upon the brethren in Achaia. However, Christians who loved their brethren in Achaia knew that Apollos could help edify them. Therefore, they wrote the brethren in Achaia to urge them to receive Apollos. No local autonomy was violated and no individuals acted in a way to seek a place as brotherhood directors. It was simply a case of brethren loving their fellow saints in other areas and seeking to help by urging them to receive a brother who could aid their work in Christ. By the same love, a parallel action of urging them **not** to receive a brother who could harm their work in the Lord would also be authorized as an act of love.

When individual Christians today love their fellow saints, they will do the same things exemplified by first century Christians with God's approval. Efforts to improve Bible classes and other methods of edifying the saints within local churches are necessary, but the work of edifying cannot stop at the doors of the church building. Brethren who love one another will open their Bibles in private homes and seek opportunities to edify their brethren on an individual level as well. When we have the proper love for brethren in other places, we will take advantage of opportunities to edify them. True love for our brethren will always cause us to share and defend the soul-saving gospel.

The book of Jude is a case study in the responsibility of Christians to defend the truth. The writer began the epistle with the well-recognized exhortation to "contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). The reason for that need to contend for the faith was then stated in detail. Those addressed were reminded of the devastation brought by teachers of error and their destructive false doctrines and sinful actions (Jude 4-16). The writer then reminded the readers of the reason they needed to keep in mind the words spoken by the apostles and avoid the effects of error:

*But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life* (Jude 20-21).

The responsibilities of individual Christians mentioned earlier are consistent with the responsibility to defend the truth. Paul's love for Timothy and the brethren Timothy could teach caused Paul to warn of the errors and name the sources of that error – Hymenaeus, Alexander, Philetus and others (1 Tim. 1:18-20; 2 Tim. 2:16-18; 4:10, 14). Paul defended the truth and refuted specific errors confronting the brethren at Colossae despite the fact that he had not been among them previously (Col. 2:1-23). What motivated him to do so? Love for those brethren and a desire for the progress of Christ’s cause. The same is true of John's warnings to Gaius in 3 John and other examples given in the New Testament.

Individual Christians who love fellow saints and have concern for the cause of Christ will do their best to defend the truth against the onslaught of error in our time as well. When they do so from approved motives, their actions are not to be condemned as evidence of autonomy being violated, a feeling of self-importance, self-appointed guardians of orthodoxy, brotherhood watchdogs, a pack of snarling cur or other disparaging terms. When error is taught, it is scripturally authorized for faithful Christians to speak up in defense of the truth at home or away as they have opportunity to do so. Those who speak disparagingly of such actions show a lack of love for their brethren and the cause of Christ.

During the controversy over institutionalism, faithful brethren had a love and concern for souls endangered by error. As a result, they sought opportunities to reach those brethren straying into unauthorized practices. Bulletins were sent to the members of congregations that were supporting human institutions from the church treasury. Brethren wrote letters and visited fellow saints who were going beyond the pattern of truth. Were those attempts to defend the truth proper? The principles of Scripture already noted show that such actions were indeed approved. Why is it that some who once engaged in these efforts to defend the truth, now condemn analogous efforts to defend the truth regarding fellowship, divorce and remarriage, the literal creation account, or other doctrinal matters? Bible love for our brethren and proper concern for the cause of Christ will motivate faithful Christians today to defend the truth when it is under assault, not condemn those who so follow the Bible pattern.