## Individual Christians, Evangelism & Edification

by Harry Osborne

A love for others will cause us to bring them unto Jesus. In the first chapter of John's gospel, we see such love in two individuals. 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 Christians were changed and blessed by coming to know Christ, they naturally shared that rich blessing with those they loved. A failure to do so would have been unthinkable.

In the first century, the gospel was spread throughout the world within one century. Was that solely due to apostles like Paul and John? No, the book of Acts shows us that individual Christians carried that gospel to the lost wherever they went. When persecution arose against the saints in Jerusalem, many were scattered to other places. Did they leave the truth behind in Jerusalem? No, "those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word" (Acts 8:4). Following the well-known account of Peter taking the gospel to Cornelius, the Scripture tells of unnamed Christians who had also taught both Jews and Gentiles in other areas.

*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).

While local churches have a responsibility in evangelism collectively, we must not forget that evangelism is also our responsibility as **individual Christians**. Efforts by local churches to support evangelists in reaching the lost are scriptural and much needed (2 Cor. 11:8; Phil. 1:3-8; 4:14-16). However, let us never forget our individual responsibility in this matter as well (Gal. 6:6). When no teaching of the lost is 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 to convert the lost is for an individual, motivated by love for Christ and a lost friend or loved one, to sit down with an open Bible and teach that soul the gospel. That is the responsibility each of us has in our personal life.

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

In addition to directly edifying their brethren, first century Christians also manifest their love for saints in other places by urging them to receive faithful brethren who would 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 says:

And when he was minded to go over into Achaia, the brethren encouraged him, and wrote to the disciples to receive him: and when he was come, he helped them much that had believed through grace (Acts 18:27).

The Ephesian church could not force action upon the brethren in Achaia. However, Christians who loved their brethren in Achaia knew that Apollos could help edify them. Thus, they wrote the brethren in Achaia urging them to receive Apollos. Local autonomy was not violated and no individuals acted in a way to seek a place as “brotherhood directors.” It was simply a case of brethren loving fellow saints and seeking to help by urging them to receive a brother who could aid in their common work. Conversely, urging them **not** to receive one who could harm their work would also be authorized as a proper manifestation of love for those fellow saints.

When individual Christians today love fellow saints, they will do what first century Christians did with God's approval. Congregational efforts to improve Bible classes and other methods of edifying are necessary, but the work of edifying cannot stop at the doors of the church building. Saints who love one another will open their Bibles in private homes and seek opportunities to edify 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 result in teaching of truth and encouraging the acceptance of only those teaching truth.

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

But ye, beloved, building up yourselves 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 individual responsibilities already mentioned 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 from Hymenaeus, Alexander, Philetus and others (1 Tim. 1:18-20; 2 Tim. 2:16-18; 4:10, 14). Paul defended the truth to the brethren in Colossae and refuted specific errors confronting them, despite the fact he had not been among them previously (Col. 2:1-23). What motivated him to do so? His love for them as brethren and his love for the cause of Christ so motivated him. The same is true of John's warnings to Gaius in 3 John as well as other examples given in the New Testament.

Individual Christians who love fellow saints and have concern for the cause of Christ will defend the truth against the onslaught of error in our time as well. When they act in such approved ways, they are not to be condemned as violators of autonomy, moved by arrogance, 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. One who speaks disparagingly of those defending truth shows a lack of love for brethren and the cause of Christ.

During the controversy over institutionalism, faithful brethren had a love and concern for souls endangered by error in other places. 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 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, renewed social gospel efforts, the appeal to emotionalism 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.