

Following "Our" Preacher

One of the great problems of all time is what is generally known as "preacheritis," or the excessive loyalty which many give preachers. It has always been a problem. Some people's religion seldom runs deeper than some preacher. He is the center and circumference of their religious devotion. This soul-damning disease deserves to be looked at in depth.

What Is Preacheritis?

1.) It is excessive exaltation of a preacher. Preacheritis sets in when people take their eyes off Christ, and set them on men; when they "think of men above that which is written" (1 Cor. 4:6). It begins its work when people exalt the preacher above the preaching, the messenger above the message, and the proclaimer above the proclamation. It is a spiritual affliction which causes people to "prove" their religious practice by the words and deeds of a preacher rather than by the authority of Christ (Col. 3:17; 1 Cor. 4:6).

People in the early church had this sickness: (a) The Corinthians said, "I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas..." (1 Cor. 1:12; 3:4). (b) Pergamos had those who held "the doctrine of Balaam" (Rev. 2:14), and the "Nicolaitans" (Rev. 2:15). (c) The Galatian churches had in them those who had followed the Judaizers in being circumcised that they might glory in the flesh (Gal. 6:12-13). (d) The Ephesians were warned about some who would "speak perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them" (Acts 20:30).

Should we think it strange that people still have this disease? There are some very severe cases of it. One sister said, "For all I care, they can shoot all the preachers except brother." Others feel no interest or obligation in attending meetings unless their favorite preacher is preaching. If the preacher is out preaching to people who need it worse than does his "home congregation," attendance may fall off until he returns. A brother once said to a local preacher, "What do you mean by being gone in so many meetings?" Some church members seem to think they will be judged by the words of their favorite preacher rather than their own worthy or unworthy deeds (Romans 2:6).

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Some brethren don't like to change their favorite even for a short meeting: "Brother Newcomer is a good preacher, but he will never take Brother Oldtimer's place" (as if he wanted to). It goes without saying that a religion that is built around a man is not built around Christ. If it is preacher-centered it is not Christ-centered, and therefore, is vain (Matt. 15:9).

2.) It is Spiritual immaturity. Paul said preacheritis is a sickness of spiritual babies: "And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto BABES in Christ. I have fed you with milk, and not with meat; for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able...For while one saith, I am of Paul..." etc. (1 Cor. 3:1-4). These Corinthians were milk drinkers rather than meat eaters because their spiritual constitutions were so delicate, and diseased. Preacher-centered religion is baby religion, because it cannot get weaned from a preacher. One version represents these people as saying: "I belong to Paul..." etc.

3.) It is carnality. "For ye are yet CARNAL: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divi-sions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men? For while one saith, I am of Paul..." etc. Paul said, "to be carnally minded is death..." (Romans 8:6). Hence, preacheritis is a fatal spiritual disease; preacher religion is a death religion; it cannot bring eternal life. Carnality signifies that which is fleshly; that which is of the world. Paul said the Judaizers wanted to "glory in your flesh" (Gal. 6:13). Preacher religion is a fleshly religion; it cannot bring spiritual rewards.

4.) It is walking as men. To the Corinthians, Paul said, "you walk as men, for while one saith, I am of Paul..." etc. (1 Cor. 3:3-4). Preacheritis is walking "as men," not as Christians. It is a human religion, not a divine one. It is therefore, a "vain religion" (James 1:26), and brings one no closer to heaven than any other human religion, though it may parade under the name of Christian.

Is the Preacher to Blame?

The matter of responsibility for preacheritis is an important consideration. We see only the symptoms of the disease in the actions of people, and maybe never really think about its origin.

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Let us consider two possible sources of the malady:

(1) The preacher: Preachers are often the main cause of preacheritis. Some preachers are experts at building up congregations around themselves. Some brethren seem to think "How Great Thou Art" should have been written with them in mind. This is accomplished in the following ways:

(a) Running the show: Paul said to the Corinthians: "Not for that we have lordship over your faith, but are helpers of your joy" (2 Cor. 1:24). There are many preachers who are anything but "helpers of your joy." They are lord's over the faith of too many in their home congregation. The church, therefore, is made up only of those who are willing to knuckle under to the preacher's iron-fisted rule.

Church members are often quick to jump to the defense of "their" preacher. They are often sincere in denying that he is seeking a following. They have been brainwashed to think that all who oppose him are just jealous of his success and position. They think the voice of the preacher is the voice of God, and opposition to him or his ideas is blasphemy.

(b) Martyr complex: Preachers sometimes build up a following around themselves by playing the role of a martyr. They are constantly supposed victims of a vicious plot, and the brethren are always seeking opportunities to take advantage of them. Most people favor the "underdog." Hence, the members begin to feel sorry for the poor helpless preacher, and, no matter what he preaches, he is "OK."

One brother told of some very good and able members of a congregation protesting when a well entrenched preacher aligned himself with certain false teachings. In a business meeting some of them went into a detailed exposure of the false doctrines the preacher had embraced. When they finished, the preacher arose and said, "I am just like Jesus before Pilate. These men are determined to crucify me, and like Jesus I am not going to answer a word." That carried more weight with his deceived followers than any scriptural defense could have. Who could refuse to come to the defense of the poor, crucified preacher?

(c) Alignment with the weak element: Some preachers gain personal following within the congregation by aligning themselves with the weaker members (this often includes men who have something to say in leading the congregation). The spiritual opposers are sometimes even driven out in disgust, or by excommunication.

(2) The members: Preacheritis cannot be imposed upon any person against his will. This is one disease one must be willing to catch! There are people even now who would rather "stand by their man" than "stand...in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths..." (Jer. 6:16). There are those who believe that grace and truth came by brother so-and-so. Preacheritis is self-inflicted. But, as in the case of physical disease, it is brought on by weak resistance. The spiritual constitution is unable to fight off its invasion. The preacher's personality, domineering spirit, "political" prowess, or even his pulpit ability, are more than some members can stand. They either knuckle under to power politics, or are overwhelmed by personal attachment. They "with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the preacher, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the spirit of the preacher" (cf. 2 Cor. 3:18, with apolo-gies). Indeed, with some people it is hard to distinguish between the glory of God and the glory of the preacher!

The Danger of Preacheritis

Preacheritis is a very dangerous disease. We will consider some of the dangers of this affliction.

(1) Spiritual fatality: When one ties his faith to a man, he subjects himself to the danger of spiritual fatality. Sooner or later he will discover that his worshipped image has feet of clay. Regardless of how much a man is idolized, he is still a man, subject to all human weaknesses. It goes without saying that a preacher who will allow people to tie their faith to him, usually has more than his share of such frailties. The psychology of preacheritis from the preacher's standpoint may well be that he realizes that a personal following is his only chance of remaining employed as a preacher because if people are dedicated to the Lord, they will automatically repudiate his liberal tendencies.

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Preacheritis has been spiritually fatal to many who have it because the preacher they idolized turned out to be morally bad. We should just face reality and frankly admit that we have human preachers who, like some other church members, are first class hypocrites and who are or have been guilty of just about every sin in the catalog. The discovery of such in some preachers seldom causes their followers to become more godly, but rather more ungodly. Their attitude is that if preachers cannot live righteously, why should others even try to do so. Most preachers are godly, dedicated men, but unfortunately, some few are otherwise. It is these who give preaching a bad name.

(2) Easy prey for false doctrine: One of the great dangers of preacheritis is that it makes the individual easy prey for false doctrine. If the preacher gets "led away with the error of the wicked" and falls from his own steadfastness (2 Peter 3:17), his followers usually go with him because their main concern is the messenger rather than the message. Many new denominations have been started in just this way. Many congregations have been divided in this manner.

Conclusion

All should realize that all human religion is vain (Matt. 15:9). Following the modern preacher will not lead one to heaven any more than will following an ancient one like Luther, Calvin, or Wesley. We often castigate the denominations for elevating certain men (Calvin, Wesley, Luther, etc.), and upbraid the Catholics for exalting the Pope. Yet, there are times and instances when some of our own brethren are guilty of the same thing.

Human religion never brings spiritual or eternal rewards. Such is limited to this life, and whatever benefits are derived from it are limited to this life. It may bring some measure of happiness and satisfaction here, but it will bring only misery and dissatisfaction in the world to come.

While preacheritis cannot always be controlled by the preacher, that is, some brethren will just be that way, let us be determined not to lend a hand in our own exaltation, nor that of another. Let us all look to the one Head of the church, the one Author and Finisher of our faith, the one Apostle and High Priest of our profession, the one Lamb of God, the one Alpha and Omega—the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:22-23; Heb. 12:2; 3:1; Jn. 1:29; Rev. 1:8)!

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Preachers today, like Paul, must strongly desire and insist that the brethren's "faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God" (1 Cor. 2:5). They should neither desire nor accept the devotion of people; their admiration, and encouragement, yes, but NEVER their devotion! —Adapted