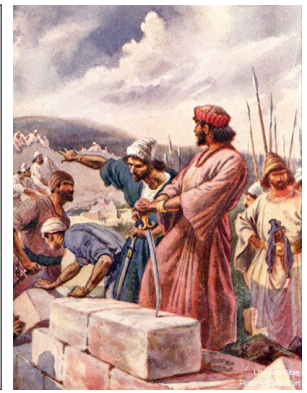


The Sword and The Trowel

They which builded on the wall, and they that bare burdens, with those that laded, every one with one of his hands wrought in the work, and with the other hand held a weapon. For the builders, every one had his sword girded by his side, and so builded (Nehemiah 4:17-18)

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Offending A Brother

I certainly hope we recognize that the English language has changed a lot in the past few centuries. There are words that existed in the time of Shakespeare that are just not heard or used much anymore. In Hamlet's Soliloquy (which I was forced to memorize in the seventh grade and have since forgotten almost all of it) there is the word "fardels." I have to admit that I did not know what this word meant years ago (I have since looked it up) and have never, except in the piece from Hamlet, heard it used at any time in my life. It means "burdens" and I suppose it was perhaps a common word back then, but it sure isn't now. Of course, a common word in today's cyberspace society is "blog." I don't think they had that one back in the days of Will Shakespeare.

I think we can see changes in English demonstrated in the Bible. Take the KJV which was written in the common English of the early 17th century. Let me hasten to say that there is nothing wrong with the English of the KJV or with the KJV itself. All I am trying to do is show you how English has changed. In Luke 17:9 (KJV) you will find "I trow not." "Trow" (rhymes with "throw") means "think" or "suppose." In Romans 11:2 we find "Wot ye not what the scripture saith of Elias?" "Wot" means "know." I do not know about you, but I cannot recall every using or hearing used "trow" or "wot" at any time except in a reading from the Bible. This sometimes is used to make fun of the KJV. Such mockery exhibits a crudeness that is unbecoming and unaccept-

able and ought not to be. It is one thing to point out that certain words are no longer used and have become archaic. It is an entirely different thing to show disrespect and open the door to contempt! It was a legitimate word back then and so what if we do not use it now.

Other words sometimes change meaning over time. For example, there is Philippians 1:27, "Only let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ: that whether I come and see you, or else be absent, I may hear of your affairs, that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel." Today the word "conversation" means an "oral exchange of sentiments, thoughts, opinions, ideas." In the 17th century it meant more than that. It meant "conduct" or "behavior." The Greek word means to "live as a citizen" and had in view one's conduct as a citizen of the kingdom of God. That is a huge difference that can be easily missed today. It is not just limited to oral dialogue. It includes that as well as all the rest of our manner of life.

Another common mistake is over the word "offend." Today this word is primarily used when something unpleasant is heard or seen. "I don't like that, it offends me" might be said. Sometimes this is a legitimate complaint. There are also times when it is a matter of taste. There are other times when it is a matter of personal opinion. Certainly we ought to do all that is possible not to deliberately cause such offense. However, we must also realize that if the complaint is not legitimate, it may be that a person just wants to control what you

do.

Sometimes when there is a claim of being offended, the offence may be in the eye of the beholder. There were those who were superficial followers of Jesus. "Yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while: for when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended." Oh, look, he is offended and the word of God is the reason! Should we eliminate the word of God then? No, someone needs to be more mature and rooted in the faith. This is not a legitimate claim or reason.

Another time "...came his disciples, and said unto him, Knowest thou that the Pharisees were offended, after they heard this saying?" (Matt. 15:12). Was Jesus supposed to go to the Pharisees, beg their forgiveness, and never say what He said again? (Furthermore, did Jesus sin on this occasion? Some who make the common mistake must think that He did). No, the problem is not with what Jesus said; the problem was that the Pharisees did not want to hear what Jesus said and this caused them to make an illegitimate claim of being offended. They needed to listen to Jesus, realize that it was the truth, do what He said, and then the alleged "offence" would disappear. This was a case of wanting Jesus to stop His perfectly legitimate criticism of them.

Ah, but someone will point out that the Bible does use the word offend (or its derivative) and that it *is* something to avoid. Perhaps Romans 14:21 is used on such occasions. "It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor any thing whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made

weak.”

Paul is referring to those who are weak in the faith (see Rom. 14:1). His remarks are for those who do not have the necessary understanding on certain matters. The person who makes the claim of offence is someone who is weak in the faith, not strong in the faith. They will be confused over the actions of another and be caused to do something that violates the conscience and that would be wrong for them to do so. They must be taught and have these things carefully explained to them. A point which is often overlooked in Romans 14 is that that these occasions of offence are to be overcome, not allowed to kept like a cheese and aged to perfection.

You see, some will say it is wrong to offend a brother in Christ. Of course, when folks make this statement, they are likely making the common mistake. They are using our meaning of the word and not the New Testament meaning. The New Testament word “offend” means “that which lays a trap or snare to entice us into the ruin of sin” (Barclay, p. 258). In other words, offending a brother would be causing him to sin. So when a brother (or sister) claims to be offended in something you might say or do, ask them if it is going to cause them to sin. If they say no (and they probably will) then they are misusing the Scriptures. If they are going to be caused to sin by whatever you might say or do, then you MUST desist in whatever it is that is offensive. At the same time, let us not be naïve. If someone says my coin-faced watch offends him and that it is going to cause him to sin, I will need to know just how that is possible. Is he a weak brother (he will more than likely deny this and claim that I am the weak brother which is allegedly proven by my wearing this watch). If he is not weak in the faith and is not being caused to sin, what is it? It just might be that he just doesn’t like me wearing the watch and wants me to stop doing so.

One time at a church in Indiana there were some brethren who de-

cidied to host a social gathering. Two of the men agreed to share the cost of renting a former high school in the area that had become a community center of sorts. An invitation went out to brethren from several churches. All could bring a covered dish and they could eat in the former cafeteria. They could then spend the afternoon visiting or using the gymnasium for games. The children could even play on the playground. Of course, there was one man who objected. You guessed it - - he said it offended him. He thought it wrong for Christians to engage in such activities. He wasn’t opposed to eating or socializing. He just thought it wrong for brethren to gather and do it as a group. No Bible citation was given for his alleged offence. He was asked if others did as they planned to do would it cause him to sin. He said it wouldn’t. He was also asked if he was weak on this issue. He denied any weakness in the strongest and most forceful language. Now, what do you think was his problem? Do you think he just didn’t like it and didn’t want anyone else doing it? Was he offended according to Webster or according to the Bible?

Tell Me What Is Right

I have been preaching now for almost thirty years. I have endured my share of criticism and complaints. There was a time when I found such things bothersome. However, I have learned to take them with a grain of salt. I have long wished that when brethren criticized or complained they would also please tell me what is right. Unfortunately, some brethren are either unable to do so or would just rather criticize and complain.

I used to grow a beard every winter. One elderly sister finally told me that preachers shouldn’t wear beards. This good lady used to lionize preachers of the past. I have seen pictures of some of them. Guess what? More than a few of them had beards! I have neither beard nor mustache anymore, this dear sister notwithstanding. I

stopped due to coloration, not complaint. Being bearded or beardless had and has nothing to do with being a preacher. As a side note, if Isaiah 50:6 foretells of the treatment of Jesus by the Romans (and I understand that it does), then Jesus had a beard.

There are brethren who will criticize and complain that the preacher spends too much time with his family or that he does not spend enough time with his family. Yet, they never seem to be able to offer what is just right.

Others will say the preacher dresses too shabby or that he dresses better than everyone else does. Do they ever intimate what is acceptable?

A complaint might be that the preacher has too nice a car while others wonder when he will get rid of that pile of junk. Are you getting the picture now?

Folks, I am reminded of the story about Goldilocks and the Three Bears. Goldilocks tried out the porridge, chairs and beds. She knew which ones didn’t suit her and which ones did. At least Goldilocks knew what was right and was willing to admit it! Well, hats off to Goldilocks.

There is not a preacher, dead or alive, who can successfully jump through all the hoops that brethren might place before him. If he tries to do so he will spend all his time jumping through hoops. Of course, some brother or sister will then take note of all his hoop jumping. “That preacher could study more if he’d stop jumping through all them hoops!” I wonder if they might be offended too?

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