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When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the "angel of the Lord" appeared to nearby shepherds, announcing "good tidings of great joy.... For unto you is born ... a Saviour." This angel was suddenly joined by a "multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men" (Luke 2:9-14).

Our spiritual senses stretch to grasp the meaning of the angelic message. Joseph had been commanded to "call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). Isaiah had prophesied that the Child of the virgin would be called Immanuel, which means "God with us." When Jesus was born, God was come to earth in human flesh, the Incarnation.

The angelic chorus encompassed the entire scope of Jesus' earthly life. That which the shepherds witnessed at Bethlehem led ultimately to Calvary and the empty tomb. Consequently, the message of the angels is realized in the Person of Jesus Christ. But, we might ask, has the angels' message been fulfilled? Do not peace and goodwill seem to be evasive virtues on this sin-darkened earth? While many reject the Person and the provision the angels were declaring, their chorus is indeed fulfilled in the lives of all who receive the Incarnate Messiah as Savior and Lord.

Through His provision of eternal salvation for all people, glory ascends to God. Peace descends to earth from God through Jesus Christ. God, holy and just, becomes the justifier of those who believe, and they experience the peace of God. Not only are they at peace with God; they also have peaceable human relationships, characterized by kindness and goodwill.

How then should we who identify with the angels' message and join their chorus of glory and peace and goodwill relate to all the excitement associated with December 25? To be among those who give glory to God in the highest, we must reject and denounce all idolatry. Keeping December 25 as a day of festivities has its origin in sun worship. Many of the practices associated with Christmas have nothing to do with the birth of Christ, but are borrowed from false religions.

But we also understand that Christian tradition recognizes December 25 in commemoration of the birth of Christ. A God-honoring observance of this day, however, will be markedly different from that of worldly society and nominal Christianity. Our worship and our activities should be con-

sistent with our practices on other days of religious significance.

The worship of false gods is idolatry. But the corrupted worship of the true God also constitutes idolatry. Aaron's sons died when they offered strange fire before the Lord. We do have God-approved, God-commanded ordinances as memorials of the One who brought peace to earth. Each Communion, we commemorate His suffering and death with God-given emblems. We commemorate His resurrection each Lord's Day. But God has not given symbols or objects in commemoration of His birth. We should not attach religious symbolism or spiritual significance to objects (trees, wreaths, lights, manger scenes) when God has not commanded it. These things should be conspicuously absent from our homes.

Is the exchange of gifts an evidence of peace and goodwill among men? Probably many folks give gifts to others out of heartfelt sincerity and goodwill. But many others spend money they do not have to give gifts that are not needed to impress the recipients. As we observe the gift-buying frenzy and the post-holiday stress that follows, we conclude that the whole thing fuels commercialism and consumerism, that it is hardly an expression of peace on earth and goodwill to men, and that it is far more pagan than Christian.

As children of the Highest, our goodwill should extend to all men all year long. Giving to those in need should be a way of life. And we can probably find better occasions to give tokens of appreciation to our loved ones.

Those who have embraced the angelic message have followed Christ from Bethlehem to the cross. They have been crucified with Him, and are risen to a new life in Him. Their lives reflect God's peace within. Their lips and their lives constantly and consistently declare, "Glory to God in the highest!"

—ism



Offenses in the Brotherhood

The phrase offenses in the brotherhood seems like a contradiction. When we think of the brotherhood, we think of a caring family unit with God as our loving Father. We think of a relationship that fosters close ties with each other. We think of each brother and each sister looking out for the good of one another. These sentiments represent what a brotherhood should be. Why then do we have offenses and brotherhood in the same title?

Avoiding Offenses

Each of us must deal with our own carnal nature. To "put off the old man" and to "put on the new man" is an ongoing endeavor. As Christians we are constantly learning not to offend others or to be easily offended ourselves. The verse that declares, "In many things we offend all," also states, "If any man offend not . . . , the same is a perfect man" (James 3:2). As we strive toward the goal in developing the "new man," we seek to avoid offending others. We do this by being sensitive to our brother's needs and wishes, by bridling our tongue, by thinking on the good of others, and by seeking to please our brother, even when we do not see things the same.

We also need to be people who do not become easily offended. We measure ourselves by God's Word, not by the idiosyncrasies of our brother, not by the personality that conflicts with ours, and not by the opinions of our brother—opinions that do not seem to make sense to us. "Great peace have they which love thy law: and nothing shall offend them" (Psalm 119:165).

The self-willed experience many offenses. Even the child of God, who understands the brotherhood to be a body fitly joined together, will experience some offenses.

"Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular" (1 Corinthians 12:27). Christ has assigned each member particular gifts with which he or she can best edify the body of Christ. Those gifts are often commensurate with a specific personality—one that may be quite distinct from our own.

Personality differences that may otherwise tend to offend us will take on a much different light when we view them as possible gifts to the church. Rather than being offended and minimizing our brother, we will see him as an instrument God is using to fill a place we could not fill. "And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you. Nay, much more those members of the body,

which seem to be more feeble, are necessary" (1 Corinthians 12:21, 22). We can much better understand each other as we rally around Christ, His Word, and His desire for the church.

Christ's desire is expressed in his prayer for the church: "That they may be one, even as we are one." Even our relationship to God is judged by our relationships to our fellow man. "If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? And this commandment have we from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also" (1 John 4:20, 21). The true test of love for our brother is loving him even when the going becomes difficult. We must follow Christ's example of extending love and forgiveness because doing so is the right thing to do, whether it seems easy to do or not.

Building Good Relationships

This brings into focus the importance of developing good relationships with our brethren. A desire to maintain good relationships is perhaps the single most important antidote to offenses in the brotherhood.

We build relationships by praying for each other, by sharing our joys and sorrows, and by bringing out the best in each other. This takes humility. The apostle Paul is a noteworthy example. To the church at Colossae, he said, "We give thanks to God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, and of the love which ye have to all the saints." He was praying for them and sharing in their joy of faith in Christ. In his epistles, the apostle Paul repeatedly mentioned names of those he wanted to compliment and encourage. "And I intreat thee also, true yokefellow, help those women which laboured with me in the gospel, with Clement also, and with other my fellow-labourers, whose names are in the book of life" (Philippians 4:3). "Greet Priscilla and Aquila my helpers in Christ Jesus" (Romans 16:3). "Only Luke is with me. Take Mark, and bring him with thee: for he is profitable to me for the ministry" (2 Timothy 4:11).

When we have good relationships with each other, we understand each other better. We know what words or actions will be offensive to our brother. This has the potential to make our relationships either better or worse. Both the apostle Paul and Jesus chose to better their relationships with the knowledge they had. The apostle Paul, because of his knowledge, could have eaten meat which others found offensive. Instead, he said, "If meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend." Jesus, the Creator of the world,

when asked about paying tribute, said, "Notwithstanding, lest we should offend them, go thou to the sea, and cast an hook, and take up the fish that first cometh up; and when thou hast opened his mouth, thou shalt find a piece of money: that take, and give unto them for me and thee."

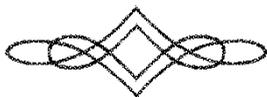
Dealing with Offenses

Our goal as a brotherhood is to be free from offenses. But what should we do when offenses come? It is possible that we have offended someone and are not even aware of it. For this reason, Matthew 18 mandates that the offended brother should take the initiative to clear the air. "Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone" (Matthew 18:15). If that does not clear the matter, then we are to "take with [us] one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established." Other brethren can witness firsthand the severity of the offense. If the matter is still not resolved, the church should then become involved. "And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican."

Following these steps is a safeguard for both the person that is offended too easily and for the presumed offender. Sometimes situations arise where a brother is "offended" because of a personal opinion that is at odds with the practical direction of the church. The steps from Matthew 18 will help clarify what the church is binding and loosing, and bring rest to both the offending and the offended. "Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 18:18).

As we contemplate this subject, let us consider how serious a matter it is to cause offenses. "But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea" (Matthew 18:6). Let us ever remember and demonstrate Christ's desire that we "love one another with a pure heart fervently."

Brother Clarence



The Preacher and His Preaching

Encouraging Words for Those Who Preach the Word

God had only one begotten Son—and He made Him a preacher. "He hath anointed me to preach" (Luke 4:18). Christ preached in the synagogue. He preached by the seaside, on the mountainside, and in the city. "Let us go into the next towns that I may preach there also" (Mark 1:38).

The apostles likewise were preachers, and the first deacons preached. Paul said, "Woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel!" (1 Corinthians 9:16). The church was born in the context of preaching.

The early church gave priority to preaching, "the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4). Down through the centuries, Christianity and preaching have gone hand in hand because "it pleased God through the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe" (1 Corinthians 1:21).

Preaching is the communication of God's truth by man to man. Preaching is the carrier of truth. Preaching is not speculation; it is rather a word from the Lord. It is God in action through human personalities. It is the link between God's redemptive act and man's apprehension of it.

Preaching is not a cold lecture but a sincere, fervent, heartfelt proclamation of truth. Preaching that is void of passion can hardly be called preaching. Someone once asked why an entertainer drew large crowds, and a preacher only a few persons. One person's observation was that the entertainer presented his fiction convincingly, but the preacher presented the truth apologetically. Even though Biblical preaching will not always draw large crowds, God speaks through messages that are well prepared and clearly delivered.

It is good if the preacher gives his sermon a three-fold test. Is the sermon characterized by vagueness and mediocrity and can hardly be listened to? Is it a good speech that can be listened to? Or is it a sermon that presents truth clearly and powerfully, that meets the needs of the hour, that demands a response, and must be listened to? Biblical preaching is marked by clarity. It does not cause confusion but brings understanding. The preacher is not an originator but a custodian of a revelation that has already been given. The need of the hour is not some bright idea, but a word from the Lord! The Bible speaks to man when all other voices fail. The preacher's library will likely include some well-chosen reference materials. But if a preacher is depending upon reference books, he will be disappointed. The Bible is like an artesian well.

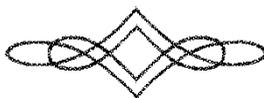
Substantial sermons are preached by those who know their Bible. This

requires patient, prolonged study of the Scriptures. Serious reading gives opportunity to tuck away into the corners of our minds those truths that will serve us well later. It is usually a fatal mistake to try to say too much in one message.

Preaching is an integral part of meaningful worship. Doctrinal material is essential for laying the foundation. Present-day applications make Bible truth pertinent and practical. The forthright declaration of truth instructs and inspires. The careful preacher will give due attention to both content and communication.

Sheep and lambs both thrive on teaching that emerges from the Bible. May God bless those who stand behind the sacred desk and feed the flock of God.

Brother Donald



Church Committee Report The Publication Board

"When people of Anabaptist heritage moved to America... imprisonment no longer forced the saints to inactivity, which had given them time to write long, edifying letters. Now it seemed that operating farms and raising families kept writing and reading to a minimum."* (*A Time to Heal* (Crockett, Ky.: Rod and Staff Publications, 2002).

How does it stand with us? God grant us the spiritual vision and zeal we need to promote His truth through the printed page.

The Eastern Mennonite Publication Board is made up of twelve members. One of its purposes is "to provide leadership in helping to develop, direct, and protect the literature and writing interests of the church." It is organized into the editorial, publishing, and marketing departments. The Board gives oversight to six committees: curriculum, history, art, tract, Northwest literature, and Spanish literature committees. It produces these periodicals: The Eastern Mennonite Testimony, Home Horizons, Living Waters, Sendas Derechas, The Curriculum Communicator, and The Historical Journal.

Some ongoing projects presently are three new storybooks and a study guide Mennonites in Holland. The Christian Ordinances study guide is

mostly written. The Bible storybook text is nearly completed, as is about half of the artwork. The instruction book, Instructions for Christian Living and Church Membership, is receiving its first "refreshing" since its initial publication in 1984.

Some projects already completed, or nearing completion, are The Doctrine of Christ and the Spanish translation of Samantha's Gift (the first Spanish storybook being published by EMP). The Mennonite Encyclopedia has been reprinted by an agreement with Menno Media and is at the printer. Volume 6 of the bound volumes of the EMT is again in print, making volumes 1-9 available. The Spanish translations of A Great Cloud of Witnesses and Lovers of the Truth are in preparation for printing.

School curriculum projects include handwriting for grades 4 and 5, and grade 3 of the reading series. Praise and Practice, a music drill book of about 250 pages, should be available by the end of this year. This book should be valuable in all levels of learning, including the Bible school level.

Eastern Mennonite Publications works with Rod and Staff in various curriculum projects. EMP is also involved in the production of Sunday school literature, which is published by Rod and Staff.

The Joint Publication Council, which includes representatives from Eastern, Washington-Franklin County, and York-Adams County churches, represents another joint publishing effort. One of the projects of this committee is a children's paper called Little Lights. With a full-color cover, Bible stories, poetry, and present-day stories, they make a contribution to the street meeting work. Other projects of this Joint Committee are the completed study guide, Train Up a Child, and the ongoing work on the hymnbook.

Publishing is a far-reaching and time-consuming work. Take, for an example, the number of people directly involved in producing one month's copy of Home Horizons. The team includes six Home Horizons committee members, six editors, approximately eighteen writers, five reviewers, about seven artists, and five copy editors, making a total of nearly fifty individuals. Pray for the work. Willingly contribute with purse and pen. Publishing is not the glorious labor of a gifted few, but the quiet labor of hundreds of brethren and sisters. Together, let us safeguard and promote the work of Christ's kingdom on earth.

Brother Jonathan for the Publication Board

First Things (Part 6)

The Grace of Christian Giving

And this they did, not as we hoped, but first gave their own selves to the Lord, and unto us by the will of God" (2 Corinthians 8:5).

Etched on the face of a crumbling tombstone, the ancient epitaph read, "What I kept I lost. What I spent I had. What I gave I have." Men who live for themselves will lose all they have, while men who give to the Lord will gain immeasurable reward. A Christian's eternal vision should make gracious giving a natural priority.

The Old Testament commanded God's people, "Honour the LORD ... with the firstfruits of all thine increase." When a little boy brought his teacher a shiny, red tomato, he told her, "It's the first one from our greenhouse." That tomato was extra special. Have you given the Lord something in the "first" category? If you are determined, you might set aside money for the church offering immediately after receiving a paycheck. It might even mean adjusting your lifestyle to live on what is left.

Parents, giving your little children a nickel for the Sunday offering teaches them by practice that "it is more blessed to give than to receive." Later in life, the hand will more easily give, and the head will not need so much convincing. Working youth might not handle all their own income, but they should handle at least enough of their money to establish a habit of giving.

Your attitude counts too. Given in an attitude of humility, the widow's two mites were worth more than handfuls of gold. God is able to do far more with a cheerfully given tidbit than with a begrudged wad of cash. Giving requires faith—faith that your hard-earned funds will be directed by the church to a worthwhile need. How faithless to disregard the offering basket because one believes the need is unworthy!

Giving to the Lord comes down to earth when we realize that that is where the needs are. When you are aware of needs in your community, are you driven to give? "Be ye warmed and filled" is a poor substitute for firewood and potatoes. "Thinking of You" cards may brighten the day; but the sick, grieving, or elderly may appreciate a knock on the door and a sit-down visit even more.

God wants more than the surplus in our budgets. He needs more time than what remains when our to-do list is crossed off. The world will not be won to Christ with what Christians can conveniently spare. Have you truly given of yourself to the Lord if it has cost you little or nothing? The Lord is

well able to reward a loving, magnanimous giver far more than any tax deduction ever could. "Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7).

Brother John



PRAYER POINT

*"The effectual fervent prayer
of a righteous man availeth much"*

Pray for the Ashland and Numidia Bible schools. Over the past years thousands of young people have been instructed in the ways of the Lord. Pray especially for the school board and administrators as they labor to maintain an atmosphere conducive to spiritual learning and life.

Pray for the Mennonite Fellowship Home located near Hagerstown, Maryland. This home for the aged is presently under the administration of the Allegheny District of the EPMC. Pray for those who are involved in the daily care of the residents.

Pray for the regional winter Bible schools. This churchwide program is a yearly highlight for the congregations. Much time and effort is invested in this ministry. Pray that God would bless the sowing of the seed of truth.

Thank God for the virgin birth of "JESUS: [who] shall save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). In this season of cultural festivity and celebration let us keep our attention focused on the higher program and purposes of God.

