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"Vow ... Unto the Lord"

A new year offers hope that a new page can be turned for the better. Many resolve to quit old habits, pay off debts, or grow in some virtue. These are noble aspirations, but as Christians, we know that power for victory in life comes through submission to Christ. However, as a New Year dawns, rather than self-righteously reflecting negatively on others' frivolous resolutions, we should aspire to new heights of victory in Christ. One way to reach these heights is to avail ourselves of God's counterpart to resolutions—"Vow, and pay unto the LORD your God" (Psalm 76:11).

The vow, a solemn promise to God, is a form of praise. "Praise waiteth for thee, O God, in Sion: and unto thee shall the vow be performed" (Psalm 65:1). God anticipates the contrite heart, which, reaching up in faith, expects His provision. Hannah's vow demonstrated her faith in the ability of God to provide for her need. A vow is also an acknowledgement of one's accountability to God.

The public vows of baptism and marriage invoke reverence and sobriety. But vows are also saturated with the joy that accompanies consecration. Vows to God inspire faith in the reality of His presence.

The world and those who follow the world marginalize God by saying marriage vows to each other rather than to God. But weakened promises produce weaker homes. "Vow ... unto the Lord."

Vows can fill a vital role in personal victory and growth. Going beyond resolutions and driving a stake by entering into a covenant with God may be the key to victory in areas of struggle. Job found victory in personal purity. "I made a covenant with mine eyes" (Job 31:1).

The flesh recoils from commitment, but that may be precisely what it needs. If God's Word brings conviction during the preaching of the Word or personal Bible study, when your heart says amen to His will, seal it with a vow.

At times a vow may confirm our sincerity to grow in an area of weakness. Could we vow to skip a meal if we miss our daily spiritual meal? Or if we struggle with sleeping in church, would it enhance our sincerity to make a vow that would inflict consequences for failure? "Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name: ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full" (John 16:24). Growth and victory through travail hold unspeakable joy.

Vows are so serious that "better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay" (Ecclesiastes 5:5). "When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for he hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed" (Ecclesiastes 5:4). We hold documents that remind us of our baptismal and marriage vows. It may be wise to write down other vows and commitments that we make to God so that we do not become guilty of forgetfulness. We do the same for commitments we make to men.

Vows should not be made that we may not be able to pay or that would be unwise to pay. Jephthah learned the hard way (Judges 11). For this reason, vows should not be made on impulse. "It is a snare to the man who devoureth that which is holy, and after vows to make enquiry" (Proverbs 20:25).

Personal vows that we enjoin in our secret prayer closet will hold their value if they are not flaunted. However, a husband and wife may choose to make a vow together. Israel made a collective vow to God if He would bless them with victory (Numbers 21:2). At times we may include others in our vows. We may commit ourselves to confide in a mature brother or sister if we fail in personal purity or lose the battle in some other area of personal life. "Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed" (James 5:16).

God hears and remembers vows. God reminded Jacob, "I am the God of Bethel, where thou anointedst the pillar, and where thou vowedst a vow unto me" (Genesis 31:13). Will God at the Judgment declare, "I am the God of where you uttered a vow"?

If we fail to pay vows that we have rendered to God, the memory of those sacred moments will flood our souls in condemnation before the throne of God. Conversely, picture the rapture of the vow performed. "For thou, O God, hast heard my vows: thou hast given me the heritage of those that fear thy name" (Psalm 61:5).

—BAS



When Truth Hurts

Pilate asked Jesus, "What is truth?" (John 18:38). Although his inquiry may have been cynical, it reflects man's desire to discover truth. To the truly sincere seeker, truth can be found in the Word of Truth through the aid of the Holy Spirit and the wisdom of fellow Spirit-filled individuals.

Why then, if mankind wants to know the truth, does truth sometimes cause pain? It hurts because the very nature of truth is sharp and pointed. "For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword" (Hebrews 4:12). It is able to reach deep within the heart of man to his innermost thoughts and intents. Likely most of us can recall feeling the sharpness of God's Word. It brings every dark need within our heart to the surface. And how often have we listened to a divinely inspired sermon and marveled how the bearer could "see" the exact area of need in our life? Truth is sharp and inflicts pain as it addresses our spiritual needs.

Truth hurts because man's heart is "desperately wicked." Man's unregenerate heart is full of pride, and, sadly, pride is also at times an unwelcome presence in the converted heart. When truth's sharp sword reaches a proud heart, the personal ego suffers a deadly blow. It is pride that resists the help of the church. Pride rejects the concern of a well-meaning brother. Pride says, "I know what I am doing, and you can mind your own affairs." And thus the high-minded scoffs at what is meant to be a loving, faithful wound of a friend (Proverbs 27:6).

Furthermore, sometimes truth hurts because it is presented in an unkind and thoughtless manner. The blunt truth can be as salt to an open wound. Perhaps the giver never realized the trial or temptation we were facing and added coals to the fires of testing already burning in our lives. Nevertheless, it is still the truth. The choice is ours: How will we respond to truth?

When truth hurts, we should thank the Lord. Thank Him that truth still reigns and that it addresses present-day Christians and their weaknesses. We should deeply value His interest in our lives and recognize His methods of bringing us unto perfection. A humble heart accepts the concerns of a sincere brother as direction from God. Perhaps this test is the hardest. "Giving thanks always for all things" (Ephesians 5:20). Can we thank our brother for being our keeper?

A sensitive Christian is willing to make adjustments to align himself to the plumb line of truth. He will humbly admit his need of growth and then act upon it. We cannot afford to be like the man who "goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was" (James 1:24). When

hearing truth stirs conviction in our heart during a Sunday morning message, we should be sure it does not lose its grip by Tuesday. Are we lovers of truth so much that we will practice truth at all cost, even when it hurts? We should also respond in love and appreciation for the bearer of truth. Human nature would like to even the score and hand concerns back regarding his own life and conduct. But the humble, honest man receives, accepts, and acknowledges error even when he sees faults in his friend's life. Sharing truth with others requires a premeditated conviction, not an impromptu grievance.

How can we be effective in sharing the truth with others? We need a genuine interest in their spiritual health. We seek to restore in the spirit of meekness (Galatians 6:1), never with the secret intent of humiliating another. This difficult task requires much preparation in prayer. Prayer will help us understand the need of the situation better, as well as refine our motives and passions. We are not prepared until we can truly love the recipient. May God help us to speak the truth with His love (Ephesians 4:15)!

A Scriptural basis for our concern rather than a well-articulated argument of human philosophy will ease in the end the pain of rebuke for the honest Christian. Truth is most convincing when we can echo words from the Source of all truth. His words, a simple message, convict the hearer.

Tact can ease the pain. The spirit in which truth is presented greatly affects whether it is accepted or rejected. If we take pleasure in dropping bombshells on others, we can expect very guarded and defensive responses. Rather, truth soaks in best through slow, gentle showers, "by the meekness and gentleness of Christ."

However, it is possible to be so concerned about hurting feelings that we miss getting to the point. But the sensitivity of an individual determines the method of our approach in expressing truth.

Truly, we desire to be among those who receive "the love of the truth, that [we] might be saved." It is ultimately the truth of God's Word to which we will answer at the Judgment Seat of Christ.

May we love His Word and promote it today so that it will not condemn us on that day.

Brother Nevin



The Imperative of Fellowship Lines

Numerous Bible commands impress one with the fact that fellowship lines, or boundaries, are imperative. "Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness" (Ephesians 5:11). "For what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness?" (2 Corinthians 6:14).

Relating to the distinctly worldly, evil, and unbelieving people is likely not as hard as establishing safe fellowship lines with professing Christians and groups with whom we share common ground. Bible examples illustrate this danger.

Jehoshaphat joined affinity with apostate Ahab, and they fought together at Ramoth-gilead. Apart from divine intervention, Jehoshaphat would likely

have died in battle. Upon his return he was rebuked by Jehu the seer. Somewhere in the course of life, his son Jehoram took the daughter of Ahab to wife (2 Chronicles 18:1, 28, 31; 19:2; 21:6).

King Hezekiah befriended the messengers of Babylon and showed them all the precious things of his house. Did his lack of reserve influence his son to do evil in the sight of the Lord? The Bible records the rebuke from the prophet Isaiah, prophesying that Hezekiah's treasures would be carried to Babylon, along with his offspring (2 Kings 20:12-19).

Our Rules and Discipline guide us in defining fellowship lines. "Our members shall find their companions among those of like faith.... Members marrying otherwise are not privileged to counsel and commune until they acknowledge that they have transgressed the evangelical discipline of the church." "Members shall support the activities of their own denomination rather than give active support to groups who do not uphold the doctrines." "Those members who stand by such who are out of fellowship place themselves in the same state."

We do well to draw our personal and family fellowship lines similar to those of our congregation and church group. The Christian salutation may be shared more broadly than with those with whom we exchange pulpits. However, we should be slow to attend their services other than for special occasions such as funerals and weddings.

Sometimes these reserves bring the criticism that to draw such stiff lines is too judgmental. However, we make fellowship lines to avoid the responsibility of judging others (1 Corinthians 5:12, 13). To have fellowship with persons who are not clearly identifying with our applications of truth is to judge them worthy of our fellowship, and gives the wrong signals both to

them and to us.

Difficult decisions related to fellowship lines are knowing how to relate to family and relatives. It is proper to maintain contact with relatives, but we should guard how, where, how often, and how long those contacts are. In the regroupings that have taken place in conservative circles over the past fifty years, some have made right choices for their church fellowship but have continued interchange with relatives and former friends. Many have awakened too late to the reality that their children have not followed them in choosing a safe fellowship.

An occasional visit of an hour or two or an occasional family gathering may be acceptable. However, frequent gatherings such as a monthly family night or renting a campground to be together for several days will likely be damaging.

Special care should be exercised when persons are living in open violation of clear Bible teachings, such as divorce and remarriage. (The pamphlet *Relating to the Divorced and Remarried* gives guidelines.) If we have questions, we should seek the counsel of faithful brethren who help us find our way. We should pay careful attention to questions and voices of warning and concern that are raised by our fellow brethren. Defending ourselves in those areas could bring a bitter harvest.

A current threat is the ease of communication such as E-mail, which facilitates contact with a broader circle of fellowship. The open-ended nature of such communication, along with the fact that it disregards the directives given for E-mail use, destroys foundational beliefs and starts an amalgamation process that destroys stability and Biblical conviction.

Some are attracted to groups who plan more activities for youth. However, the church has attempted to hold a line in regard to youth activities for good reasons. The play-and-activities mentality does not foster deeper commitment to truth and right.

Opportunities arise that invite us to unite our efforts with others in evangelism or relief work. History shows that joining our efforts in matters like these usually leads to apostasy and the loss of conviction. We do not discredit the good others are doing, but it is always safest to channel our efforts in these areas through our own church fellowship. Many of the safeguards in these realms have been formed because of what has happened when these principles were not followed.

May God help us to cultivate a love for God and for His people that will aid us in choosing a right way for ourselves and for those who follow after us.

Brother Enos

Church Committee Report

The Relief Committee

The unusual weather patterns of the past year have given opportunities for relief work after several years of very little activity. In the spring many areas experienced tornados. We often found it difficult to know when or where to get involved. The brethren in the Midwest did relief work after a major tornado struck Joplin, Missouri, on May 22, which was relatively close to some of our churches. While the damage was very extensive, we did not ask for help from the East because many other church groups from the Midwest responded to the need. On June 2 a tornado struck Springfield, Massachusetts. The Denver District, along with the Relief Committee, supplied labor for the cleanup.

Our next project was in Vermont after Hurricane Irene brought extensive flooding in the Northeast on August 28. The local brethren from Wolcott started flood cleanup work south of Wolcott and were later joined by help from the broader church.

On September 7 Tropical Storm Lee came on the heels of Hurricane Irene. This storm caused widespread flooding in southeastern Pennsylvania, affecting many of our local communities. In some areas the water levels exceeded the flooding of Hurricane Agnes of 1972. Many of our congregations and districts were involved in relief work in their local communities. Since the flooding occurred over a very vast area, it seemed to be more practical for the churches and districts to organize their own work in their areas. We appreciate that many took the initiative to do local relief work without direct Relief Committee involvement. We did ask for help from the broader brotherhood in Middletown and Bloomsburg. Middletown was flooded by the Swatara Creek and Bloomsburg by the Susquehanna River. Most of the work consisted of cleaning out flooded basements and removing ruined dry wall.

Without the voluntary response from the brotherhood, we would be unable to do relief work. We appreciate the excellent response of our own constituency, as well as the assistance from the York-Adams County and the Washington County, Maryland, churches. Relief work gives us the opportunity to share the Gospel in word and deed. Those who responded testified of the blessing it was to help those in need and to dialogue with those who experienced loss. To have someone do the work that they were unable to do themselves was a tremendous relief.

Since many contacts have been made on a local level instead of several

hundred miles away, we had an excellent opportunity for continued contacts. In all of our relief efforts, we do not want to lose sight of our real mission—sharing the Gospel. Many of the contacts that were made could possibly be continued by way of visiting and cottage meetings in the homes. May we pray that all of our relief efforts and the follow-up work would bring glory to our benevolent God, who has blessed us with the Gospel message and with the resources for relief work.

P.F.- For the Relief Committee



PRAYER POINT

*“The effectual fervent prayer
of a righteous man availeth much”*

Bless the Lord, "who daily [loaded] us with benefits"
throughout the past year.

Pray for faithfulness unto the end.

Pray for those who lost life companions through death.

Pray that God would bless the young people as they attend Bible school
this winter at Ashland and Numidia.

Pray that we may all be strengthened in faith as we support the regional
Bible schools.

Thank God for the privilege to supply our own needs and to assist others
who experience hospital care or accidents.



Separation in Business (Part 3)

Product Sales

God's Word requires that Christians sell differently from others. A shady business deal cannot be justified by saying, "Business is business." Business is a moral issue. Consider the type of product as well as the manner in which it is sold.

Products must be items "for necessary uses," of good quality, and in harmony with a consistent Christian witness. Do not intentionally cater to the world's gods: products that feed pride, the sports craze, or a luxurious lifestyle. Choose places of employment that do not sell harmful products such as tobacco and alcohol.

Conscientiously guard the principles of honesty, fairness, gentleness, and kindness in sales tactics. Do not apply excessive sales pressure, especially to vulnerable individuals such as elderly folks, widows, or the physically limited. They should incite our sympathy.

Respect others' schedules and graciously accept a "No, thank you," or even a nasty retort. Sales tactics should be questioned if a testimony for Christ feels awkward during or after a sale. All salesmen brighten your day—some when they come and others when they go. Be the former.

The Old Testament Law forbade dishonesty in sales with "divers weights and measures." "Provide things honest in the sight of all men" (Romans 12:17). Do not attempt to disguise product defects with tactics such as hiding small, gnarled fruit under large, beautiful ones, or hushing a noisy machine with extra thick oil. "And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise" (Luke 6:31).

May our business life, as well as our entire witness to the world, praise God. "That ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world" (Philippians 2:15).

Brother Joel



Vocal Vices (Part 1)

Foolishness

"For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned" (Matthew 12:37). This sobering fact from the lips of Him who will finally be our judge should challenge us to control the use of our

tongue.

A vice is bondage to a habit. This tool of the devil destroys character. A vocal vice is habitual, corrupted speech, which is expressed by a depraved nature. "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh" (Matthew 12:34).

"Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child" (Proverbs 22:15). Thus "a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame" (Proverbs 29:15). Satan appeals to this inherent human tendency when binding men with the vice of foolishness. Foolishness is overcome only by a deliberate choice. Youth should be grateful for parents who have used "the rod of correction" to "drive it far from [them]."

Silliness may appear to be innocent, but it is foolishness. For lack of something worthwhile to discuss and with little forethought, fools expose a lazy, empty mind. Young children very easily get caught up in this kind of talk. Occupying the minds of our children with good storybooks, chores, and other profitable activities will curb silliness and help them develop into youth capable of profitable conversation.

Unchecked silliness will lead to talk that expresses stupidity and a lack of understanding. This form of foolishness comes from an immature mind that lacks proper teaching. Not only is stupidity expressed in relation to the secular and the intellectual side of life, but, more seriously, it also exposes a lack of spiritual values and ignorance of the serious consequences of one's thoughts, words, and actions.

"Go from the presence of a foolish man, when thou perceivest not in him the lips of knowledge" (Proverbs 14:7). Witty, comical, amusing characters do not build good character.

"Fools make a mock at sin" (Proverbs 14:9). "It is as sport to a fool to do mischief" (Proverbs 10:23). The most serious form of foolish talk is sin becoming a subject for entertainment. What makes a man laugh is a true test of his character.

Should it not be considered a sin itself to laugh at anything that would take a person to hell? "Who knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them" (Romans 1:32). See 2 Thessalonians 2:12.

"The mouth of fools poureth out foolishness," because "the mouth of fools feedeth on foolishness" (Proverbs 15:2, 14). "Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his [speech]? by taking heed thereto according to thy word" (Psalm 119:9).

Brother Roland.