

Closing the Back Door

M. W. Bassford, 6-6-10

Some years ago, when I was still in the training program at Dowlen Road, I had a conversation with Max Dawson about a barbecue that he had attended in the early 1980's. The barbecue was hosted by a brother named Westley Pollard, who's currently one of the elders at Dowlen Road. Westley had just obeyed the gospel, and he wanted to celebrate. When he was sending out invitations to his barbecue, he made a special point of inviting all of those who had recently come to the Lord just as he had. He even videotaped the barbecue to commemorate the event.

About twenty years later, Max and Westley got out that old videotape to watch it, and as they did, they realized to their dismay that about two-thirds of the people at that barbecue no longer worshiped with them. Some had died, of course, and others had moved away, but many of the attendees had just fallen away. At some point over the past 20 years, they had lost their faith and returned to the world, worse off than they were before they ever had become Christians.

This highlights one of the most subtle, but most serious pitfalls for our evangelistic efforts. It's easy for us to fall into a mindset that says that evangelism is about getting people baptized or getting people restored instead of getting people to heaven. If we think this way, we'll be great about talking to visitors and talking to our co-workers and doing everything we can to lead them to the Lord. But then, once they do obey the gospel, we say to ourselves, "Mission accomplished!", we move on to the next prospect, and we forget all about these new members who still need our help.

Brethren, that does nothing to help the Lord's cause. If we convert 10 people this year, but next year we allow all 10 to fall away, what good is that? True evangelism requires us to give some thought not just to saving the lost, but to keeping the saved. With this in mind, let's consider what the word tells us about closing the back door.

General Attitude.

If we wish to succeed in keeping everybody here headed in the right direction, we must first start with the correct general attitude. Peter does a marvelous job of summing up what this attitude must be in 1 Peter 3:8. To begin with, we must be of one mind. In other words, God doesn't want to see division of any kind existing in His church, whether that division arises as a result of doctrine or of social interaction. Without that unity of mind, we aren't going to please Him or succeed in His work. Second, we must be compassionate. We are commanded to feel a deep emotional sympathy for one another. We need to rejoice in the successes of our brethren as though they were our own, and we need to mourn their tragedies as though they were our own. Third, we must love one another as brothers. Just as we saw a couple of weeks ago in Titus 2, this is not *agape* love, but *phileo* love. This doesn't mean that we are to selflessly seek one another's good, although that is also true. Instead, here Peter is instructing us that we need to like one another. We need to be friends with one another. We need to share that glow of familiar affection that we feel toward those who are closest. Fourth, we must be tender-hearted. In other words, although we need to emotionally react to one another's needs, that's not enough. We need to not just be willing to help one another out, we need to understand how to help, and we need to follow through and actually do it. Finally, we need to be courteous and humble in our dealings with one another.

Obviously, this is a tall order. God quite clearly requires us to be heavily invested in one another, and we see Paul lay out the reason for this requirement in Romans 14:15. In context, of course, Paul is speaking of matters of conscience, but no matter what the topic is, one thing is always true of our brethren in Christ. Even the most insignificant, wallflower Christian in the congregation is someone for whom Christ died. Someone we might not think to look twice at is someone whom Jesus loved enough and valued enough to suffer on the cross for. Every saint here was bought with an awesome price. Every one of us is precious in the eyes of God, and we need to treat one another that way. It's easy not to do that. It's easy to fall into the habit of seeking out our friends among the congregation and ignoring everyone else. If all of us have that attitude, though, some brother or sister is almost certainly going to fall through the cracks and be overlooked. Christ cared enough to die for them, but none of His disciples care enough to talk to them. Brethren, if that's our attitude, it calls into question whether we're really Jesus' disciples at all. Let's remember one another's value.

Finally, we must remember that just as every Christian was purchased with the blood of Jesus, every Christian now has his faith as his most important identifier. Paul discusses the importance of this in Colossians 3:9-11. Remember, friends, racial and cultural distinctions were every bit as important to people 2000 years ago as they are to us today. They commonly classified themselves according to their ethnicity and economic status. However, in Christ, all of those people with such varied backgrounds found a unity that was more important than any of those other divisions could be. In our congregation, we need to be careful not to duplicate all of the divisions that exist in our society. There are lots of ways that people today divide themselves up, but inside the church, we should never think in terms of those classes. They aren't important anymore. What is important is that Christ is everything to us, and Christ is everything in us.

Specific Actions.

Within this general attitude of love for one another and value for one another, there are specific actions we need to carry out in order to put that love into practice. First, we must be careful to avoid partiality. James tells us precisely this in James 2:1. In context, James then goes on to discuss a rich man and a poor man who visit the assembly, and the rich man is treated well and given a place of honor, while the poor man is dismissed and told to sit on a footstool. Brethren, I daresay that modern-day America isn't any less materialistic than the Roman Empire of two millennia ago was, and we can fall into precisely this same trap without any difficulty. We can be drawn to a visitor, or a Christian for that matter, because he's nicely dressed in an expensive suit, his hair is neatly cut in a popular style, and he holds himself in just that right way that announces, "This is a person of quality." On the other hand, if somebody else comes in a T-shirt and some dirty work jeans, and maybe they haven't shaved recently, and maybe they've got a hint of B.O. about them, that might be somebody we're not as interested in getting to know. Now, this is not to say that we should treat rich people badly. That's not the point. The point is that to us, riches should be irrelevant, just as education should be irrelevant, or good looks should be irrelevant. We need to treat everyone here with the same attitude of love and respect.

Second, if we want to love one another, we must consider one another. The Hebrews writer raises this point in Hebrews 10:24. In the Greek, the idea here is that we need to study one another carefully, that we need to perceive one another clearly, so that once we've gone through that study, we can use our perception of one another to build one another up. Especially, we need to consider one another for signs that they have needs that aren't being met. This is something that I have the opportunity to see as I wait by the door after services. Every week, there are some Christians who will start talking to somebody else right after the last "Amen" is said. They're established in the church, they've got some old, familiar friends here, and they're eager to visit with them. That's great. What's not so great is that there are Christians here who don't have people eager to talk to them. These isolated Christians look around a little bit, shuffle their feet, feel awkward, and then leave. Brethren, it's those saints who don't have people to talk to here who are at the greatest risk of falling away. We need to consider them, to ask what we can do to reach out to them, and even more than that, we need to consider the isolated Christians who aren't here, who are already in the process of falling away, and sadly, this congregation does have members in that position. We don't have to wait for the elders to say something before we call or send them a card. We should already know who they are, and we should already be doing something about it.

Third, we must have the same care for one another. Paul explores this idea in 1 Corinthians 12:24-25. There isn't one of us who is totally self-sufficient. At one time or another, we all need help from other Christians, and as Christians, it is our responsibility to see that every member who needs help gets the help he needs. Sometimes, the brother who needs help is very visible. He's there every Sunday, he takes part in the worship, but now both he and his wife are very sick, and they need food brought to them. That's easy for us to do. What's not so easy is when one of those Christians who sits in the back and doesn't say or do much gets sick, or one of our shut-ins goes downhill a little bit. In cases like that, we might not even know the need exists, much less work to fill it. Brethren, that's not the Lord's plan for His body. He does not will for us to be ignorant of or indifferent to one another's difficulties. We need to be aware of what's going on in one another's lives, and we need to take care of one another, regardless of who needs the help.

Finishing the Deal.

Finally, there are a couple of things we need to do to finish the deal, to make sure that we have done everything we can do to keep a brother or sister from falling away. The first of these, probably to no one's surprise, is that we can show hospitality to one another. Look with me at 1 Peter 4:9. We've been looking a lot at showing hospitality to non-Christians as a way of opening a door for the word, but it's every bit as important to show hospitality to our brethren too. Remember, hospitality has to do especially with showing kindness to strangers. We aren't being hospitable in the fullest sense of the word when we invite our same old friends over for dinner. We're being most hospitable when we invite someone who has never sat at our table before. Let me ask all of you this morning: have you eaten a meal with every Christian in the congregation? I doubt any of us have, and if not, it's something we can all work on.

Finally, we really do our best to close the back door when we do not grow weary in doing good. Paul raises this very point in Galatians 6:9. I know, I know. Just like hospitality, perseverance is something that I talk about all the time, but I bring it up so much because it's so important. We don't do God's will when we hear a sermon like this, really make an effort to reach out to our brethren for two weeks, and then forget and go back to the way we were before. That's not spiritual growth. It's just a spiritual stretch, and, in the long run, it does very little to help keep our brethren faithful. Instead, we have to keep doing, and keep doing, and keep doing. We have to continually consider one another. We have to continually care for one another's needs. We have to continually be hospitable to one another. That's work, I know, but it's work that must be done, and if we devote ourselves to that work, we'll see results. If we care for one another as we should, our efforts will lead to nothing less than people going to heaven who wouldn't have gone if we'd neglected them. Something as simple as a conversation can make an eternal difference. Let's start making that difference today.