

STEEPLE SITTERS

by Mary Ellen Drushal

When you were a child, did you ever walk across the yard looking through the large lenses of binoculars? I did that once and promptly walked into a tree! Observing scenes through the large lenses sufficiently distorts one's perspective to make things appear a distance away when in reality they are much closer.

The same visual distortion occurs within the church, especially evangelical churches. Constituents within these churches scrutinize Scripture through binoculars and even magnifying glasses to conclude that God's Word is inerrant, infallible and the only sufficient guide and foundation for ministry. God's Word is truth and therefore the only rule for practice. So why does the whole counsel of God go unnoticed? Do evangelical believers become "steeple sitters" and peer at their world through the large end of the binoculars?

In Matthew 22:34-39, a lawyer quizzed Jesus regarding the most significant commandment in the Law. He said there were two: love the Lord your God with your whole being and love your neighbor as yourself. Certainly believing Christians love God and His Word, the historic family album. But loving your neighbor as yourself creates a different dilemma. That implies we must first love ourselves and then translate that love from God to our neighbors through observable and demonstrative acts of love.

Do we love ourselves? Do we adequately love and care for our neighbors? What constitutes a corporate response to these commandments?

Loving Oneself

We are created in the image of God. In Genesis 1:27 God states: "And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them." We are His children (John 1:12) created and gifted uniquely to serve Him (I Corinthians 12). Frequently in the church, we are warned that loving oneself immediately connotes the concept of pride and Scripture speaks to this perversion ". . . do not think of yourselves more highly than you ought to think . . ." (Romans 12:3). Loving oneself directly reflects our understanding of the person of God, that He is who He said, and that He can and does do what Scripture records (Ephesians 1:5-7). To not love ourselves amounts to blasphemy!

Love of Neighbors

You may be saying to yourself, "well, I can understand loving

God and loving myself through His revealed plan for me, but love my neighbor as myself? Who is my neighbor anyway?" Scripture gives a very clear and distinct answer to that question. When Jesus was sending the disciples out as witnesses of the truth they had seen, He instructed them to begin "from Jerusalem" (Luke 24:47) or right where they were. In Acts 1:8, the instruction was specific, Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, or right where you are, then to the state, next the country, and finally to the "remotest part of the earth."

While "in Jerusalem" we are responsible to feed the flock, both spiritual and literal food (I Peter 5:1-4). We are commanded to care for and help meet the needs of those believers around us in our congregation. But unfortunately, most "steeple sitters" stop at this point. Brothers and sisters, I fear we are sufficiently busy and content in caring for the needs of our own that we fail to exhibit concern about those who live in the next county or city, let alone the adjacent state or foreign country. If we believe God's Word to be true and without error, then why do we practice such a small portion of it?

Because we have such a high view of Scripture, we often look down our spiritual noses at more liberal interpreters of the Word and at their implementation of what is called "the social Gospel." And yet, many of them may fare better on the day of Judgment because they did what Jesus said, "to feed the hungry, clothe and shelter the homeless, visit the sick and imprisoned" (Matthew 25:34-40).

Loving our neighbors as ourselves requires more than witnessing to them and bringing them, through the power of the Holy Spirit, into the fold of the Lord. We must also minister to their needs and sometimes this precedes their coming to Christ! Right now, while you are reading this, take out a sheet of paper and begin to analyze your individual and your church's program of outreach beyond the local congregation. Include on that list organized programs of the church as well as ministries that are carried on by one or two individuals. The proof of what I'm saying lies in the length of that list. How many items are there — two, four, seven, or are there none listed?

Now, let's get specific regarding this personal inventory. When was the last time you or someone you know visited a person in prison? List the most recent person you visited in a nursing home. How often has your family invited a divorcee and children for a meal or an outing? How recently did you take a meal to a family experiencing some difficulty? Throughout the week, does your church have an empty nursery where a day care center could be provided for children of working parents?

By now you likely have one of two responses — either the Holy Spirit has convicted you of your own and/or your church's failings or shortcomings in implementing the loving Gospel of our Lord, or you have become defensive and angry and a heated rebuttal letter is forming in your mind. Often consciences are salved by saying: "I can't minister to someone in prison. It's too dangerous a place;" or "Offer shelter to someone I don't know? Why I could get mugged or killed;" or "Nursing homes are depressing;" or "My church will not provide a day care facility, because we don't want to provide parents with an easy out to foist off their children on the church while they work." Interestingly, the psalmist wrote a beautiful poem in Psalm 91 to ease these expressed anxieties. And God, Himself has promised His presence to those who serve Him (Matthew 28:20). Friends, admit it — we are without excuse before the Lord and our judgment will be quick and sure on that day when we stand before the Almighty God. Will our excuses for not ministering in His name stand up to His scrutiny?

Romans 6:16 states: "Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness?" No equivocation can be gleaned from that statement. Either we serve God or Satan, there is no half and half. How can we love His Word and not obey it? James reminds us to "prove ourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers *who delude themselves*" (James 1:22).

The Churches Response

By faith, in faith, and through faith, the challenge lies before each reader to do the following:

1. examine your own commitment to Scripture and *all* its teaching;
2. critically analyze your individual and then your church's response to loving neighbors;
3. evaluate the effectiveness of current efforts in meeting the needs of individuals; and then
4. think creatively (that means beyond the traditional expectations) about specific ways you and others in your congregation might carry out our Lord's commands.

Be reminded that we teach little by verbal prattle, but much by what we do and are.

Loving neighbors takes time, energy, commitment, conviction, action, and frequently receives criticism. Jesus was well acquainted with the critics of His day but that didn't deter Him from His task. Jesus ministered to and met the needs of many outside His own covenant family or group. There were no government

programs or subsidies to meet neighbors' needs. In fact, there might not be today if the church had obeyed Jesus' commands! Neighbors reside in every community who will not have their basic survival needs met unless Christian carpenters, lawyers, doctors, educators, plumbers, factory workers, and presidents of corporations, become active in implementing God's Word.

It is time — in fact, past time — for “steeple sitters” to come down from their lofty perch and focus their binoculars using the correct lens on the issue and situations that face neighbors. Love is not a noun, it is a verb. John 14:15, instructs: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” Love translates into obedience; obedience into conviction; and conviction into action.

Let us (both individually and corporately) be about the task of loving our neighbors and ministering to them in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!