

## A Significant Historical Event—Is History Repeating Itself? # 2

by James P. Needham

In article one, I chronicled a change in attitude and strategy in and around Nashville, TN that had a far-reaching influence on the churches. It was a precursor to the overwhelming avalanche of liberalism that divided the church in the 1950's and '60's and has led some liberal churches to merge with the Christian Church. Four young preachers and some older ones too, grew weary of the "fighting style" of Foy E. Wallace, Jr., and others, and determined to move to a passive soft-soaping style of journalism. Here is a record of that happened:

"M. Norvel Young, James D. Bales, George DeHoff, and Woodrow Whitten - conceived the idea for this journal (*20th Century Christian*, jpn) in 1938. Disillusioned with the fighting style that increasingly characterized journalism in Churches of Christ and concerned that Churches of Christ had failed to communicate effectively with the younger generation, these students determined to bring the message of Churches of Christ more into line with contemporary concerns - a goal strikingly similar to that of the new *Christian Leader*. Further, like those who pioneered the new *Christian Leader*, these young men also were committed to positive, constructive journalism.

"But when Young took this idea to E.H. Ijams, at that time President of David Lipscomb College in Nashville, he received little or no encouragement. Ijams informed Young that a group of older men was about to launch a significant journal, backed by substantial funding, that would accomplish precisely what these younger men had in mind. Ijams therefore advised Young and his colleagues to stand aside and entrust their common vision to the older generation.

"Despite this advice, the graduate students determined to press ahead. With their own funds and their own resources, they issued the first number of the *20th Century Christian* from the basement of Nashville's Hillsboro Church of Christ in October 1938 - only three months before the new *Christian Leader* appeared. Knowing that none of them carried sufficient weight among Churches of Christ to serve as editor, they secured for that position J. P. Sanders, at that time the preacher of the Hillsboro Church of Christ. They also signed on Hugh Tiner (dean of Pepperdine College in Los Angeles) and Athens Clay Pullias (vice president of David Lipscomb College) to serve along with Sanders and themselves on an editorial council." (*Revival of the Ancient Faith*, Richard T. Hughes, page 210,211).

This was a historically significant event that largely was overlooked, and the creeping disease of softness swallowed up most of the churches between Nashville and Memphis and eventually throughout the nation. As one can see from the above quotation, the *20th Century Christian's* policy was orchestrated by the principal figures of the institutional/sponsoring church movement which was to come shortly. It opened up the floodgate to apostasy. If the powers that were in Nashville (certain preachers and David Lipscomb College) and Freed-Hardeman College sneezed, every church but 3 or 4 between Nashville and Memphis said, "Bless you."

Now, I am disturbed at the likelihood that history is repeating itself. There is the old adage that "those who refuse to learn from history are doomed to repeat it." I fear that the creeping disease of softness is invading the conservative churches of our time. And again, it is being fostered by a periodical and an organization formed by brethren—not surprising! Be it remembered that the forces of softness in the 1940's and '50's continued to repeat the characteristic mantras, "**We speak where the Bible speaks, and are silent where the Bible is silent.**" They also emphasized "**the restoration movement**" and were proud of their "**Restoration heritage.**" This was also the case with the missionary society and instrumental music apostasy in the 1800's.

I have reference to the change in editorial policy of *Truth Magazine*. In announcing the policy change, Brother Mike Willis, like those of the 1940's says,

"We reject the compromising spirit of our age which tries to accept all doctrinal beliefs and ethical behavior as evidence of their tolerant spirit." And he avers that "We have reached the conclusion that most of the doctrinal issues facing brethren will be fought through the Internet rather than through the papers. We are adjusting our approach to reflect this conclusion."

**Brother Mike seeks to justify the change in 5 arguments:**

1. **"...Most of the doctrinal issues facing brethren will be fought through the Internet rather than through the papers."** One must wonder what evidence he used to reach this conclusion. Did he not realize that not everyone has a computer, thus no access to the internet? I personally know a number of brethren who are avid readers of the periodicals who don't have a computer, and have no plans to purchase one, thus will have no access to both sides of any issue by means of *Truth Magazine*. Surely, this is not the agenda of Mike and his associates by the change of policy, but it is the undeniable result.

2. **"Generally only a small percentage of our readers are interested in the doctrinal conflicts occurring among us."** How did he learn this? And if it is true, it explains much that is occurring among the conservative churches. I have engaged in religious journalism most of my preaching life (almost 60 years now). I was a staff writer for *Truth Magazine* when Bryan Vinson was editor. That was soon after it began. I resigned when he apologized for an article I wrote on the then current issues of the sponsoring church and institutionalism. I again became a staff writer and part owner of the magazine at the insistence of Cecil Willis and Bill Wallace after they acquired it. I was reluctant to be re-associated with the paper but they wouldn't take no for an answer. I must say that my experience says that Mike's assumption lacks evidence. If brother Mike's conclusion that "only a small percentage of *Truth Magazine* readers are interested in conflicts occurring among us" is correct, why do I receive letters and phone calls from all over the country and from regions afar concerning my feeble efforts at writing, and how was a faithful remnant saved from the heavy artillery of the Nashville movement in the institutional/sponsoring church struggle? Was that because brethren didn't read the papers? It was the consensus of brethren generally that the *Gospel Guardian* and local church bulletins saved the day for conservatism. Mike's assertion does not harmonize with hard facts.

3. **"Most brethren think these doctrinal exchanges are distractive."** "Most brethren," brother Mike? How does he know this? Did he take a poll? Where is the evidence for his dogmatic conclusion? I think he is desperate to justify what he has done, and I think I detect some sub-conscious doubt in his mind at what he has done. Mike has to know that he is taking a giant leap with the acquiescence of the board and staff of the paper. The Cecil Willis I knew and worked with so closely for years would abhor this change of policy, and I think Mike must know this. It is a drastic change of direction for the paper, and a scar on the memory of the work done by his deceased brother and the many brethren who gave and loaned money to the magazine to keep it alive.

4. **"Some turn off the magazine because they view them as preacher' fights."** Yes I have heard this from some few brethren for almost 60 years now. That some brethren so view honorable discussion of issues as "preacher fights" is absolutely true, and not new. There are always brethren whose convictions are as flimsy as jello, and have more sympathy for softness than for a straight-forward presentation of the truth. Now, I must ask, are Mike and his associates saying that the policy of *Truth Magazine* from now on will be governed by those of indefinite and flimsy convictions? We heard this over and over from weak brethren during the institutional/sponsoring church struggle, but we didn't change our policy or preaching to accommodate it. Brother Mike says **"I believe that brethren who have this conclusion are wrong and that the issues discussed in the papers are usually very relevant."** Even so, he uses it in his chain of reasoning in an effort to justify changing the policy of *Truth Magazine*.

Following is Mike's solution to this problem, **"To accommodate this change in communication style, we generally will address relevant issues in an informative article in the magazine and refer our readers who have interest in a particular issue to our web site which will distribute more material relevant to the subject for those who have the interest to pursue it."** Brother Mike, what about the thousands of brethren who don't have computers and have no plans to purchase one? Did the Lord and the apostles refer inquirers to a source to which many had no access if they wanted to argue with the truth?

5. **"Many Christians do not take the time to read the magazine."** If this is true, then how does that justify changing the policy? If many Christians do not read the magazine, how is changing the policy going to remedy that? If many Christians don't read the magazine, how will they be drawn to it by a change of policy? How will they learn about the change of policy if they don't read the magazine?

BRETHREN BEWARE!!!

What has happened to *Truth Magazine* is a water shed event. There is a definite possibility that history is repeating itself. It smacks of B. C. Goodpasture and the *Gospel Advocate* of the 1940's and forward. The *Gospel Advocate* announced that it would print only one side of the issues, and refused to even consider printing rebuttals, even when brethren offered to pay for the space. It also favors the Nashville softness movement which said they would not be discussing the premillennial issue (and others), which was raging then. Had it been left up to them R. H. Boll and his cohorts would have spread premillennialism all across the nation among the churches. Goodpasture said he had no responsibility to print error! Thus he became the brotherhood arbiter of truth to determine what brethren could read, and they could be assured that he would screen out all error and print only the truth!!!! He must have thought he was infallible. So, we had a brotherhood determiner of what was the truth on every issue. Is this what brother Mike and his associates have become? Not intentionally, I am sure.

Now please notice: Brother Willis has departmentalized his writing staff which pretty well dictates the subject matter that will be presented in the magazine. If anyone objects to the material presented, their objection will not be presented in the magazine, but will be referred to a web site, **if the person has a computer**. If they don't, well they can forget any possibility of being heard. The readers of the magazine will hear only *Truth Magazine's* view of the matter, shades of the Advocate and Goodpasture.

I feel quite certain that most of the material that will be presented in the Magazine from now on will be good, true and edifying, but it will lack the balance that the paper has had in the past. I will now make a statement that brings chills to my spine and should do the same for every gospel preacher: **It is possible for a preacher to preach only truth, and never preach any error, and still go to hell for not declaring the whole counsel of God.** We should take no comfort as preachers in the fact that we have never preached error, we should take a serious look to see if we have preached all the truth.

Brethren Mike Willis and Connie Adams are diligent to assure us that they have not changed their convictions on current issues among the brethren. I wonder why they felt it necessary to so assure us of this. Is it possible that they know that their change of policy is a close companion of compromise? Is it not obvious that something untoward and invisible to most people motivates this change? Maybe those involved in it are unaware of it, but anyone who can see through a ladder can see that something unusual is happening. A small hole has been punched in the dike, and we all know that small holes in dikes don't remain small, they wash out and become gushing, overwhelming floods. My knowledge of church history forces me to this conclusion. I have no ax to grind in this article. I am saddened by this turn of events. The writing staff and most of the board members of *Truth Magazine* have been long-time acquaintances of mine. Some have been close friends and yokefellows; brethren who stood shoulder to shoulder with me

and others in the institutional/sponsoring church struggle. My association with the Willis family has been long, warm and friendly. Cecil and I worked together for years on the magazine, in gospel meetings and public debates, and we became almost like blood brothers.

Much of Paul's letters could not appear in *Truth Magazine* under the new policy, because they were written in rebuttal to the false doctrines of people who opposed the truth and were trying to lead brethren in the wrong direction. Most of the letters to the seven churches of Asia could not be printed in *Truth Magazine* under its new policy, because in them THE LORD was calling for the exposing and expelling of false teachers.

Organizations formed mainly for church members are dangerous. They get too close to the church and many brethren lose sight of the demarcation between them and the church. A family known to me recently made a large contribution to a college. The wife, in commenting on the gift, said, "The College is an extension of the church." This attitude is prevalent in the minds of many brethren. This has been proven over and over again. A blind man can see what happened in the 1800's with Alexander Campbell and his school and periodicals. We can see the influence that David Lipscomb College, Freed-Hardeman College, and other such institutions had on the churches from 1940 and forward. We can see the dangerous influence now wielded by Florida College, the Cogdill foundation and *Truth Magazine*. They not only think of themselves as extensions of the church, they even supplant the church, they do what God commissioned the church to do. When such organizations get on the wrong track, there is no turning back. This because they are commercial enterprises and money becomes a ruling factor. The administration of these organizations depends upon them for their employment, and their living. The strong inclination is to follow the money. Money is power. These institutions never get enough money. Wealthy brethren make large contributions to them, and wealthy brethren tend to be liberal. If they make large contributions to these institutions, they expect to have a voice in their direction. As time goes by liberal donors' philosophy begins to dominate. We know the rest of the story.

### **Conclusion**

It would gladden many hearts if the *Truth Magazine* administration would reverse their policy change. I can tell you that many brethren are deeply concerned about what is happening, but I fear it won't matter. I warned the president of Florida College some years back that some of his actions were alienating brethren who had supported the college for many years, and that he was about to lose some old friends that he was going to need. My words were acknowledged, but unheeded. Things a hundred times worse than what I had in mind then have occurred since I sounded that warning. Unfortunately that follows the pattern of history.

I am nearing my 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. I have been preaching the gospel for almost 60 years. I know that "life's evening sun is sinking low," and soon I shall go the way of all the earth. I have reached the point to where I know more people on the other side than I know on earth. I have seen many changes in the kingdom of God, and in our nation. To say I fear for the future is to put it lightly. I fear for the kind of country in which my children, grandchildren and great grandchildren will live. I even fear worse for the church of the future. Forces are at work in and out of the church that eventually will destroy its existence in this country if certain evil forces are not halted. We are seeing it happen before our very eyes.

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