The Herald of ~~Truth~~ Error

By Nathan Battey

What is the Herald of Truth?

Herald of Truth is a missionary society that operates both a nationwide and international television and radio program. In addition to its media efforts, in recent years Herald of Truth has begun to sponsor numerous missionaries in foreign fields and conducts its own foreign works. In short, Herald of Truth is an organization operating separate from the church to do the work God gave the church. Herald of Truth is funded by numerous digressive churches of Christ as well as donations from society as a whole.

How it began:

Herald of Truth began as a radio program and evangelistic effort of the Highland Avenue Church of Christ in Abilene, TX in 1952. Herald of Truth began airing on 31 American Broadcasting Co. stations and, within its first year, it is estimated over 5,000 people were converted.

Because of the tremendous success of the radio program, Highland Church decided to begin a television program to pair with its radio program. In 1953 a fund raising campaign was begun with the hope of raising enough money to broadcast Herald of Truth on 62 television stations across the nation. The goal of the campaign was to get 1,000 churches to commit to sending $27 per week so a potential viewing audience of 10 million viewers could be reached.

The television program was successfully launched in 1954 on 50 stations and by the 1970's had expanded to 468 radio stations and 152 television programs. The program met with much success, but was not without controversy.

By the mid 1950's and throughout the 1960's, the Herald of Truth program was the source of heated debate. Defenders of the program included such noted men as Guy N. Woods, Thomas B. Warren, and Batsell Barrett Baxter while other noted brethren such as Roy E. Cogdill and W. Curtis Porter opposed it. Papers and publishing companies also got involved in the controversy with Gospel Advocate defending the program and Gospel Guardian and Truth Magazine opposing it. Numerous formal and written debates resulted including the Cogdill – Woods debate, and the Arlington Meeting. The Herald of Truth controversy ultimately escalated to the point of major division between what came to be known as the Main Line Churches of Christ and the Non-Institutionals.

Why the controversy?

Why would brethren and faithful preachers oppose a program that was converting thousands? What could possibly be wrong with Churches of Christ being put on the map and a good program gaining national attention and competing with the denominations? How could such a blessing be the source of so much division and controversy?

Points of controversy:

In discussing the points of controversy, one of Herald of Truth's defenders will be allowed to present his own case for consideration. The following quotes come from Jack Meyer Sr. and are recorded in his book, *The Preacher and His Work* and were delivered as a strong defense for Herald of Truth.

Argument #1:

> "Now those who oppose Herald of Truth and any such form of congregational cooperation, have, quite sincerely in most cases, "gone to seed" in using this "no example" argument. Every such argument which they make is made by the anti-class… group." (p. 166).
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> "This is where you are going to have to make up your mind as to where you stand, and I appeal to you to think long time before being stampeded into extremism by a radical doctrine that crusades under the name of keeping the church sound, but is actually headed into the same results as those of the anti-Sunday school and Ketcherside-Garrett groups." (p. 171)

Meyer's Argument: Those who oppose the Herald of Truth are making the same arguments as the anti-Sunday school proponents (and must therefore be wrong).

Meyer correctly observed what many who were opposed to the Herald of Truth failed to realize: The arguments used by Roy Cogdill and others were essentially the same arguments used against Sunday school classes. In classic digressive fashion, Meyer felt he had answered the issue by merely labeling those opposed to Sunday schools and the Herald of Truth as "Antis". Unfortunately for Brother Meyer, the linking of the two topics did not and does not prove the Scripturalness of either Sunday school classes or Herald of Truth.

What Brother Meyer failed to realize is that Bible silence forbids rather than permits (Colossians 3:17). If Scripture does not authorize a practice, it is to be rejected. Quoting passages that authorize teaching (such as Matthew 28:19-20) does not make void the rules for how the teaching is to take place (1 Corinthians 14) or how

the church is supposed to accomplish its task (1 Corinthians 3:10; 2 Timothy 1:13-14).

Argument #2:

> "But before you are deceived by that line of reasoning, be sure that you are not driven to extremism by extreme pressing of a true principle. And mark this: when brethren do this, they wind up by taking positions or urging principles that are not true. **Press a true principle to an untrue extreme, and you will the manufacture untrue principles.**" (p. 166)

Meyer's Argument: "Press a true principle to an untrue extreme, and you will the manufacture untrue principles."

Meyer's second argument appears to be an attack on logic. Truth cannot be pressed into error. Truth can be abandoned in favor of error, but truth cannot be taken to untrue extremes. Asking for a Bible examples or patterns that support Sunday school classes or the Herald of Truth program is no more extreme than requiring such a pattern for baptism or communion (Colossians 3:17). Labeling a thing as "extreme" does not prove it to be unscriptural.

Argument #3:

> "For example, they argue that when Homewood church, Birmingham, with which I labor, sends money to Highland church in Abilene, TX., to help support our national gospel broadcast, The Herald of Truth, our congregational autonomy (independence) is violated. On the contrary, we exercise that congregational independence by deciding to send that money, by earmarking it to be sent for a specific purpose. The Highland church exercises its independence by deciding to invite churches to assist, by accepting the money, and carrying on the program with money sent for that purpose. The autonomy of no church is violated. Highland church contracts for the program and can terminate the program when thought best. But we understand that when we send our money and send it with that knowledge. Just where has any contributing church, including Highland, lost its autonomy? Only in the charges of those who continue to make these false charges and make good brethren believe such to be true." (p. 167)

Meyer's Argument: Autonomy is not violated since the money has been freely given and is earmarked for a certain work and then used for that work.

First, Meyer contradicts himself by speaking of the Herald of Truth program as an independent work of Highland Church and at the same time stating, "to help support **our** national gospel broadcast," (p. 167). To whom does the program belong? Does it belong to Highland Church or to all sponsoring churches?

Second, Meyer correctly notes autonomy has to do with independence, yet is wrong in claiming Highland Church was maintaining its independence while conducting the Herald of Truth program. Meyer himself notes this fact later when he states, "assisting Highland with a program which those brethren found themselves able to carry on in part, but for which they need help maintaining in its entirety." (p. 169). Highland Church, though full of good intentions, bit off more than it could chew when attempting to air a television program on 62 channels and reach an audience of 10 million people. When a church starts asking 1,000 churches to donate $27 per week to their program, they are creating a dependent work. Whether Highland church was dependent on 1,000 churches, or 100 churches, or 1 church makes little difference other than magnifying the dependence. Dependence is dependence regardless of severity. The fact that Highland Church had to settle for beginning 50 television programs rather than 62 emphasizes they were dependent and unable to act independently of a brotherhood.

In extreme situations a congregation may be forced to become dependent on other congregations (such as the Judean churches in 2 Corinthians 8), but such a situation is a far cry from creating dependency through a national television program. There is a difference between a congregation suffering unavoidable dependence (2 Corinthians 8) and a congregation creating debt and expecting the brotherhood to tote the note for them. When congregations decide to take on a work, they must "count the cost, whether they have *enough* to finish *it."* (Luke 14:28).

Lastly, halfway through his argument on autonomy, Meyer switched from discussing Highland Church's independence to discussing her ability to self-govern. Both independence and self-government are a part of autonomy, yet independence and self-government are not the same thing. Here is why the distinction between independence and self-government must be maintained: A congregation cannot scripturally choose to become dependent upon another congregation and at the same time claim autonomy. When a church chooses to undertake a work greater than her ability and then requests assistance of accomplishing said work, she is not acting autonomously.

Argument #4:

> "Then they charge that Highland church is turned into a missionary society, and that contributing churches are sending their money to such an organization. Wrong. The difference is this: a missionary society is a board of men, members of various congregations, over the country, banded into an organization outside of and separate and apart from a congregation **to do the work of the church, in competition with the church**. But Highland

> church is not such an organization, but is a congregation under the oversight of its elders, according to New Testament authorization. (Acts 20:17,28; 14:23) So, in supporting this great program of blanketing our nation, and many adjacent nations, with the gospel, you are not sending money to a missionary society, but to a congregation." (p. 167)

Meyer's Argument: Herald of Truth does not operate as a Missionary Society.

First, even if it could be argued that Herald of Truth was not a Missionary Society in the 50's and 60's, it is freely admitted it is such today. Thus, those who opposed Herald of Truth on the grounds of where it would lead have been justified by time.

Second, it is impossible for a single congregation to scripturally and independently maintain a work that spans 468 radio stations and 152 television programs. Such an endeavor requires organization in the areas where it is being broadcast that is beyond the scope of a single congregation. To argue such is possible is to argue a single church can successfully (and scripturally) conduct mission efforts in 468+ cities each week all on its own.

When a substructure greater or smaller than the local congregation begins to be established and aids in or accomplishes the work of the congregation, a missionary society is being formed. Such was the case with the Herald of Truth program and brethren who recognized such digression were to be commended.

Third, though Meyer correctly defined a missionary society, he misrepresented the issue by stating, "But Highland Church is not such an organization, but is a congregation under the oversight of its elders, according to New Testament authorization." No one was arguing Highland Church was a missionary society, but rather they had formed a missionary society of which they were head; there is a difference between the two statements.

When a single congregation receives money to do a work greater than their ability to independently maintain, and is forced to organize or coordinate with several other congregations in order to get "their" work accomplished, a missionary society has been formed to compete with the work of the local congregation. God designed each church to complete its work independently, rather than as part of a super-structure. When a church attempts to do a work larger than its ability, autonomy will be forfeited and a missionary society (however great or small) will be established.

As time unfolded, the Highland Church grew tired of operating a program as large as what Herald of Truth had become. As a result they established Herald of Truth as an independent organization under its own oversight and in charge of its own funding. The end result was merely a solidification of what had long been established. Make no mistake; a missionary society had existed for a long time before Highland Church openly admitted its existence.

Argument #5:

> "Then some of them charge that Herald of Truth is separate from the church, because for it Highland church, in Abilene, TX., has a separate bank account, a separate treasurer, and with one elder delegated to supervise it. They seem to forget that congregations often employ this practice for special projects. For example, when Homewood congregation launched a project looking ultimately to the building of our second and "main" building, we created a separate building fund account, and with one brother in charge of that fund. That money was kept separate from our general fund, and the general fund treasurer never touched a dime of it. That wasn't because we lacked confidence in our general fund treasurer. On the contrary, his job was a big one, and this treasureship for the building fund was to be a big one. Further, to keep the two separate not only spread work among treasurers, instead of overloading one, but it simplified bookkeeping. Too, we kept before the people that every penny which went into the building fund would go for that purpose, and could be spent for nothing else. That helped to establish confidence and increased incentive. Only after the building was finished and duly financed did we abolish the separate fund and vacate the office of a separate building fund treasurer. While we had that plan, did that mean that our building fund was separate from the Homewood church? That our treasurer for that fund was separate? Did that mean that such fund constituted a separate organization? That is **all** that the separate Herald of Truth fund in Highland church operation means… The foregoing Homewood practice has been standard with congregations, and it is not questioned in any quarter." (p. 167-168)

Meyer's 1st Argument: Highland church has a separate account for the Herald of Truth program, but this is no different than having a separate building project fund.

Meyer argued that when congregations sent money to Highland Church for the Herald of Truth program, the money belonged to Highland Church and not Herald of Truth. The natural question would then be: Could Highland Church use the money sent to her for any purpose she deemed worthy? Or, must money sent for airing the Herald of Truth program only be spent on the program? If the program were to end, must Highland give their money back to sponsoring congregations, or are they free to roll it over into another fund?

Earlier, Meyer acknowledged his home congregation of Homewood sent money "earmarked" for the Herald of Truth program to Highland Church. Question: If the money belongs to Highland church, what business does Homewood have in telling them how to spend it?

When one congregation sent money to another congregation in the New Testament, it was for the sake of a temporary need with the concept of completion in mind rather than an unending burden (2 Corinthians 8:10-15). The Herald of Truth fund could not and cannot be classified as a temporary need; it was and is both ongoing and a want rather than a "need".

The problem with Meyer's argument is that a church's independent building fund does not parallel with the dependent Herald of Truth fund. Had Meyer paralleled a dependent building fund with Herald of Truth's dependent fund, he would have been onto something (however unscriptural both sides of the parallel might have been).

Meyer's 2nd Argument: How the money is separated for Herald of Truth is how we have always done things and must therefore be right.

One of the greatest tragedies of the church is its willingness to base current practices on tradition rather than Scripture. Arguing how something has always been done is no answer for a "Thus saith the Lord" (Isaiah 45; Colossians 3:17).

Argument #6:

> "We are carrying on our own program, and assisting Highland with a program which those brethren found themselves able to carry on in part, but for which they need help maintaining in its entirety." (p.169)

Meyer's Argument: We are completing our own work and assisting Highland church with hers, though she makes her own decisions.

Question: Why must Meyer clarify his congregation is completing its own work only to admit that Highland Church is not completing hers? Why clarify one congregation is operating independently if such does not matter?

Furthermore, Meyer's statement begs the question of how much of their own work Highland Church was carrying. If it takes 1,000 churches to make a weekly commitment to begin a work, it is questionable how much of the load the "owning" church is carrying.

The Bottom Line:

The Herald of Truth was and is an abandonment of the Biblical pattern and the creation of a monumental state of dependency. The end did not and does not justify the means. Division occurred because brethren recognized a departure from the biblical pattern, though they refused to see it in other areas (Sunday school) where the same arguments were applicable.

May the Lord's people learn from and remember the error of the Highland Church and the Herald of Truth program. May congregations recognize their obligation to do all they can for the cause of Christ, yet not over-extend themselves beyond what they are able (2 Corinthians 8:12) or what is written (1 Corinthians 4:6).