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Missionary and Benevolent Societies



By

Eugene Britnell
Tuckerman, Ark.

Parallel: "With like direction or tendency; like in essential parts. Anything equal to or resembling another in all essential particulars." — Webster

MISSIONARY AND BENEVOLENT SOCIETIES

In their efforts to defend some of the benevolent works in the brotherhood, some good brethren vehemently deny that there is a parallel between the Benevolent Societies or Associations among us and the Missionary Society. So far as I know, no one contends that they are parallel in every respect, but as I shall show in this study, they are parallel in enough ways that they must stand or fall together. By Benevolent Society, I mean the organizations separate from the church which provide and supervise the means and methods involved in benevolent work, just as by Missionary Society I mean the organization (stripped of any abuse) separate from the church to provide and supervise the means and methods in evangelism. With our terms defined and our aim clearly stated, I invite the reader to a consideration of the following points of similarity between a Missionary Society and a Benevolent Society.

1. They **both** originated in the mind of man.

2. They **both** perform a work of the church.

3. **Both** are organizations separate and apart from the church.

4. **Both** solicit and accept contributions from churches for their support.

5. **Both** are composed of a President or Superintendent, Board of Directors, Secretary and Treasurer, etc.

6. **Both** are organizations larger than the local church but smaller than the universal church.

7. **Neither** is under the oversight of nor amenable to any church or eldership.

8. **Both** have their own constitution, by-laws and rules.

9. **Both** are organizations designed to give greater efficiency in the mission of the church.

10. **Both** assume the oversight and responsibility of portions of the Lord's treasury.

11. **Both** emerge in the sight of the world as official functioning organs of churches of Christ.

12. They **both** propose to do what individual congregations cannot do themselves, thus supplying a missing link in God's work.

13. For authority to exist, **both** claim to operate in the realm of expediency.

14. **Both** cause division in the church.

15. They **both** have to provide the means and methods involved in doing their work.

16. **Both** are organizations to activate the universal church. I am not saying they have done so, but the principle by which they operate will certainly allow it.

In view of these sixteen points of similarity (and there may be others), I am unable to see how anyone could deny that there is a parallel between the two Societies. About the only way in which they differ is in the work each is designed to do. One operates in the field of evangelism and the other in the field of benevolence. Actually, the Benevolent Societies are often a combination of Benevolent and Missionary Societies, for some of them send out young men every Lord's Day to preach the gospel. Someone may be ready to deny that the organizations (superintendents, directors, etc.) that provide and

oversee the brotherhood homes for widows, orphans and the aged are Benevolent Societies or Associations. If they are not, how would it be possible to form a Benevolent Society or Association? Even their Charters say they are.

Others Have Seen the Parallel

Just to show that I am not the only one who holds or has held this position, I now refer to a few of the many men who have taken the same position and the works wherein their statements are found. I know that this does not prove my position to be right, but it is worthy of consideration, anyway.

C. R. Nichol, **C. R. Nichol a Preacher of Righteousness**, p. 247.

Homer Hailey, **Attitudes and Consequences**.

G. K. Wallace, **Gospel Guardian**, May 24, 1951.

F. B. Srygley, **Gospel Advocate**, Jan. 11, 1934.

Guy N. Woods, **A. C. C. Lectures**, 1939.

Jack Meyer, **Gospel Visitor**, Nov. 20, 1952.

There are hundreds and thousands of gospel preachers, elders, and Christians who recognize the similarity between the two organizations.

Parallel Arguments

I now call attention to the fact that the arguments used both now and in the past in an effort to defend the two organizations are **basically the same** and many times **identical**. To prove this, I shall show the parallel between the arguments being made by brethren today in their efforts to defend the Benevolent Societies, and those made by J. B.

Briney in his defense of the Missionary Society in the Otey - Briney Debate in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1908.

1. Brethren frequently contend that God commanded us to care for orphans, widows, and other indigent people but didn't tell us **how**. Now note Briney's argument. "I stated that the Saviour said go, and that I said there was silence as to how, leaving the brethren to decide as to methods and details in regard to the matter — leaving them largely to exercise their own judgment with reference to it." (**Otey - Briney Debate**, p. 287.) The issue then was not and is not now over **how** but rather **what organization**.

2. Brethren often find other "parallels" to the Benevolent Societies — organizations such as railroads, publishing houses, hospitals, etc., from which the church may buy services when needed. So did Briney. "This is to say, they form an organization, and they go upon business principles, and the purpose of this organization is to preach the Gospel by means of this periodical." (**Debate**, p. 163.) On page 165, Briney compared the Society to a railroad.

3. Some argue that without the brotherhood Benevolent Organizations many small congregations cannot do what God requires of them in caring for the needy. Hear Briney on this as he defends the Society. "Now, is there any objection to those small congregations co-operating with each other? I ask my friend how small congregations that are not able to send a missionary each are to co-operate? How are they to take part in this work? Now, the society provides for that. They co-operate. (And I suppose those who

d' didn't believe in the M. S. didn't believe in co-operation. — E.B.) They send their mites, as it were, to men who will see that their contributions reach men and women that are at work on the field." (**Debate**, p. 199.) Evidently he did not realize that responsibility is determined by ability and opportunity. If those small congregations preached the gospel to the extent of their ability and opportunity, they did all God expected of them. Small congregations today can fulfill their obligations in benevolence without acting through some Society, and if one has more needy than it can care for other congregations can and will assist.

4. Some want to know what we who oppose the Benevolent Societies are doing in the field of benevolence. They seem to think that if we are wrong or inconsistent that makes the Benevolent Society right. I've never thought that a man could prove that he would be saved by proving that someone else will be lost. I am sure the work of many who oppose Benevolent Associations would compare favorably with some who claim to believe in them. From the way the present Benevolent Societies continually plead for support one would think they are not being supported too well by those who claim to support them. Let that be as it may, here is Briney's effort along that line of argument. "I would be very glad to know of him and those who sympathize with him in his ideas, if they are doing anything worthy of the name in mission work. I should be very glad, indeed, to consider the figures. Where are their missionaries? What are the fields? What is the work that they have accomplished?" (**Debate**, p. 195.) Do you suppose

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The Issue Then Was Not

1. Simply a matter of "how."
2. Should the gospel be preached?
3. Was the church obligated?
4. Could churches co-operate?
5. Could a "place" be maintained?
6. Systematic arrangement.

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The Issue Then Was

Could churches
build and maintain

Missionary Societies

through which to do their
work of Evangelism?

The Issue Today Is

Can churches
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Benevolent Societies

through which to do their
work of Benevolence?

that Brother Otey wasn't preaching the gospel at all at that time?

5. Many point to the work being done by the Benevolent Societies as justification for their existence. They sometimes ask if people will be lost for helping those widows and orphans through such an arrangement. Such arguments are to create prejudice, and are based upon the erroneous idea that the end justifies the means. If simply doing a good work will make an organization scriptural, what is wrong with the Baptist and Catholic benevolent organizations and the Salvation Army? They do a "good work." May churches of Christ contribute to them? But Briney made the same kind of argument. "I want to know of him, and I have a right to know, and so do you, whether or not he thinks that the Lord frowns or smiles upon that work? Which? Is it pleasing or displeasing to God? There are 1109 of these churches." (**Debate**, p. 217.) Now, brethren, how would you have answered? Will they be lost for preaching the gospel (saving souls) through the Missionary Society?

6. Some say the Benevolent Society is just a systematic plan or arrangement for doing work. But Briney said the same about the Missionary Society. "My friend says, 'through the church, the one body.' I say that, too, but I deny that these societies are anything else than agencies employed by the church, the one body, to carry on this work systematically." (**Debate**, p. 284.)

So by these arguments Briney thought he proved the Missionary Society to be scriptural. Did he? No, a thousand times no! And to this I'm sure all faithful brethren will

agree. How then can they prove the Benevolent Societies scriptural by the use of the same arguments? One may contend as long as he pleases that there is no parallel between the two, but so long as two organizations depend upon the same arguments in an effort to defend themselves, it seems to me there must be a parallel along the line somewhere. Let no one accuse me of not believing in caring for the needy. That would be just as false and absurd as to have accused Brother Otey and all who oppose the Missionary Society today of not believing in preaching the gospel.

Objections Reviewed

In some of the current periodicals, tracts and sermons, I note that some brethren are offering what they seem to believe are unanswerable arguments designed to prove that we who claim to see a parallel between the Societies don't really believe they are parallel. They say that we are inconsistent; that by our action and teaching we show that we don't believe what we teach concerning the Societies. Some say such a charge is not against our honesty, but rather against our logic or lack of such. In order to make this study as complete as possible, I would like to present these objections to our position and show that we do not believe what some charge, and that these objections do not disprove our claims that the Societies are parallel in many ways.

1. They say we do not believe they are parallel, because we teach that individuals may contribute to the Benevolent Societies but deny that individuals may contribute to the Missionary Society. Personally, I do not

believe I can rightfully and consistently contribute to a Benevolent Society which receives contributions from churches. I shall illustrate what I believe about this by the colleges. I believe men have a right to build and operate a school in which the Bible is taught as a private enterprise and an adjunct to the home. I believe individual Christians may contribute to such a work, and I have done so. But should such a school begin to contend that it was doing the work of the church and begin soliciting and accepting contributions from churches, then it is wrong, and I can no longer support it as an individual.

2. Another objection concerns buying services. They say we believe a church may buy services from a Benevolent Society but not from a Missionary Society. This argument is hypothetical, for I know of no service which the church may now buy from a Missionary Society. But if a Missionary Society offered something for sale which churches needed and could rightfully use, they could buy from the Society on the same basis that they could buy Bibles from the American Bible Society. Churches cannot make a contribution to the Bible Society or a "brotherhood" publishing house, but they may buy services from either. And such would not necessarily be an endorsement of that particular organization. I once heard of a congregation buying a building from the Baptists with the understanding that they were to paint the building. That was buying products and services from the Baptist Church. Was it wrong? I don't think so. Could that congregation make a contribution to the Baptists? No! The only reason I wouldn't advise buying from the

Missionary Society (if it were possible) is that they might use the profit in promulgating error. But after all, couldn't such be done by other organizations from which the church may and must buy services? I am not ready to accept the position that churches may buy services from all Benevolent Societies, but let us keep in mind that there is a difference between buying services and making a contribution.

3. Then there is the disfellowship argument. They say we are inconsistent because we fellowship brethren who believe in and support the Benevolent Societies but refuse to fellowship those who believe in the Missionary Society. Of course, there are many things which would forbid our fellowshiping the majority of those who believe in the Missionary Society. Personally, I'd rather talk about unity and fellowship than even mention or think of a cleavage in the body of Christ. We can have fellowship, and 1 John 1:7 tells us exactly how to do so. I'm much more interested in solving our problems than in disfellowship. Didn't loyal brethren fellowship the instrumental music and Missionary Society brethren for many years while trying to get them to change their course? Finally, because of an **attitude** those men had toward the Bible which led them to accept many other errors and innovations in addition to the music and Society, and their future course was clearly marked, division was inevitable. We hope and pray that history does not repeat itself.

But those making this charge are as guilty on this point as they say we are. They charge that we are "hobby riders" and "church splitters" and Romans 16:17 clearly demands the

disfellowshipping of such individuals, yet they fellowship us. At least, most of them do. They have also charged that our position is similar to a part of Roman Catholicism. One Benevolent Society advocate recently wrote: "The Catholics try to make a civil government out of the church. Some of our anti-orphan-home people would try to make a home out of the church." The last sentence in that statement is false! I have never seen nor heard of the man who contended that the church was a home, or who was trying to make a home out of the church. And I know of no one who is "anti-orphan-home." But the point is, they fellowship us and refuse to fellowship the Catholics. I think the reader can see the fallacy of this charge.

4. Another objection offered concerns the right of the Societies to exist. Some say we don't believe they are parallel because we contend that homes for widows and orphans have a right to exist while denying that the Missionary Society has such a right. In this study, I am not trying to parallel the Missionary Society with **a home** for widows, orphans, and the aged. The parallel is between the Missionary Society and the Benevolent Society which provides and supervises the home. In both cases, the work (preaching and caring for the needy) is one thing and the organizations which provide and supervise the work is another. Let us keep this in mind. Now the Benevolent Society itself, like the Missionary Society, has no right to exist. Both are human organizations, and this is why they are still parallel. The care of the needy necessitates a home or homes. Any one knows that. But that home should be provided and supervised by the church (un-

der the elders who are doing their own work) if it is an obligation of the church, and not by some human organization.

Consider these thoughts concerning preaching the gospel and benevolence in general. It is the mission of the church to preach the gospel, and this obligation rests on no other organized body of people in the world. The Missionary Society exists only to do that which peculiarly is the responsibility of the church. It has no right to exist. But benevolent organizations may exist; that is, organized bodies (Red Cross, March of Dimes, etc.) to function in the realm of benevolence without intruding necessarily into the peculiar province of the church. Why? Because material benevolence is not **the** mission of the church. The church is not designed peculiarly and exclusively to function in the field of benevolence. But it is thus designed in the field of evangelism. The care of the needy is a duty of a general scope and nature in society. Many organizations exist for the care of the needy, and they are not interfering with the mission of the church.

The church, God's organization, with its bishops and deacons (Phil. 1:1) is to provide and oversee the works of evangelism and benevolence in which the church is obligated. May we all continue to work, pray, and study God's Book to the end that unity shall prevail in the body of Christ. "Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus unto all generations for ever and ever. Amen." (Eph. 3:20, 21.)

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