

## Classic Writers Series of Gospel Tidings

This book is the first of hopefully several volumes of the collected articles of some of the early, seminal writers of the Gospel Tidings. Gospel Tidings was founded by G. B. Shelburne publishing its first issue in 1936. The publication entered its 78<sup>th</sup> year in 2010 and continues under the current editorship of Bill Adcox, preacher for the 50<sup>th</sup> St. Church of Christ in Oklahoma City, OK. Previous editors included W. J. Leach, Baxter Loe, Jim Shafer, Larry Branum, Gaylon Wright, Jim Bullock and Travis Allen.

The paper has played a major role in providing teaching and direction for those churches generally known as Non Sunday School Churches of Christ. While consistently advocating their position on the question of the Sunday School, over the years the various editors have generally sought to model the scriptural ideal of “speaking the truth in love,” presenting without apology their understanding of the truth and at the same time seeking to be a force for love and unity among brethren. That irenic spirit is exemplified in the following quote by Gospel Tidings’ founding editor, G. B. Shelburne:

*To sum it up, then, I am a conscientious objector to the Sunday School. I cannot foster it or encourage it in any way. Neither can I approve the course of those who have “lined up” behind this practice... **But I am not making it a hobby; nor will I do so in order to please the brethren and maintain a standing. I refuse to be a party to any sect, anti-Sunday School or otherwise.** I plead not for carelessness about obedience to the commands of the Lord nor a stifling of anyone’s conscience, but for mutual respect, reason and tolerance among brethren in the Lord while we prayerfully study our differences together and endeavor to restore that unity for which Christ prayed. **Here I stand** (Gospel Tidings, April, 1947).*

In that statement Shelburne was expressing the convictions taught to him by his own spiritual mentor, N. L. Clark who wrote:

*Brethren, I implore you to think prayerfully, do nothing that is inspired by prejudice, enmity, or personal preference to the detriment of any other man. Contend earnestly for what you believe, and be sure to allow others the same privilege. Above all, do not try to make a law for the Church of Christ where he has given liberty. (Gospel Tidings, June, 1947)*

Had such counsel been better heeded, there would perhaps have been less division among Churches of Christ. But division did come to the movement, separating believers into various camps with little or no exposure to one another. One of the many unfortunate consequences of that was that many gifted and insightful teachers in the Kingdom were and continue to be largely unknown outside the boundaries of their own limited fellowships. With the publication of the first installment of the Classic Writers series, it is hoped that greater exposure will be given to these early writers of the movement.

## Preface

My family moved to Lubbock, Texas in the fall of 1961. I was six years old at the time, and barely aware of the man who would stand in the pulpit and preach to me for most of the Sundays from then until I graduated from high school 12 years later. Reflecting back on those years I do not remember so much any of his sermons as I do his presence in the pulpit. He was a powerful and engaging speaker whose sermons took on the character of a dramatic performance. My parents told me that I once described listening to N.E. as going to a Shakespearean play with N.E. speaking all the parts.

I say I don't remember specific sermons so much and yet as I have compiled and read these 155 articles written by N.E. for the Gospel Tidings, I am struck at how much I must have been listening during those years after all, for time after time I have come across thoughts, insights even phrases that were familiar, some of which I had thought might even have been my own original thoughts, yet here they are in N.E.'s sermons. I have little doubt there are hundreds of other preachers who might make the same observation as they read this book, for N.E.'s writing and preaching was hugely influential in the lives of at least two generations of preachers among the Non Sunday School Churches of Christ.

N. E. was born March 17, 1923 in Portland, Tennessee, moving to Nashville seven years later. He preached his first sermon at the age of eleven and held his first revival meeting at the age of 15. After graduating from Vanderbilt University in 1944, N.E. and his wife Ruth worked with churches in Brookhaven, Mississippi where N.E. also taught psychology and speech at Whitworth College. When the 4<sup>th</sup> and D Church of Christ in Lubbock moved to their new location at 22<sup>nd</sup> and Memphis Avenue in the summer of 1958, there was interest in bringing in someone to preach for the congregation. George Hughes, who had brought his family to Texas from Arkansas, knew of N.E. and his recommendation that he be invited was agreed upon. The Rhodes family moved to Lubbock to begin a ministry which would last for 16 years. N.E.'s move to Lubbock was controversial however, as the 4<sup>th</sup> and D/Memphis Avenue congregation had been a church plant by the 17<sup>th</sup> & N congregation, whose elders disapproved of the use of a "located preacher." That was perhaps one of the reasons why in addition to preaching, N.E. also worked as a salesman at Radio Lab, a TV and appliance store owned by Memphis Avenue elders Herb Griffith and Kline Nall. Still, as a consequence of Rhodes' coming, the 17<sup>th</sup> & N church felt compelled to sever fellowship between the two congregations.

Later N.E. would preach at the Pleasant St. Church of Christ in Springdale, Arkansas and then the North 50<sup>th</sup> St. church in Fort Smith, Arkansas where he was serving when he passed away in April of 2001. Over the years N.E. held meetings throughout the country, sometimes as many as fifteen a year. N.E. and Ruth's life was hit by tragedy when their daughter, Pattye, who had

recently moved to California to continue her career as a school teacher, died in a car accident in 1978. Seven years later Ruth would pass away in 1985. N.E. married again to Betty Watson with whom he lived and ministered until his death. N.E.'s son Mike lives in Lubbock with his wife Mary.

As well known as he was for his preaching, N.E. had as much or more influence through his writing, contributing over 200 articles for the *Christian Appeal* and the *Gospel Tidings*. At a time when a liberal arts college education was rare among preachers in Churches of Christ of all stripes, this Vanderbilt educated preacher became a model for many not only in their preaching but in their thinking. N.E.'s messages rarely addressed the multiple arguments which divided brethren in the Churches of Christ, but focused instead on larger and more substantial topics such as the nature of God, the incarnation of Jesus, the work of the Holy Spirit as well as addressing the many challenges to faith generated by modern science and philosophy.

N.E. preached and wrote extensively about the critical role of prayer in the spiritual life and the nature of the Holy Spirit's work in the transformation and sanctification of believers. Because of his already established reputation for teaching in these areas, he became a natural mentor to many who were re-discovering these important truths as the *Charismatic Movement* began to peak in the early '70s. He had been influenced by the Christian author Glenn Clark, whose books *The Soul's Sincere Desire* and *I Will Lift Up Mine Eyes*, written in the thirties, were popular treatises on prayer and spirituality.

N. E. also was known for his powerful funeral sermons. In them he would teach about heaven, emphasizing especially its "physical" nature, a return to the physical paradise of Eden, contrasting the commonly assumed ethereal, ghost-like existence. The following excerpt is from a sermon given in 1994 at the memorial service of Kyle Gage, the young son of evangelist Scott Gage and his wife LaDonna. In classic Lewisonian style, N.E. pictured the glory of the life to come as he answers his hypothetical skeptics:

*"You don't think that the tree of life is a real tree, do you? Aren't the tree of life and the river of life just figures?" Yes, praise the Lord, they are probably figures but that doesn't mean they are not real. Remember that if they are figures they are God's figures. The tree of life is more real than any tree you have ever seen down here. Its fruit is far more real than the most delicious fruit you have ever put in your mouth. The finest fruit you ever tasted was but a pale imitation of what Kyle now puts in his mouth. A figure is not an unreal expression of something more real. The figures in the Bible are attempts to describe something so far beyond our experience that it just won't describe. When you look at last upon the river in which Kyle now bathes his feet you will say, "No, that's not just a river. That is liquid light. That's not just water. That is freshness and glory taking form." And the tree of life is not just a tree. It is life and growth and joy in a visible expression. Its fruit is not just fruit. It is radiant health and well-being so real you can actually taste it. The songs*

*of the angels are not just words in rhythmic arrangement. They contain the meaning and purpose of music. Where did we ever get the idea that heaven was a vague, less concrete, less solid place than earth? How did we come by the folly that the spiritual realm was less solid than the physical?*

After hearing N.E.'s images of loved ones splashing in heaven's river of life or swinging from the branches of the tree of life, it was not uncommon to hear people express their desire to go right now. It is appropriate that the final entry in this collection of N. E.'s articles is the full sermon excerpted from above. Scott Gage kept the transcript of the sermon and seven years later would preach it himself, this time at N.E.'s own funeral service!

N. E. had a photographic memory. At one time I recall being told he was able to quote entire books of the Bible by memory. I remember on many occasions his entertaining at church parties with his amazing ability to quote on demand the lyrical ballads of poets like James Russell Lowell or extended passages from Shakespeare. Often N.E. would quote from authors like Milton, Tennyson and other literary giants in his sermons. As much as any one author though, he seemed most influenced by the venerable C. S. Lewis. N.E. once told me he had read everything Lewis had written at least twice and I can remember many times he would refer to Lewis or use one of Lewis' illustrations in his sermons. Largely due to N.E.'s influence I had read several of Lewis' books before finishing high school.

Beginning with his first article, "The Kingdom of Paul" written in 1951, N.E. was a regular writer for Gospel Tidings contributing as many as five articles a year and often writing extended series, the longest of which was his 35 article series on the apostle Peter. Reading these articles it is clear why N.E. enjoyed a reputation for being an engaging thinker, an effective communicator and a faithful preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is my prayer that by making this collection available, the teaching and influence of N.E. Rhodes will be extended to yet another generation of disciples.

I am thankful for all those who helped me to locate many articles that were not available in the collection of Gospel Tidings held at Quaker Avenue Church of Christ in Lubbock. I also want to thank Kenneth Hawley, Carey Jones and Lisa Langford for their assistance in editing the final manuscript. Finally I want to thank Mike Rhodes and Betty Rhodes for their permission to make these articles available in book form, as well as Bill Adcox, editor of Gospel Tidings. It is our hope that additional publications might be forthcoming which will provide the writings of other notable contributors to the Gospel Tidings throughout its years.

David Langford  
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