

A Strange Criterion for Doctrine

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Several years ago I attended a debate on the issue of marriage, divorce, and remarriage. In the debate one of the antagonists foolishly contended that *adultery* merely means, “breaking the marriage covenant,” rather than sexual infidelity. Besides the fact that this assertion utterly denies the meaning of the word *adultery*, the consequence of this doctrine allows (and encourages) couples who are living in adulterous marriages to continue to do so, under the impression that God is pleased with their behavior. Those thus deluded, thereby continuing their illicit relationships, will face the Lord in Judgment as impenitent adulterers. Jesus’ words on this subject stand firm: “And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and he that marrieth her when she is put away committeth adultery” (Mat. 19:9).

A preacher friend whom I had not seen in several years was also at the debate. As we visited during an intermission, he indicated his agreement with the brother in the debate who was advocating the aforementioned erroneous and spiritually fatal position. He explained that he had adopted this view because there are so many people in the world who have been divorced and who are in second, third, or fourth marriages. He “reasoned” that we will soon run out of people to whom we can teach the Gospel if we do not adopt a more liberal view of Jesus’ teaching than that which brethren at one time taught (correctly so) almost universally.

I immediately responded that the immoral condition of society is hardly the right criterion for determining Truth and error. Although he had just given this as the reason for his liberal view, he admitted the truth of what I said. However, he then began to try to blame what he called our “traditional view” (read “correct view”) of Matthew 19:9 and related passages on the decision of some ancient church council, parroting one of the “arguments” of the false teacher participating in the debate. This brother indeed evinced a strange criterion for determining doctrine.

I have long suspected that the departure in recent years of so many from what false teachers enjoy calling the “traditional view” on divorce and remarriage has been due more to emotional factors than to any others. The preacher friend mentioned above actually admitted that raw emotion (sympathy for adulterers) had led him to exchange the Truth for error on this

subject. The attempts of such folk, though mighty and loud, to credit their newfound doctrine to scholarship or to only “recently discovered” information, have been vain.

We should avoid sweeping generalizations and motive judgments. However, it seems more than mere coincidence that at least some brethren did not abandon the “traditional view” (in favor of almost any other view, regardless of its absurdity), until they themselves, a family member, or a dear friend became involved in an unscriptural marriage or wished to do so.

We should all genuinely sympathize with those who have found themselves in adulterous marriages or who have loved ones who are thus situated. We also sympathize with those who have been led to believe that their marriages are pure when they are not. However, I have little sympathy or patience for those who have had a part in inventing or propagating two dozen or more “loopholes” in an effort to circumvent the plain teaching of Matthew 19:9 on this issue. Some of them are modern counterparts of the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus’ day, of whom He said: “Woe unto you,...for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he is become so, ye make him twofold more a son of hell than yourselves” (Mat. 23:15).

The subject of marriage, divorce, and remarriage is not the only one concerning which some have determined their convictions or behavior on the basis of emotional rather than rational and Scriptural factors. In 1985 a “Unity Forum” involving some of our brethren and men from the Independent Christian Church (ICC) convened in Tulsa, Oklahoma, hosted by the Garnett Road Church of Christ. One of the ICC men stated on that occasion that his brethren do not accept the argument against instrumental music in worship that is based upon Leviticus 10:1-2:

And Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took each of them his censer, and put fire therein, and laid incense thereon, and offered strange fire before Jehovah, which he had not commanded them. And there came forth fire from before Jehovah, and devoured them, and they died before Jehovah.

The “argument” to which the ICC men object is that God is just as displeased with “strange music” today as he was with “strange fire” in their day, and for the same reason—it is unauthorized. God said as much about instrumental music in New Testament worship as He did about Nadab and Abihu’s fire—nothing whatsoever in both cases. Thus if one is unauthorized, both are.

It is not hard to understand why the ICC folk do not accept this argument and the principle behind it. If I advocated using instruments in worship and was determined to justify

them, I would likewise reject that argument. The preacher at the host congregation (one claiming to be one of us, mind you), responded to the ICC men that he would no longer use Leviticus 10:1-2 in discussing with them the use of instruments in worship, since they do not accept the obvious application of this passage. Such is not only a strange and sorry basis for deciding one's doctrine – it is a damnable basis.

Let us suppose that armed robbery becomes so prevalent in society that we have difficulty finding someone to teach who is not guilty of such behavior. Shall we change the command of Jesus, "Repent or perish" (Luke 13:3), to accommodate this sin? If someone in my immediate family becomes an inveterate liar, shall I then decide that lying is not really lying? May I redefine the term, and put the Word of God through all sorts of torture so as to come up with one or more loopholes that will allow him to go right on lying, all the while believing that God is pleased? If homosexual behavior ever becomes as common as its advocates want it to be, in order to be consistent with the flawed rationalizations of the men cited above, they will have to abandon God's attitude toward it (as various denominations have already done).

The irrational positions of the two preachers I have quoted above is not one centimeter behind that of most denominational preachers and their refusal to preach the Truth on Matthew 16:18, Mark 16:16, Acts 2:38, and a host of other passages. The Benny Hinns, the Billy and Franklin Grahams, and others of their kind refuse to preach the truths declared in these passages because they know they would be completely out of step with ninety-nine percent of the world's adult populace that professes belief in God, Christ, and the Bible. Shall we allow the prevalence of doctrinal error to influence us to cease preaching on the one church of Christ and its uniqueness (as the aforementioned brother thought we should do regarding Mat. 19:9)?

The Graham types also know that most sinners would not accept the truths of the New Testament concerning those things which sinners must do in order to be saved, particularly regarding baptism. They would immediately lose their audiences if they dared preach the Bible Truth on this subject (which would translate into severe loss of revenue, of course).

Most denominational preachers are more consistent than the Tulsa preacher cited above (the one who promised not to use Lev. 10:1-2 anymore). They seem to have no problem casting aside almost any Biblical passage that gets in their way of drawing the largest crowds or the most dollars. If the Tulsa preacher is going to cease teaching the Truth found in one passage because some reject it, he may as well cease using any other passages that contain Truths which some reject. In fact, to be consistent, he **should** do so.

Like Graham and his ilk, this Tulsa preacher should have immediately ceased quoting Mark 16:16 and Acts 2:38 because the vast majority of “believers” reject their content regarding baptism. He further should have abandoned citing/quoting Genesis 1–2 as the authentic explanation of origins because atheists, humanists, and the heathen reject the creation account. He should never again quote John 14:6, setting forth the Lord Jesus as the only access to God because both Jews and Muslims reject Jesus as the only Savior. As we can see, there would soon be no passage that one can use if one travels this road to its logical end. The Bible thereby becomes useless.

When one allows anything besides the Word of God to determine one’s doctrines and practice in religion and one’s behavior, he has doomed himself ultimately to error and damnation if he does not turn back. There is but one source of Truth for the soul and spirit of man: Jesus said to His Father, “Thy word is Truth” (John 17:17). There will be but one standard of Judgment in the Last Day for all who have lived this side of Calvary. Jesus said: “The word that I spake, the same shall judge him in the last day” (John 12:48).

How tragic it has been (and continues to be) to observe some who were once among us, some of whom formerly strongly contended for the faith, but who have allowed emotional responses to the sinful practices of men to dictate their doctrine and morals. They can never be a blessing to sinners, for they provide only disastrous deceptions that give false hopes. Neither sinners nor the prevalence of a given sin must ever be allowed to determine doctrine or behavior. Rather, we must ever determine the identity of sinners – and sin – by the unalterable doctrine of Christ, and we must ever call them up to its level by faithfully living and proclaiming it.

[**Note:** I wrote this MS, and it originally appeared as an “Editorial Perspective” in the March 2003 issue of *THE GOSPEL JOURNAL*, of which I was editor at the time.]

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