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LOOKING FOR LOOPHOLES

BY EDWARD O. BRAGWELL, Sr.

A "loophole" is "an outlet, or means of escape or evasion". (*The Random House American Dictionary*)

A good sister called once to ask our opinion about her daughter's marriage. As I recall, her only daughter had married rather young and hastily to a man who had dealt her nothing but misery - even physical abuse. Unable to live in such misery, her daughter had left that wretch of a man and lived single for a time. Then she met and married this wonderful man who treated her like a queen - making both her and her mother very happy.

But there was a bit of a problem: There had been no fornication involved in the daughter's divorce from her first husband. So, the brethren where she attended services were questioning her right to be married to her present husband and it looked like they might even "withdraw fellowship" from her.

I told the mother that about all I knew to do was to read to her what the Bible says on marriage and divorce, so I read Matthew 19:1-9 to her over the phone.

Her response: "Brother Bragwell, I know that is what it SAYS - but isn't there a loophole in it somewhere."

As I hung the phone up, I thought, "I wonder just how many of us are looking at the Scriptures in this light." Are we really interested in doing the Lord's will (what the Bible says) or are we wanting to fit the Lord's will to our will by finding (or having someone find for us) a loophole? Are we willing to do what the Bible says, at all cost, or are we seeking some way to accommodate the text to the manner of life that we, our relatives, or our friends have chosen? Are we really wanting to do what the Bible really says regardless to the difficulties it may cause - or are we looking for some way to "interpret" the sacred text so that it presents few or no difficulties to our present practice? I wonder just how many of our views concerning Scripture passages are tailored to fit our situation rather than tailoring our situation to fit the passage.

The Pharisees expressed a great respect for the law of God, just as we "speak where the Bible speaks, and be silent where the Bible is silent" folks do today. But often when their practice was questionable they proved adept at finding a loophole. God's law said, "Honor your father and your mother" - but there was an exception (a loophole) in the Pharisees mind: "But you say,

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FRANK CHUMLEY, Preacher

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'Whoever says to his father and mother, "Whatsoever profit you might have received from me has been dedicated to the temple"--is released from honoring his father and mother.'... (Matt. 15:5,6-New King James Version).

We are well aware that there are times that we must "interpret" a passage that seems to say one thing on the surface but could possibly and correctly be interpreted to mean something else in order to harmonize it with other things the Bible may say on the subject. For example, Matt. 7:1 seems to say (on the surface) that it is wrong to judge another - but this presents a difficulty for us. There are other passages that plainly obligate us to "judge" others (John 7:24; 1 Cor. 5:12,13; 6:4). So, our view of Matt. 7:1 must be made to harmonize with the other passages. But, how often do we seek to make a passage harmonize, not with other passages, but with what our belief and practice already are on the matter? We must be careful.

Problems God's People Must Face & Solve In The 80's If Churches Are To Grow

By Donald Townsley

In the beginning let me state that I do not believe the Lord's church is going to be destroyed from the face of the earth, or even from American soil. I believe God cannot lie (Heb. 6:18), and He said (through Daniel) that He would set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed (Dan. 2:44; Heb. 12:28). It cannot be destroyed because we have an indestructible Word which is the seed that produces the Kingdom (Luke 8:11; 1 Pet. 1:23-25; Matt 13:19). While I believe the church can never be destroyed, I do believe that congregations may die or lose their identity (Rev. 2:5; Rev. 3:1-6). The churches that Paul, Barnabas, Silas, Luke, and Timothy established and labored with have long ceased to exist. Local churches in a given part of the world may suffer from these same problems and all go into apostacy and lose their identity as the Lord's people, or go totally out of existence.

Brethren, I believe churches of Christ in the United States do face a survival problem in this decade if we do not wake up and turn some things around! Churches of Christ have some common problems that must be realized and cursed or they will bring death to many congregations and will decrease membership in others. The 80's are not like the 40's, the 50's, the 60's, or the 70's in churches of Christ. There is a growth problem that must be faced head-on! We cannot make this problem go away by "sticking our heads in the sand" and ignoring it, not taking a "business as usual" approach. Let us take a long, hard look at ourselves NOW (1 Cor. 1:26; 2 Cor. 13:5). I don't believe there is anything pessimistic about facing facts.

We are losing ground in many congregations as faithful saints grow old and pass away. Just think of how many we are going to lose in the next ten years! In this area alone! Who will replace them as leaders and stable "pillars" in these congregations? Most of the churches of Christ in the cities have a leadership who came from rural churches where they were converted and trained. Many rural churches have died (or are dying) and are no longer converting the young and "feeding" city churches with material for leadership. And the city churches in many places are not doing that well in converting and

training new leadership either. Many congregations that have been in existence for ten or fifteen (or fifty-EOB) have no eldership -- and no immediate prospects for one! One of the great problems we face is a leadership problem, and losing our present leaders in death will compound that problem! Let us face up to this problem NOW and put forth a greater effort to encourage young family men to begin to prepare themselves to be elders in the Lord's church.

We are losing ground as the world attracts many. Many preachers have divorced their wives and have married again. Elders, deacons, song leaders, and Bible class teachers have done the same! Many members of the church are involved in illicit affairs and all kinds of other sins of the flesh. Yes, brethren, worldliness is one of the main issues we face, and it is taking its toll among us! The divorce and remarriage issue will be one of the problems we will have to deal with for years to come. The problem of worldliness must be faced and dealt with because it will have a devastating effect on congregations that do not deal with it! (Amen!-EOB).

We are losing ground as people we baptize fall by the wayside before they can become productive in the Lord's kingdom. Many cannot take tribulation and persecution that comes because of the Word. Others are overcome by the deceitfulness of riches. The love of others waxes cold because of worldliness.

We are losing ground when we are losing 63% to 75% of our young people -- and some congregations have lost the last three generations! Some of the causes for this are materialistic homes, division in the local congregation, and brethren who cannot get along with one another. This constant strife has its detrimental effect on our children. Many times we have failed in our teaching programs. There is just a combination of things that have contributed to the loss of our children to the world. This trend must be reversed if the church is to grow. We must not only teach our children the truth, but we must set the proper example by practicing those things that are taught.

Another problem we face is that men in our society are less and less interested in the gospel and the salvation of their souls. We are baptizing more women than men in many places, and if this trend is not reversed we will become a church made up of women. A church made up of women loses its financial base and has hard time supporting the preaching of the gospel. The "macho" image has caused men to be less and less interested in spiritual things. The "macho man" drinks in bars, wears his shirt open to his belt buckle (I have seen a "modern" preacher or two about one button above the buckle-EOB), and seduces all the women he can! His temper is hot, and he will break your head if you get in his way! Now isn't this a terrible "role model" for our young men?! Our young men need to see fathers and grandfathers who strive to do the will of the Lord, and be taught to honor and respect them. They need to be taught that real strength comes from striving to follow the example of our Master, Jesus Christ.

BASIC PROBLEMS IN CHURCHES OF CHRIST TODAY

1. *Zero-growth in many places.* The solution to this problem is for every member to be committed to teaching someone else the gospel (without waiting for someone to insert them into an organized effort-EOB). When the church is busy teaching publicly and privately it will grow (Acts 5:42; 20:20).

2. *Fragmentation (or division).* Division over non-doctrinal issues. The cause of Christ of late years has (in many places) been disgraced by brethren biting and devouring one another! Division is very unpleasant, hinders progress and growth, and leads to sins of all sorts (James 3:14-18; Gal. 5:15). Fragmentation discourages weak members and they drift away from the church. It

disturbs children and keeps young people from obeying the gospel. Our society has produced many self-ambitious men who love to have the preeminence among the brethren, and if they don't get their way division follows. This fragmentation over non-doctrinal issues must stop, and these "Diotrepheses" must be dealt with and exposed for what they really are (3 John 9-10).

3. *Materialism, the seeking after "things and stuff" - such as better cars, houses and furniture.* Jesus said that no man can serve two masters (Matt. 6:24) because his affections and obedience would be divided. He would fail altogether in his duty to one or the other. One he would love, the other he would hate. One would be neglected. The man who is serving mammon has taken his eye off of heaven, his eye is evil, and he is filled with darkness (Matt. 6:23). This man may think he is godly because he talks about God, believes in God, and goes to worship where God is worshipped, but he is really living for earthly things, he serves mammon. He is like the nations that were moved into Samaria: "So these nations feared the Lord, and served their graven images" (2 Kings 17:41). Many in the church today say they fear God, but spend every waking hour serving mammon! We must wake up and realize that the only thing that is important is serving the Lord, putting His kingdom first, then all the "things" we need will be "added unto" us (Matt. 6:33).

4. *The destruction of the family.* We live in a nation that grants one million divorces a year! This breakdown in the family has reached into God's people! We are going to have to do more teaching on what God wants the home to be. We are going to have to teach our children that marriage is for life (Rom. 7-7; Gen. 2:24; Mal. 2:14). These principles must be deeply impressed in their minds from childhood.

5. *Christians don't know Christ and God, they have no personal relationship with them.* One develops a strong personal relationship with God and Christ by daily Bible study, daily prayer, by tribulation and meditation, by attending the services of the church regularly, and by trusting God for temporal needs. When members of the church develop the relationship with God and Christ that God intended for us to have, we will see a big turn-around in the Lord's church.

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