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BRETHREN WITH TOO MANY RELATIVES

Edward O. Bragwell, Sr.

No, I am not talking about a population explosion. I am not even talking about long lost cousins that surface when someone starts a rumor that we have come into some money.

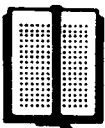
I am talking about relatives as opposed to **absolutes**. It is near blasphemy to some brethren to confidently affirm a position to be the true in the absolute sense of the word. Things considered settled in heaven (Psa. 119:89) are becoming fewer and fewer with many brethren. Why? Because someone has discovered new scriptural evidence that forces them to question or abandon long accepted positions of the past? No! But, because the positions do not seem to be "working" in this present age. I am afraid that some preachers, teachers and elders may be spending more time trying to to adapt what the Bible says to situations they find rather than conform the situations they find to what the Bible says. Let me tell you it is a whole lot easier to become unsure of one's position and/or change it than it is to change brethren and society. Maybe if we spent more time studying the Book and less time trying to "relate", it would help.

So often, what do we find ourselves doing? We study the Bible and its message seems to be reasonably clear -- **unti! we go out into the "real world" influenced by Satan**, trying to apply what we have learned, and it causes

problems. Intelligent people present us with difficult questions relating to its application. (Brother John T. Lewis used to say, "The Bible was not designed to answer every fool question somebody might think up") Hence, the wisest course seems to be to either modify the position or at least relegate it to the realm of "unsettled questions over which smart men and good brethren differ". My brethren, it is just old fashioned philosophical **relativism*** that has found a new home.

The Bible was written that we might be sure about more things -- not less. Luke wrote of "things which are **most surely** believed among us". (Luke 1:1). He even spoke of "**infallible proofs**" (Acts 1:3). On Pentecost, Peter said, "Therefore let all the house of Israel **know assuredly** that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ." (Acts 2:36). Paul warned Timothy that "evil men and imposters will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived. But as for you, continue in the things which you have learned and been **assured** of, knowing from whom you learned them." (2 Tim. 3:13,14). No matter what men might think or do, there was the absolute truth of the scriptures that Timothy could depend on (vs. 15-17). He was even to charge others to teach **no other doctrine**. (1 Tim. 1:3).

The Scriptures came from the Absolute God



Relatives ...

and the truth in them is **absolutely** true for all time. (2 Tim. 3:16,17; 2 Pet. 1:16-21). That truth neither depends upon nor does it change with the individual, time, and circumstance. **Any adjustments must be made to fit the scriptures and not the scriptures fit the circumstances.** While I have known few who would admit that they have altered their view of truth to fit circumstance, I am just as confident that the evidence is overwhelming that they have indeed done so. There is that ever present danger with all of us. We cannot allow the fact that some brethren have dogmatically affirmed positions that were not so and caused trouble over them to keep us from confidently affirming what we believe the Bible teaches on any subject; and refuse to modify it to fit the changing whims of society or brethren.

It is all too easy to allow some unpleasantness or difficulty with applying something that the scriptures teach, something been held to be so by us for a long time -- to cause us to "restudy" the matter and alter our views. Not that we have found any new evidence from God's revelation that causes us to revise our thinking, but because our altered view will be easier to apply in the day to day world. Or that it answers more of the questions that people raise about the matter. Or that we find the consequences easier to live with. So, if a position has difficulties unacceptable to us, or raises questions too difficult for us to answer, or presents problems too unpleasant for us to accept; we reason that our view of the matter not be right - no matter what the obvious and fair meaning of the words used by Inspiration. It is not that some difficult passage seems to be in conflict with other scripture and thus must be re-examined with the faith that truth does not conflict with itself, but it is a re-examination and consequent reshaping of views to better fit the circumstance. Bible truth is not of that nature. There are difficulties and questions associated with applying every Bible subject that I know. People can raise questions that I frankly do not know the answers to - but I still must not

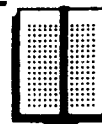
allow these difficulties and questions to cause me to abandon what the Bible says.

For years good people have presented cases (real and imagined) that make it difficult to apply what the Bible teaches about baptism. Questions about an honest and sincere boy who is killed in battle without having opportunity to be baptized. Or, some beloved and seemingly godly relative that never knew about Mark 16:16. And on and on. One may not know the answers to all those difficulties - but the the Bible still says, "He who believes and is baptized will be saved", and one can still so affirm with confidence. Dare we try to change it to make it easier to to answer those questions? If someone presents scriptural evidence that the point of the passage has been missed then one must admit his misunderstanding and adjust his view and practice to fit the scriptures - but not to ease the difficulty in applying it to some cases.

There are a lot of problems associated with consistently applying what the Bible teaches about church benevolence (saints only), whom to fellowship, local autonomy, withdrawing from every brother who walks disorderly, etc. If one changes his position on any of these things, he needs be sure that his change is dictated by what the Bible says about them and not by a desire to find a way to make application less painful.

Sometimes brethren, in their sincere zeal to win more souls and to see the church grow, see that the narrowness of the "our position" on certain subjects is a hinderance to their efforts; so they, just as sincerely look for some way to interpret the scriptures so that the basis for fellowship can be broadened to include the nice people that they are interested in bringing into or keeping in the fold. It is not the purpose of these brethren to corrupt the church, but to see it grow and prosper. Nothing that the scriptures say has altered the matter, but it is assumed that a position must not have been right because it excludes some of the nicest people in town.

Multiple marriages becomes a bigger and bigger problem everyday. The more we study the Bible with people the more second, third, fourth, etc. marriages we find. People are constantly presenting us with cases that it would take a Solomon to unravel. The church



is not getting and even sometimes losing some "good people" who cannot bring themselves to dissolve such marriages. But, we had better be careful that we do not begin to re-examine "our position" about such marriages -- and the churches' obligation to not fellowship those in adultery -- in light of the present circumstances. In fact, I am convinced that some are already doing so. Men who had no problem with teaching that only a person who has divorced another for the cause of fornication has the right to marry another, are being heard from that now take a broader view of the matter. What brought about their change? New scriptural evidence that shows that their old position is unscriptural? Hardly. It is more likely that the price of insisting on the old position became more than they were willing to pay. To stay with that position would cause hardship for them or someone that they were concerned about. Or someone raised some "what if's" of application that seemed too difficult to overcome. I am not saying these men are dishonest, but that it is just so easy to be deceived by the desire to apply the Bible in a way that would cause the least problems and for themselves and church.

Brethren, this is no minor problem. It cannot be placed over in that category of "things over which brethren have differed for years without causing problems". It is more fundamental than that. If one who marries again, without having put his first partner away for the cause of fornication, is committing adultery -- and he is, if we can depend on language at all to convey the truth (Matt. 19:9) -- then a he is placing himself among those (adulterers) that the Bible specifically says cannot inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Cor. 6:9,10). He is in the class of the one detailed case of church discipline that we have in the New Testament (1 Cor. 5). It was because John the Baptist was not willing to look the other way, while Herod had a wife that it was not lawful for him to have, that caused him to lose his life. (Matt. 14). Fornication was the thing specifically mentioned as being allowed by the church at Thyatira that caused the Lord to condemn that church. (Rev. 2:20,21). No, it should not be considered another one of those things of "individual application" over which brethren may differ and still maintain full fellowship. It is a matter of fornication or adultery -- a matter that the Bible specifically says left alone would leaven the whole lump. (1 Cor. 5:6) and in the class with those those with whom we are specifically forbidden to keep company (1 Cor. 5:11).

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OUR SERVICES
SUNDAYS:
Bible Classes 9:45 AM
Worship.....10:45 AM
Worship.....6:00 PM
WEDNESDAYS
Bible Class...10:00 AM
Bible Classes 7:30 PM



Relatives ...

I do not want to sound like an alarmist, but I am afraid that this thing is much bigger that we might like to think. It is not something off out in California somewhere, it is right next door to all of us. Unless brethren who still believe what the Bible teaches on the matter maintain enough courage to stand up now and be counted and stop the mouths of those who would revise God's marriage law (no matter how sincere their motives) they may find themselves in churches that will either be fellowshiping those the Bible specifically forbids and/or find themselves with a battle royal on their hands just to keep the church from being torn asunder, because those who present such loose views are often among the more popular and pleasing personalities among brethren. So, it is not easy to get brethren to deal as firmly with them as they should.

Brethren, if you do not know what the men of influence in the congregation where you worship stand on this matter, then you would do well to find out. If you can get no clear cut answers from them, then beware. Their position is probably relative to the circumstances. If they do stand for what the Bible teaches then hold up their hands in the matter. If they do not, then make every effort to expose them. It is not enough that they may not teach it from the pulpit or the church's Bible classes. Such men do more harm in their private counseling than they ever do by public proclamation of their position. This may sound a bit hard and dogmatic to some, but until someone produces evidence that Matt. 19:9 does not mean just what it seems to say, then that is where we must take our stand. Judging from some things that I have heard lately, I predict that you will be

hearing of more and more re-examining their positions on abortion, modesty and even forsaking the assembling of ourselves together. As he world becomes more humanistic and hedonistic in its outlook brethren will find ways to relate the old Bible truth to the new circumstances. I have in recent months heard preachers publicly talk about what they **used** to think about some of these things, and that they **now** are not as certain as they once were about them. What precipitated their doubts and changes of views? Did someone present them with hard evidence that they had **misread the passages** that deal with such subjects? No sir! They found circumstances that made it hard for them to consistently apply the principles they had been teaching, so there must be something wrong with what they had taught for years!

Brethren, this is a real danger to us all. Let us not be so rigid that we will not review and/or revise any view that we might hold in the light of scriptural evidence. But let us make sure that the basis for our readjustment is the **absolute truth of God and not relating our positions to the individual, time and circumstance.**

Let us not be so dogmatic that we cannot be swayed by scriptural evidence, but let us not fall into the trap leaving nearly every thing open-ended and being able to affirm hardly anything with certainty. Yes sir, I am afraid my brethren are getting far too may **relatives** and not nearly enough **absolutes.**

*The theory of knowledge and ethics that holds that criteria of judgment are relative, varying with the individual, time, and circumstance.-- **The Random House American Dictionary.**

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