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MORE THAN FEELINGS

“Feelings are neither right nor wrong; they just are.”

(Richard Henegar, Elder, La Mesa
(California) church of Christ)

One of the leading social issues in the United States right now is the matter of homosexuality. Same sex (technically “same gender”) marriages are headline items in Massachusetts, New Mexico, and California. New comedies and reality shows on television and dramas and musicals on the live stage are trying to reach the gay market segment. The role of gays in ministry is splitting denominations. The question of how to evangelize this small, vocal segment of the population is, or should be, a concern of every eldership and ministry. On my “What Does the Bible Say About..?” web site (www.geocities.com/riversidecoc) the various questions I have answered about homosexuality are among the most popular. People are eager to know what the scripture says about the issue.

One of the points of contention between many churches and the gay movement centers on the question of whether homosexuality is a choice or whether it is inborn. Although geneticists say that there is no genetic requirement that anyone exhibit homosexual tendencies, many people still claim that it is something that is “hard-wired” into one. Many preachers will argue that homosexual feelings are a choice, even though they may appear very early in life. I recently had a man ask, “How could I have made such a choice at age four?”

From a purely biblical standpoint, the question of whether these tendencies are inborn or not is irrelevant. I started this article with an apt quote from my friend, Richard Henegar. He has repeatedly pointed out that our feelings are not judged by God; our actions are. Paul doesn’t tell people not to be angry. He says instead to act appropriately on your anger. “Be angry and sin not; let not the sun go down upon your wrath.” (Eph 4:26) Anger is not wrong, it is just a feeling. What you choose to do with it may be right or wrong, however.

Never does the Bible condemn homosexual feelings. Instead it condemns acting on those feelings. “If a man lie with another man as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination.” (Lev 20:13) Paul apparently coined a Greek word, *arsenokoites*, very specifically referring to the act, as opposed to the feeling.

“Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor *abusers of themselves with mankind*, Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God.” (1 Cor 6:9-10) He goes on to say that some in the Corinthian church had previously committed such acts as these. It is not that they changed their feelings when they became Christians. Instead, they changed their actions.

Some of my friends ask, “Why would God make me this way, if he did not intend for me to act on these feelings?” My first answer is that you don’t know that God gave you these feelings. Could they not come from another source? “Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth any man; But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed.” (Jas 1:13-14) God created us with the ability to choose between right and wrong. If we follow after the wrong, it is not God’s doing, it is our own. This leads to the second response. If a man did not have a natural desire for a woman, the human race would have died out before it even started. But it is just as wrong to act on those desires without control as it is for a man to act on his desire for another man. Note that Paul, in the quote from 1 Corinthians above, listed adulterers and fornicators along with those who commit homosexual acts.

The definition of “being a homosexual” even before committing the act is not a biblical concept. The Bible says that we make choices, right or wrong, based on our feelings. It is the job of Christians to tell people that bad choices are not permanent. After all, each of us was as much a sinner as anyone who commits a homosexual act. We are, thankfully, saved from our past.

CONTENTS

More Than Feelings	1
Progressive Doctrines	2
Legal Baptism	4

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PROGRESSIVE DOCTRINES

I despise labels. I try not to call anyone “liberal” or “conservative” unless they take that name for themselves. (See “Reading the Labels” in the September 2000 issue.) I do admit that I sometimes enjoy it when someone uses one of those labels for me, since I know many who use the opposite one as well. Recently I heard another label for some churches of Christ: “progressive.” As with liberal and conservative, this term is hard to define without comparing it to other, less or more progressive, congregations. Thus, it is really meaningless.

Like the liberal or conservative labels, progressive is not, in itself, wrong. Every Christian and every congregation should be progressing toward something. “I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.” (Php 3:14) Anyone who is not progressing is regressing, because there is no standing still in religion. Unfortunately, as I understand it, this is not what is usually meant by this label.

The way I heard this label used, it could be interpreted as “more like the denominations.” Based on

If one is saved before immersion, what is he saved from? Not sin!

what I was told, progressive churches may hold the following doctrines.

Take Christ’s name off the church.

Although there is no one “name” for the churches of Christ, its members all wear the name of Christian. There is, admittedly, no requirement that any group of Christians put up a sign saying “church of Christ,” “body of Christ,” “church of God,” or any other such biblical designation, many have chosen to do so. In this age in which there are so many who put up unbiblical names based on doctrines, styles of leadership, names of prominent leaders, a location, or even the Bible, it is to a congregation’s advantage to identify itself with the Lord of Lords who is their savior and king. Some congregations choose to call themselves simply “the church” to distance themselves from the denominational “Church of Christ,” with a capital C.

One prominent congregation, held up to me as being “progressive,” has changed from being called the church of Christ to being simply called a church. Their

reasoning is that using “church of Christ” on their sign has actually caused some people not to attend their worship. Because some people are ashamed of the name of Christ, or fearful of it, they don’t attend assemblies of the church. So instead of teaching them about the Christ, we just remove his name? How many people are converted to New Testament Christianity by casual attendance of assemblies of the church? Very few. People are converted because Christians have taught them in their homes or businesses. Evangelism of the lost, for the most part, occurs before the individuals enter the church building, not after.

How important is the name on the building? Possibly not very important. How important is the name we wear. Of supreme importance. “There is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12) If a church (a group of Christians) suffers, even in numerical attendance, because it wears the name of its savior then it is to God’s glory.

But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men’s matters. Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God on this behalf. (1 Pet 4:15-16)

We must be progressing toward converting souls to Christ. It seems strange to tell people not to be ashamed of wearing the name of Christ, while at the same time removing his name from association with the assembly of his church. To take his name away from our assemblies appears to be regressive, rather than progressive.

Remove the necessity of baptism.

An essential doctrine, as expressed by the apostles and other biblical writers, is that immersion (baptism) is the point at which a person is saved from sin. Baptism is not “the initial step of obedience after salvation.” That flies in the face of scripture and logic. “The like figure [like Noah being saved by the water of the flood] whereunto, baptism doth also now save you.” (1 Peter 3:21) “Arise, and be baptized **and wash away your sins**, calling upon the name of the Lord.” (Acts 22:16, emphasis mine) “Repent, and be baptized **for the remission of your sins**.” (Acts 2:38, emphasis mine) If one is saved before immersion, then what is one saved from? Certainly not from his sins! In an exchange of e-mails I had with an individual, he said, in essence, that salvation isn’t from sin but from a state of being unsaved. If salvation is not from the consequence of sin, which separates us from God (Isa 59:2), then of what value is it? It just makes us saved people who can’t be with God.

Paul understood that salvation was from sin, and that immersion in water was essential to that salvation. "We are buried with him [Christ] by baptism into death; ...We have been planted together in the likeness of his death...Our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed." (Rom 6:4-6) Without immersion there is no salvation from sin. Without salvation from sin there is no salvation.

Compare with that some churches that now say that you can be a member of the church without being baptized, you just won't be allowed to lead in worship or teach classes. Only after you are immersed can you do these things, but until that time you are still a saved member of the church. What does a statement like this teach? Some see it as teaching that, as long as you don't plan on taking a public role in the worship, baptism is optional. If I were a lady who never planned on teaching a class, I would have no incentive to be baptized. Such a church teaches it is essential for someone who has been saved to be immersed, but they say by their example that it is really not vital. What they are really progressing toward is numerical strength at the cost of spiritual weakness.

Adopt a social gospel.

The main doctrine that makes a church "progressive," as it was explained to me, is that we need to get more people in the church doors, and you do that through social programs. Before I am misunderstood, I want to point out that ministries are not, in themselves, wrong. We need to be teaching the gospel to homeless people, drug addicts, AIDS sufferers, homosexuals, singles, families, teens, etc. It is important to teach basketball players, rock musicians, jugglers, and artists. But it isn't basketball games, pizza nights, cabarets, and job retraining that bring people to Christ. The only thing that brings people to Christ is Christ. "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all unto me." (Jn 12:32) If someone comes for pizza or job training, then what will keep them is not Christ, but more pizza and job training. "Jesus answered them and said, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Ye seek me, not because ye saw the miracles, but because ye did eat of the loaves, and were filled." (Jn 6:26)

I was told that the congregation where I attend "sounds progressive" simply because we had an annual program for certain members of the congregation. If a congregation is large enough, then a multitude of programs may not be damaging. Since most congregations of the Lord's church average under two hundred people, many programs may be damaging. It has been said that ten percent of any congregation does ninety percent of the work. If that is true, then a multitude of programs in a small congregation spreads that small percentage mighty thin. In small congregations it may easily lead to the attitude that says, "we tried that program and people only

supported it a little while. Why should we try any others, since people won't help."

In contrast to the attitude of programs at any cost, there is also that segment of the population of the church that calls themselves conservative. They teach, with some reason, that the church treasury is to be used to help the church. To them many of the programs of the self-styled progressive churches are not only sometimes ill-advised, they are downright unscriptural.

If it is popular, it must be right.

Not all so-called progressive churches believe this statement, but some act like it. Not many accept the corollary, "if it is unpopular it must be wrong," but many act like it. Conservative, middle-of-the-road, progressive, and liberal. Whatever the label I take on myself or am given by others, I must listen to the words of Paul to the Romans. "Be not conformed to this world; but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind." (Rom 12:2) It is not always wrong to do what the rest of the world does, but if it doesn't conform to God's will it is wrong. If I do

If pizza brings them to the church, then pizza, not Christ, keeps them.

it because it is popular, rather than to follow God, then I will get my reward, the honor of men, and can ask for no more.

A few churches are getting away from the long-held belief that the use of instrumental music is wrong, or at least a holdover from the "shadow" worship of the Old Testament. They have not yet added incense and priestly garments, although their arguments would make those acceptable. Instead, they say that the young people will leave if we don't include a "contemporary praise assembly." That is not arguing from scripture that it is right. That is an argument from popularity. Using that argument, we may (should?) add casino nights and temple prostitutes. When we do something just because we want to keep people who don't want to obey God, or because we don't want to lose our young people to the world, that is not progressive. That is sin.

I don't care what label anyone gives a congregation, even if they give it to themselves. The only label that matters is the label "Christian." Whatever label one takes upon himself, though, he must be wary of doctrines that are progressive, if they are progressing toward Satan.

LEGAL BAPTISM

We in the churches of Christ regularly and adamantly insist that we are not a denomination. We have published tracts saying that we are “Neither Catholic, Protestant, nor Jew.” Yet it is possible for the non-denominational church of Christ to become the denominational “Church of Christ.” When we turn the grace of God through the Messiah into a legalistic check-list we become a denomination. Paul told the Jews in Galatia, “Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace.” (Gal 5:4) When we become purely legalistic in our views, we are like those Jews.

Perhaps the one subject that is most prone to such legalistic treatment is immersion for remission of sins. As I stated in the previous article, baptism is necessary. It is essentially prerequisite to, or more properly concurrent to, forgiveness of sins. Without it is no salvation. But when we take grace out of baptism and replace it with legalism, we err. Over the past year or two I have seen examples of just such a substitution.

The first area of danger is in requiring baptism by the “proper” person. In all the scriptures on immersion in the New Testament, and even in the Old Testament, the matter of who does the baptizing appears to be unimportant. Most of the passages address only the recipient. “Repent and be baptized.” (Acts 2:38) “Arise and be baptized.” (Acts 22:16) “As many of us as were baptized...” (Rom 6:3) “As many of you as have been baptized...” (Gal 3:27) Paul even said he was glad he had not baptized many, lest they take pride in the baptizer rather than the savior. (1 Cor 1:14-15) What appears important is not who does the immersing, but why one is immersed. It appears that

anyone who wants to be baptized for remission of sins may have it done by anyone. It doesn’t matter whether it is a Baptist preacher, a Muslim Imam, or an atheist. To require that one be baptized in a “Church of Christ” baptistery by a “Church of Christ” preacher ignores the purpose and effectiveness of immersion.

Greek myth says that Achilles’ mother was told to baptize the baby Achilles in the river Styx and no weapon could harm him. In immersing the baby, his mother held onto his heel, leaving him vincible to heel injury. He was subsequently killed during the Trojan War by an arrow to that heel. Recently I was present at a baptism in which the individual went under the water, except an elbow. I don’t know if anyone else noticed. I chose not to say anything because I felt that doing so would be more legalistic than scriptural. Perhaps technically he was not really immersed. Perhaps the elbow went under as some other part of him came out of the water. Is God going to condemn him on a technicality? I hope not. If someone later questions his baptism, that would be the height of legalism. In such a case, legalism could become our Achilles heel.

Immersion is not a work we do. It is significant that it is something that is done to us rather than by us. It saves not because we check it off a list but because it symbolizes the death of the sin sacrifice upon which we depend. Baptism, properly understood, is a work of God. If you take God’s grace out of baptism, you might as well just get wet. We say the denominations are wrong who say you are saved before immersion. Just as wrong, just as much a denomination, is a church or an individual who takes the grace out of immersion.

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