

THINK ON THESE THINGS

Philippians 4:8

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'Don't Ask' Fellowship

By AL DIESTELKAMP

In recent years there has been much discussion about a "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy adopted by the military of our nation. It is an attempt to circumvent the official military regulation banning the practice of homosexuality.

It occurs to me that though I am not aware of any such mindset in the church regarding that particular sin, it does seem to be the approach many take regarding other "lifestyle" sins. This is especially evident in cases involving adultery that are the result of unscriptural divorce and remarriage.

Even some brethren who preach and teach vigorously against unscriptural remarriage appear willing to adopt a "Don't Ask" policy when someone in a questionable situation comes among them.

Of course, I'm not suggesting that we greet every visitor or prospect with questions about their marriage, but because unscriptural marriage has become so commonplace we do need to address the matter before we accept them into our fellowship. Otherwise we will likely find ourselves in the same condition as the church in Corinth that the apostle Paul had to reprove (1 Cor. 5).

Societal attitudes toward moral issues have changed so much in recent years that it is not surprising that most sectarian churches, always yielding to the will of the majority, have pretty well abandoned any attempt to demand true repentance. I have to wonder if the motivating force behind the laxity on moral issues is the desire for more members, which translates into more money to support the elaborate facilities and highly paid personnel.

What have surprised me are the brazen attempts by some to continue in sinful relationships while seeking to be part of

congregations of the Lord's church. There was a time when our "stand" on these issues was so well known that seldom would anyone even attempt to do so.

Just within the past five years, within the congregation where I work and worship, we have seen no less than four attempts by five erring brothers and sisters to continue in sin while worshiping with us. One was an admitted adulterer and the others were openly enjoying, outside of marriage, the benefits God intended for husbands and wives. Had we adopted a "Don't Ask" policy that "little leaven" might still be leavening "the whole lump" (1 Cor. 5:6).

Believe me, I fully understand the temptation to avoid the issue. There is nothing I can think of much worse than having to confront people on this issue. It would be much more comfortable to look

the other way, especially when the people involved are happy in their current families and are otherwise spiritually minded. When it becomes necessary to do so, I have to remind myself that my comfort is not what is most important.

Nathan, one of God's prophets, might have been more comfortable with a "Don't Ask" policy when he was sent to King David to confront him with his sins (2 Sam. 12). John, the baptizer, wouldn't have lost his head had he employed that policy in the "sticky" situation involving King Herod's adulterous marriage (Mk. 6:17-18).

The Lord, Himself, lost a potential follower when he "loved" a man enough to tell him to get rid of the one thing that stood in his way of eternal life (Mk. 10:21).

Without doubt, we are in the midst of a cultural war. Even if our nation becomes more conservative politically, without a significant spiritual revolution, it is very unlikely that our society is going to become significantly more conservative on moral matters. That means that we are going to face increasing pressure to liberalize our views. When we don't, we will be labeled as "bigots" or some other epithet intended to vilify us.

There will even be some from "among us" who will try to convince us that we are being "judgmental" when we withdraw ourselves from, or refuse to extend fellowship to fornicators, adulterers and other unrepentant sinners.

We must not yield to the pressure (whether from without or within) to "conform to this world" (Rom. 12:2). Whether it be a moral issue or some other sin, we are not showing love for the sinner by ignoring the matter and allowing them to "enjoy the passing pleasures of sin" (Heb. 11:25) while maintaining fellowship with God's people.

But fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as is fitting for saints; neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. For this you know, that no fornicator, unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not be partakers with them. —Ephesians 5:3

Stumbling Over Baptism

By **ANDY DIESTELKAMP**

It has happened so many times that you would think I would be used to it by now. It has likely happened to you as well. Each time it happens I evaluate what I did, what I said, how I said it. I consider what I might be doing wrong. I reexamine my faith and what I teach. I try to see things from another perspective, and then I look into God's word and I am convicted all over again. Maybe that is the reason that I have never gotten used to the rejection of God's clear plan to save man.

What a stumbling block baptism is! Oh, I recognize that there are other aspects of God's will that are likewise rejected, but in my experience no one thing is more often refused than is baptism into Jesus Christ for the remission of sins. Too often it is rejected with very little scriptural defense. In other words, it is rejected not because of some scriptural conviction; but because, as one woman wrote me, "I know I am saved, and there is absolutely nothing you could say to me to convince me otherwise." My heart aches. It aches not because what I say is being rejected, but because the "better felt than told" wall of defense is usually impenetrable, even by the word of God.

I have certainly had my share of disagreements with people over the years with the points they have taught me from God's word, but I don't *think* I have ever used a defense remotely like the one quoted above. May we never.

On one occasion in Czechoslovakia, I had a very long study with a couple. Finally I *had* to tell them that they were being irrational. Imagine my surprise when they proudly agreed that their faith was irrational. Obviously there was no point in trying to reason with them. As they were leaving, they shared *why* their faith was stronger than mine. My faith was weak because it was subject to change. It could be moved by reason and argument. Their irrational faith was stronger because logic and reason did not phase them. Yikes! They were using reason to explain the superiority of irrationality.

Most people of faith would not admit to being irrational and would have found this couple not only unreasonable, but weird. Yet, their admission to being irrational is really no different than saying, "there is absolutely nothing you could say to convince me otherwise"

Occasionally, scriptural effort is put forth to show reasons why baptism is not for the remission of sins. A popular form of argument is to show that it is by grace that we are saved and not by works. Baptism is relegated to the realm of works and thus

marginalized as important, but not essential to salvation.

A text recently used against baptism in a correspondence with me was Philippians 3:7-11. Paul contrasts his own righteousness that has no ability to gain Christ with the righteousness "that is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith." Baptism is not even mentioned. However, those against baptism for the remission of sins see it in verse nine. To gain Christ we count all things loss for Christ (vs. 7) and count them as rubbish (vs. 8) and are then found in Him. We are found in Him "not having [our] own righteousness which is from the law." In other words, it is said that we don't get into Christ by our own righteous actions.

What is interesting is that so many classify baptism into Jesus as "a righteousness of [our] own derived from the Law." Many say that teaching baptism into Christ for the remission of sins is works-based, an effort at perfect law-keeping and an attempt to depend on our own righteousness. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

The problem with the suggestion that baptism is our "own righteousness" and therefore has nothing to do with being "found in Christ" is that it doesn't harmonize with Scripture. Have they not read, "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Gal. 3:27)? We do not put on Christ by our "own righteousness," but we *do* put on Christ in baptism. Therefore, baptism is not our "own righteousness." Just as surely as we are sons of God through faith (vs. 26) we clothe ourselves with Christ in

baptism. As we cannot rightly be called sons of God without faith, neither can we put on Christ or be in Christ without baptism.

Baptism is presented in Scripture in the context of grace, faith and the removal of sin. Romans 5:20-6:15 is a great example of this. Law makes it obvious that we are sinners. Yet, God's grace is greater than our sin. The contrast between justification by law versus justification by grace is common in Paul's writing. Justification by law requires perfect law-keeping (Gal. 3:10,11). Justification by grace is for the imperfect.

Paul does not present baptism into Christ as our "own righteousness." He does not classify it as something we do because we are "under law." It is by God's grace alone that baptism washes sins away (Ac. 22:16). Baptism is not for those who trust in themselves and their perfection, but for those who trust in God.

Paul writes that we are "buried with [Christ] in baptism, in which [we] also were raised with Him *through faith in the working of God*, who raised Him from the dead" (Col. 2:12). Baptism into Christ is presented consistently as an act of faith in God, not in H₂O, my perfection, or my works. Saving baptism (1 Pt. 3:21) for the remission of sins (Ac. 2:38) into Christ's body (1 Cor. 12:13) is not "a righteousness of our own derived from the law," but a part of "the righteousness that comes from God." Saving baptism is an act done in faith in the *working* of God. It is nothing over which to stumble. It is a righteous act of faith to which we must submit.

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Some Thoughts on Friendship

By **RICK LIGGIN**

What kind of friend are you...really? Are you the kind of friend who influences his buddies in the right direction—one who will take the lead in doing what is good and right? Or are you the kind of friend who influences in the wrong direction—one who will take the lead in doing what is wrong? Which of these two kinds of friends are you...really?

Or maybe you're the kind of friend who is a follower—one who will follow in a wrong direction or allow yourself to be led in a wrong direction. Or maybe (and this really isn't much better) you will only follow in the right direction if you have someone who will lead you in the right direction? You're not strong enough on your own to choose what is right; you have to have someone to lead

you—or else you just won't go there. Is this the kind of friend you are?

And...what are you looking for in a friend? Are you looking for a friend who will help you do what is right, or one who lets you do what is wrong? Or maybe you are just looking for anyone—anyone at all who will be your friend, without considering his or her moral or ethical standards?

The apostle Paul once warned: "Do not be deceived: 'Bad company corrupts good morals.'" (1 Cor. 15:33). Do you believe this God-inspired statement? If you do, then have you given consideration to what kind of friend you *should be* looking for? And have you thought any about what kind of friend you are?

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Discernment Based on Biblical Principle

By RICK LIGGIN

It concerns me that I'm hearing more and more of us make decisions about what is right and wrong based on our own opinions, rather than on what the Word of God says. Some practice is questioned by a concerned brother and the response is, "Well, I just don't see anything wrong with it; I feel that it's okay." No passage of Scripture is offered to defend the practice, and no Biblical principle is appealed to—"I just think it's okay."

But it's not just happening in the direction of justifying questionable practices. It also, almost as frequently, occurs in the other direction. Some of us are willing to rule certain practices out as being wrong by simply saying, "Well, I feel it is inappropriate behavior, and so you shouldn't do it." Again, no passage of Scripture or Biblical principle is referenced—"I just think this is inappropriate behavior."

Now, I fully recognize that the Bible does not give us an exhaustive (specific) list of every right and wrong action. I also know that God expects us to use our spiritual senses to distinguish between "good and evil" (Heb. 5:14) and to "approve the things that are excellent" (Phil. 1:9-11). And since this is so, I understand that we will have to make "judgments" about whether or not some unspecified action is right or wrong...or only unwise. And in making these "judgments," we may not always see it exactly alike. But what we *cannot* and *must not fail* to see is that God expects us to use *His word* to make these decisions (Heb. 5:11-14; Jn. 12:48; 1 Pet. 4:11). He does not simply leave it up to an opinion based on worldly wisdom.

So, if you feel that there is "nothing wrong with" some action that another brother questions, that's okay—as long as you base your conclusion on some valid Biblical principle and are willing to show why you think the action is all right—using the Biblical principle! And the same is true in the other direction! If you believe an action is inappropriate, show the Biblical principle that led you to that conclusion.

The religion of Christ is not based on "I think so" and "opinion," but on the revelation of God. Defend your actions with the Bible or stop doing them until you can!

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Tattoos and Piercings

By DAVID DIESTELKAMP

Some Christians are stuck with markings and numerous holes in their bodies due to tattoo and piercing choices they made before they came to Christ. Current fads and pop culture are luring Christians back to the world represented by some tattoos and piercings.

There will be some who, simply upon seeing the title of this article, will roll their eyes and not read on, assuming that others just want to condemn their choices. Jesus warned that there would be those who would refuse self-examination to their personal loss (Matt. 13:15). That is not the spiritual minded approach to anything, nor is it keeping the commitment of "whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Col. 3:17). We always must think before we act, considering who has made us and what He wills for us to do.

Here are some questions that must be answered by a Christian while making the decision about getting tattoos or piercings:

Whose body is it? We belong to God, body, soul and spirit—and we are responsible for keeping them pure for Him (1 Thess. 5:23; 1 Cor. 6:20). We must not try to make the argument, "It's my body, I'll do what I want." What we put in, on, or around our bodies must be done in recognition of the fact that our body is not really our own, but God's possession to be used to His glory.

Is it modest? Modesty touches two important areas: 1) What it says about us, and 2) Lust. First, what we put in, on, or around our bodies is to be modest in the sense that it does not draw undue attention (1 Tim. 2:9). In other words, it is not to be outlandish, bizarre or extreme. We are to choose to put things on our bodies that are in keeping with persons who "profess godliness" (1 Tim. 2:9). If any attention is drawn to us it is to be our "hidden man of the heart," our spirit, and good works that makes us distinct from others, not what we put on (1 Pet. 3:1-4). Some of the main reasons given for tattoos and piercings involve drawing attention and self-expression. These are immodest reasons and do not reflect the goals of a spiritual and godly mind. 2) Lust. Modesty also means that what we put in, on, or around our bodies must not be lascivious (lust causing). Lasciviousness is a work of the flesh and those who engage in it will not inherit the kingdom of God (Gal. 5:19-21). Therefore, anything that draws sensual attention is also immodest.

Some tattoos and piercings are improper because of their actual form (lewd pictures, sayings, etc.), location (body parts improper to show in public), or social stigma (cultural sexual connotation). Sensual pictures or sayings will never be the choice of those who "flee youthful lust, but follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart" (2 Tim. 2:22).

What about religious statements and symbols? Some have tried defending tattoos as religious reminders, confessions or "witnesses" to others. The Lord has not asked us to mark up our bodies, but write His law on our hearts (minds—see Rom. 2:15). Others are to see Christ in us as we speak God's words and do His will (1 Pet. 2:12; 4:11). We shouldn't have to write it on our bodies or wear religious jewelry for others to see and learn from our faith and faithfulness.

Is it expedient? Paul wrote, "All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify" (1 Cor. 10:23). There is a very good chance that there will be those who will be offended by a Christian getting tattoos and piercings. This may be attributed to differences in style or age, but offense occurs none the less. In all things a Christian will choose a path that helps and builds up others, never one that ignores or tramples on the conscience of others.

Why? The majority of people seem to get tattoos or piercings simply because they want to or like them. Little defense beyond this is usually given. For the most part, tattoos and piercings are permanent and therefore require very serious consideration—not something done on a whim because of a fad. We need to be warned that it is very easy to deceive ourselves when we already want to do something. We may secretly want something in order to be like the world or for even an immodest reason while telling ourselves and others a less offensive motive. Things like loneliness, confusion and lack of self-confidence may blur spiritual thinking, tempting us to give in to the pressures of fads to reach out in desperation for attention and friends.

What is the real reason for tattoos and piercings? Instead of asking for someone to show these are wrong, we need to show they are certainly right, expedient, and in keeping with a spiritual mind before we do them.

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Benevolence is NOT the "Mission" of the Church

By AL DIESTELKAMP

In gospel sermons, debates, articles and class materials we have long been led to believe that the mission of the church of our Lord is three-fold, consisting of evangelism, edification and benevolence. At the risk of being viewed as a "heretic," I would suggest that the *real* mission of the church is two-fold, and that benevolence, though an authorized work within certain God-given limitations, can hardly be classified as a primary mission.

There is no question that the church has been charged with the task of preaching the gospel as far and wide as ability and opportunity allows. For that reason, the church is described as the "pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15).

An equal partner in the church's mission is edification, which includes, but is not limited to, assembled worship and study. Indeed, the church was designed to cause "growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love" (Eph. 4:16).

Just as Jesus came "to seek and save that which is lost" (Lk. 19:10), His church has been charged with bringing the lost to Christ and helping them to grow so as not to fall away. That's evangelism and edification.

This is not to minimize the need to "remember the poor" (Gal. 2:10), and the relief of needy saints. When legitimate emergencies arise, the church is there to give the needed relief. However, even in such cases, because it is not the primary mission of the church, when other remedies are available they certainly should be pursued so that the church is not "burdened" (1 Tim. 5:16). This is so that when a *real* emergency arises, the ability will be there to help.

I have come to believe that church benevolence should be limited to emergency situations. When you look at the examples in the New Testament involving church benevolence it is very noticeable that in every case it involved circumstances beyond the control of the recipients. Natural disasters (such as famines) prompted response from the churches. There were likely some that were placed in jeopardy due to persecution. Others, as in the case of widows who were "really widows" (1 Tim. 5:1), were poor because of the death of the sole wage earner.

There are still natural disasters, catastrophic illnesses, and loss of employment, rendering some Christians destitute through no fault of their own. When that has happened, brethren have been good to come to the aid of such needy saints. Please understand that I am not questioning these and other emergencies.

However, too many times the only criteria for determining whether church funds ought to be used in benevolence is whether or not the ones "in need" are Christians. Just as important is the *reason* there is a need. Church benevolence should not be extended to those who simply refuse to live within their means. Nor was it designed to help people live in the manner to which they have grown accustomed.

Affluence has trained many people to view luxuries as necessities. If they don't get help from the church they won't be able to pay for cable TV, or they may have to get by with only one car, or they won't be able to "eat out" as often.

Even when there is a legitimate emergency, it needs to be determined if other remedies have been exhausted before we

burden the church. First response ought to come from other family members. If they can't (or won't) help, then is when the church ought to be approached.

To upgrade benevolence from simply an authorized work of the church in emergency situations to the status of a mission of the church would render the church incapable of doing anything else. Even our Lord said, "For the poor you have with you always..." (Jn. 12:8).

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