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TWISTING IT

There is a right way and a wrong way to use scripture. That statement is true on so many different levels. You can use scripture to teach someone the truth because you care about them, or you can beat someone over the head with it just to prove that they are wrong. You can use scripture to justify your own (sometimes misguided) actions, or you can use it to correct your mistakes. Many people take scripture out of context to prove something that it does not even say. Nobody is immune to that temptation. It happens by Church of Christ members, Baptists, Catholics, atheists and agnostics, and many others.

There are a number of scriptures that are frequently taken out of context. Some use Hebrews 10:25 to make people feel guilty about missing a single assembly of the church, ignoring verse 24 that says to provoke others to “love and good works.” Husbands beat their wives with Ephesians 5:22 (“Wives submit yourselves unto your own husbands”) while ignoring the second verse following (“Husbands love your wives”). One of the most misused scriptures, however, is Hebrews 13:8. “Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever.”

Most often, it seems, this verse is used to try to prove that non-Jewish Christians today are bound by the Law of Moses. In fact, when used that way the verse is frequently misquoted. Someone will say that non-Jews must keep the sabbath or keep kosher because “God is the same yesterday, today, and forever.” Therefore, what God made as law for one group of people must be law for all. Never mind that the verse speaks of Jesus Christ, not God. If God forbade eating pork (or even any meat) at one time, then it must be forbidden for all times, in spite of Genesis 9:1-3 which clearly says otherwise. If God gave sabbath to the Jewish people, then he must object to people assembling on Sunday today, even though sabbath was not primarily about assembling together.

What is the context of the verse? Is it about the Law of Moses? No. The preceding verse (or sentence, since the Bible was not written in verses) is about obeying those in positions of leadership, “considering the end of

their manner of life.” What is the end (manner in which they died; goal) of their well-spent life. It is Jesus Christ. The fact that he is the same (if that is what the scripture says) through eternity is merely proof of his messiahship.

On the other hand, some would say that the verse is even misquoted in its common form. A perfectly valid translation appears to be “Jesus Christ, himself yesterday, today, and forever.” The Greek word translated “the same” is more often translated “him” or “himself.” It is the word *auto*, from which we get automobile (a vehicle that moves itself) and autobiography (a recounting of one’s own life). Using that as the translation, the verse means that Jesus was himself the Messiah for all time. He pre-existed, exists, and will always exist as the Messiah. It has nothing to do whether God can change his mind or his laws. Rather it has everything to do with his authority. We obey our leaders as they obey the one who has eternal authority.

God can change the way he deals with man, even if his personality never changes. He can make man a vegetarian, then an omnivore, and then limit what one group of people eats. He can take a nation out of captivity, and give them a day of rest because of their captivity, and never bind that day on those other nations that did not share that experience. He can demand animal sacrifices up to a point, and then provide the ultimate sacrifice to replace them. God deals with man in many ways. Nevertheless, his Messiah is still the Messiah through all of eternity. And no amount of twisting the scripture can change that fact.

CONTENTS

Twisting It	1
Faithful Children	2
Happy Birthday, World	4

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FAITHFUL CHILDREN

In studying American constitutional history one learns the terms “strict constructionism” and “broad constructionism.” While these terms may be, in practice, meaningless, they are definable. A strict constructionist says that the constitution must be interpreted as written. Thus, the Confederate States had a right to secede from the union, the right to bear arms only applies if the bearer also is part of the militia, and nobody can be sure whether President Obama or Senator McCain were eligible to be elected President of the United States. A broad constructionist says that laws are to be interpreted in light of the intent of the framers of the law, as modified by practical concerns. Thus the Supreme Court of the United States has the right to declare laws unconstitutional, President Lincoln had a right to issue the Emancipation Proclamation (which only had effect in the seceding states), and “States rights” is a meaningless construct.

The differences in interpretation go far beyond just constitutional law, however. Every person takes one side or the other on many issues. As W. S. Gilbert so aptly put it, that Nature doth contrive “that every boy and every gal/ That’s born into the world alive/ Is either a little Liberal/ Or else a little Conservative!” This applies especially in the interpretation of the Bible. Strict constructionists say “Repent, and be baptized” means just

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that. Broad constructionists say it means repent, and if you later choose you can be baptized.

Perhaps nowhere is the distinction as visible as in the interpretation of the qualities of elders in 1 Timothy 3. Even there, you would think even among strict constructionists (also called “orthodox” in some circles) that only two of those qualities really apply: “husband of one wife” and “having believing children.” That last phrase will be the focus of this article.

How Many

Of all the things to get hung up on, many people argue over the meaning of the word “children.” Clearly a man who has no child is not eligible. Can a man with only one child be an elder? Some congregations say no, others yes. This is probably one of the most pointless discussions, since the reason given for being a parent is

that an elder should be a proven leader. If he has taught his children well, then he can teach others. Nevertheless, there are those that say a man cannot be an elder unless he has more than one child.

The argument, of course, is that the word “children” is plural. Never mind that if you ask a man who has only one child if he has children, he will answer, “Yes, I have one child.” In his mind, one child is children in this context. In so many other areas we consider the plural to include only one, especially when asking “how many?” Are there “states” in the United States farther south than Florida? Yes; Hawaii. Were there any Presidents of the United States that never married? Yes; James Buchanan. And yet some people insist that children must always be plural.

This is, however, consistent with Church of Christ thinking in other ways. We typically say that the Bible teaches a plurality of elders in a congregation. “For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee.” (Titus 1:5) If “children” in Titus 1:6 can be singular or plural, then “elders” in the previous verse can also be singular. That is, “elders in every city” could mean that each city has at least one elder. To be consistent, any congregation that insists that a congregation with any elders must have more than one must also insist that each of those elders have more than one believing/faithful child.

The other question sometimes debated is whether an elder can have any child that is not a believer. Can a man be appointed as an elder/pastor/bishop if he has two children, but one is too young to have been immersed? Can a man who has three children be an elder if only two are believers, since he has a plurality of believing children? Can a man who has a believing child and another child that does not have the mental capacity to understand sin and salvation be an elder, since the one cannot be a believer? (But more on that later.) Again, there are probably more important points to consider, like whether the man is able to teach or whether he has a good report among those outside the church. Many men will choose not to be appointed an elder if all their children are not Christians, thus avoiding the issue. Later in this article an issue will be discussed that might throw even that choice into doubt. This is probably one of those questions that should be left up to the individual man or his congregation.

How Believing

The King James Version translates Titus 1:6 as “having faithful children.” Several other versions use a

variation on “having believing children.” Many people and congregations insist, when choosing elders, on the latter translation. There may be a fine distinction. Earlier the question was raised about the man with a child with diminished mental capacity. A man has a child (not living in his house) who is a believer, but who is relatively indifferent about his faith, and a child (living in his house) who is incapable of being a “believer” (one who trusts in Jesus for forgiveness of his sins) but is one of the most faithful people alive in terms of attendance and of love for the church. Is such a man disqualified because his faithful child is not a believer? Many, perhaps even most, congregations would say this would prevent him from being an elder, even if he qualifies in all other ways. One sometimes wonders if God is so strict in his interpretation as to penalize a man for having a loving, faithful child who was born in such a state.

There is a man who had believing children living in his household (teenagers), who stated that he would not consider being an elder until his children were grown, out of the house, and continued to believe when no longer under his control. One cannot fault his reasoning. After all, while in his house, the children have little choice but to be faithful. He argues that nobody can truly know if they are faithful until they are no longer living with him. It is a perfectly valid position to hold. Most do not, however, hold such a stringent position. Others would hold that a man is not responsible for his children’s choices once they leave home. They would point out that Ezekiel 18 says that a man should not be punished for the choice of his child, or the child for the choice of the parent. Those who hold this position would say that a man can be appointed as an elder even if his children choose to leave the church or disobey God, as long as they are no longer in his house. There are those, even, who would say that a man should not be chosen as an elder if he no longer has children living under his direct control. Since 1 Timothy 3:4 says an elder must be one “having his children in subjection,” if they no longer live in his house or under his control he cannot have them in subjection, and is therefore ineligible to be a pastor.

Three different, and mutually exclusive, positions. Which is correct in the light of scripture? Is any one of them absolutely correct? Or is the scripture broad enough to encompass all three positions? Strict construction vs. broad construction. Some would say legalism vs. practicality. Again, perhaps the scripture is written in such a way that each congregation must decide for themselves which, if any, is correct.

If Things Change

When, if ever, can or must a congregation ask a man to stop functioning as an elder? Once selected does a man become an elder for life or until he resigns, like a justice in the Supreme Court of the United States?

Obviously a congregation can discipline an elder. “Against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses.” (1 Timothy 5:19) But does that discipline extend to removal from his position? The scriptures are silent.

This question becomes important when a man’s situation changes. If he no longer has a good reputation among unbelievers, or if he becomes a drunkard, then it is clear that he has lost his ability to function well as an elder, and no longer meets the qualifications. But what if his situation with his children or his wife changes? If his wife dies, does a man have to step down from the bishopric? If not, does he have to do so if he marries again? Do either of those situations make him no longer a “one woman man” or “husband of one wife?”

There are situations where such questions come up in relation to “believing children.” If a congregation

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insists that every one of a man’s children be immersed believers, does he have to step down if another child comes along several years later, or if he adopts an unbelieving child? Unless he is an elder for life, a congregation that insists all his children be believers would have to ask him to resign. (And if he is one of only two elders does that mean the other would also have to resign through no fault of his own?)

Perhaps a more common situation is when a man’s adult children choose to be disobedient to God’s word. One elder’s child was expelled from school for illegal drug use. Should he have stepped down? One man chose not to be considered for eldership because his adult daughter had a child with a man to whom she was not married. Had he already been an elder, should he have resigned the position? (This man would have.) If a man is an elder and one of his grown children chooses to leave the church altogether, is he no longer qualified? (If all of his believing children were to do so, most men would choose to resign.)

Paul does not state that the qualities he lists are only initial qualifications. Generally, they are qualities without which a man would lose effectiveness as an elder. But does he have to step down? The questions have been asked and not answered. As with several issues, it appears that these questions must be answered by an individual congregation based on their situation and whether they hold to a strict or a broad construction of the scriptures.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY, WORLD

People react in different ways to birthdays. For many people a birthday is a joyous occasion, a celebration of getting a year closer to what one wants to be or of having completed another year. For others, a birthday is a somber occasion; a reminder of aging, perhaps, or of someone who is no longer able to share it.

Whatever one's view of birthday parties may be, there will be a celebration of a birthday beginning at sundown on September 29, 2011. In this case the celebrant will be, according to the rabbis, 5771 years old. (Bishop Ussher gave a slightly higher age, which would now be 6015 years.) Yes, the celebrant in this case is the earth. *Rosh HaShanah* is, traditionally, considered to be the anniversary of the creation. Some rabbis say more specifically that it is the anniversary of the sixth day of creation, that in which God created man.

If you attend one of the celebrations of this birthday, don't expect to hear Paul McCartney ("Birthday") or Neil Sedaka ("Happy Birthday Sweet Sixteen"). Oh, there will be music. It tends to be a little more mournful, however. It consists of many blasts on the *shofar*. (When I blow my *shofar*, it is really mournful, but in a different way.) This is traditionally a birthday without a lot of joy. That is because it begins the week ending in *Yom Kippur*, the day of atonement. The music of the day, in fact the whole tenor of the day, is repentance for the errors of the past year.

Assuming *Rosh HaShanah* to be an anniversary of the creation (and whether it truly is, or is merely a day chosen to celebrate that anniversary is irrelevant), what might that mean to us? Are there any implications to which we must pay heed?

If the day is an anniversary of creation, that necessarily implies the fact of creation. In an era when many doubt that God created, or that what we see is not anything more than an accident of random action of particles, it might be nice to declare to the world that we believe that God created the world. When so many religious Jews and Christians are backpedaling on the accuracy of the biblical account ("it is metaphor," "it was six days but we don't know how long the day was") it is refreshing for someone to declare, "God created the world in six days, and I believe it." That alone should be enough reason for Jews and Christians both to take part in worship to God on *Rosh HaShanah*.

One implication, which some rabbis point out, is that if man were created on that day, then it naturally follows that God is king. When he created man, a subject, that necessarily made him sovereign over that subject. There are a number of implications inherent in the sovereignty of God. One is that he has the authority to make laws for man, and expect them to be followed. "Thy hands have made me and fashioned me: give me understanding, that I may learn thy commandments." (Ps 119:73) Another is that man is not king. *Rosh HaShanah* says there is a personage that is outside of us and over us. Both of these implications can be found in the other meaning of the holiday; announcing a period of repentance before the judgement of *Yom Kippur*. If God has the authority to make laws and is superior to us, having created us, then he also has the authority to punish wrongdoing and reward righteousness.

You are invited to a birthday. Before you accept the invitation, be prepared to accept the consequences.

Timothy J. O'Hearn
Minutes With Messiah
737 Monell Dr NE
Albuquerque NM 87123