Learning a Lesson from the Baptists

*by Harry Osborne*

Let us suppose that a member of the congregation was seen almost daily jogging publicly in skimpy shorts. Let us say that this same member openly advocated abortion as an acceptable solution to unwanted pregnancy and actively worked to take money from fellow brethren to help fund abortions. Let us also imagine that this same member aggressively implemented programs in schools designed to teach tolerance of unmarried sexual partners and homosexuality as alternate lifestyles. Let us further assume that those programs provided birth control devices to children with graphic descriptions of how to use them. Let us also theorize that this member intentionally employed some militant, homosexual rights advocates to advance the homosexual rights cause. In fact, let us pretend that this member had such a massive influence that he ordered his international business concern, consisting of several million people, to accept homosexuality as an equally legitimate lifestyle. If all of these things were true with a member of the congregation, would you agree to continue fellowship with the man? Should you tolerate this brother due to his power and influence or should you recognize his evil influence and withdraw from him if he refused to repent?

The above situation is that in which the Southern Baptists found themselves in dealing with the former President, Bill Clinton. During his presidency, the Southern Baptists' annual convention met in Houston. Since I lived in that area at the time, I followed the extensive coverage given to the convention with much interest. Among the topics for discussion was what they should do about continuing to recognize President Clinton as a member in good standing. While he was Governor in Arkansas, President Clinton and his wife sang weekly in the choir of a Southern Baptist church in Little Rock. The President had been an active Southern Baptist for years, even throughout his time of considerable moral problems. Without question, the issues he most actively pushed (abortion and homosexuality) were and are condemned by the Southern Baptist convention as sinful and utterly unacceptable. This left the Baptists with the difficult decision of what to do about their fellow brother, President Clinton. Should they continue to have fellowship with him or not? They accepted him while he held the same views and tried to get them advanced in the state of Arkansas. Upon what basis could they deem him unacceptable when he was merely doing the same thing on a broader scale? Thus, the Baptists found themselves dealing with their practice of fellowship complicated by the issues of consistency, personality and politics, not to mention the moral issues of abortion and homosexuality.

The solution reached by the Southern Baptists was to continue to have fellowship with President Clinton, but publicly state their disagreement with his views. This approach left him free to be accepted by Southern Baptist churches, but gave the convention the ability to deny acceptance of his actions which violated their principles. Many of the leading Baptists who urged this course argued that the President's stature made it unreasonable to deal with him by ceasing to have fellowship with him. What would never have been tolerated from the average, ordinary Southern Baptist was tolerated from Bill Clinton since he happened to be the President of the United States. However, the precedent set with this "high profile case" has had a lasting effect upon the tolerance level of the Southern Baptists.

**Haven't I Heard This Before?**

As I watched those events unfold a few years ago, it seemed that there was something vaguely familiar about the Baptists' solution to this problem of fellowship. Where had I heard it before? As Yogi Berra would say, "It felt like déjà vu all over again." Then, it dawned on me. The solution proposed by the Baptists is the same solution proposed by many of our brethren today to deal with differences over divorce and remarriage. Notice the following quotations from brethren using the same reasoning as their Baptist counterparts:

*This, then, is my personal defense of Homer Hailey as a man who has earned the respect and esteem of the Christians of our time. Or, more accurately, it is my explanation of why Hailey has won wide esteem among Christians in spite of his views on the subject of divorce and remarriage.... It is an explanation of why I, and I presume those who are now attacking him, have "fellowshipped" Homer Hailey for many years, in spite of his views on divorce* (Ed Harrell, *Christianity Magazine*, Nov. 1988, pp. 6, 8).

*Brethren have uniformly admitted the difficulties involved in these questions* (divorce and remarriage ‑ HRO)*. Men of spiritual wisdom and unblemished reputations have reached different conclusions. I am not sure that I know anyone with whom I totally agree on this subject. Yet on most phases of it the majority of us seem to get along; treat one another as brethren; and not attack each other as false teachers. There seems to be some space for tolerance in this area. Am I overstepping the boundary of good judgment to suggest that we may need to make room for more?* (Ken Green, *Searching the Scriptures*, Aug. 1989, p. 10).

If a well-intentioned young man had publicly advocated the same error in the same way as did brother Hailey, I seriously doubt that much would have been said in sermons or articles to urge his continued acceptance by brethren. However, the regard for the person of a well‑loved and respected preacher got in the way of a rational evaluation of Bible teaching. Emotion eclipsed reason. As a result, churches across the country were urged to accept false teachers or even the people living in adultery justified by those false teachers. The acceptance of one man's sin and error as well as its justification in large part by one paper has led to an acceptance of other sin and error. Such is the effect of sin and error (2 Tim. 2:16‑18; 3:13).

Whether it be the regard for a president or the sentimental attachment to a loved brother that leads one to tolerate sin and error, it will not stop with that one application. Our Baptist friends now see that President Clinton is gone, but his effect is not. Brother Hailey has now passed from this life and *Christianity Magazine* has ceased publication, but the sentimental plea justifying a broader fellowship has been left behind it a broadening apostasy among brethren. The floodgate opened to justify acceptance of brother Hailey and those justifying a broader fellowship has even become intolerable to its original advocates. They even decry the vacuous, non-biblical, “tolerate anything – condemn nothing” approach in a growing number of non-institutional churches. Some have seemingly abandoned the biblical basis for unity – truth as the pattern believed, taught and practiced (Eph. 4:1‑16). Whether accepted or not, God's pattern still instructs us about how to handle those who depart in teaching or practice from the doctrine given by Christ:

*Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds (2 Jn. 9‑11).*