

Romans 14 and The Present Controversy

By Jimmy Stevens

INTRODUCTION

Following an incident in Belen, New Mexico in 1987, a controversy began to brew among brethren over the use of Romans 14 in determining fellowship with those who teach a particular false doctrine on divorce and remarriage. This controversy continues to this day. Because a very well known, highly respected and widely influential gospel preacher was teaching this doctrine, a number of brethren believed saints needed to be publicly warned about him and his teaching. He was not to be considered worthy of fellowship.

On the other hand, opposing brethren believed that fellowship could and should be recognized with this brother in spite of the fact that they disagreed with his teaching. They justified this position by applying the principles of Romans 14, which teach that brethren can maintain fellowship even though they disagree on certain matters.

The primary question we will be studying in this series of lessons is, “**Does Romans 14 justify recognizing continued fellowship with one who persists in teaching false doctrine?**”

I. Purpose for this study.

- A. Understand what Romans 14 does and does not teach.
- B. Understand the history and issue of the controversy.
- C. Show how an improper use of Romans 14 leads to spiritual apostasy.

II. Topics of study.

- A. *Topics not addressed.* Many topics have been introduced into this controversy which are at best remotely related and some not related at all. The addition of these has often caused confusion and has diverted attention away from the real issue. For that reason discussions relating to “false teachers”, “headcovering”, “military service”, weak or immature Christians who sin, local church autonomy, etc., will not be the focus of our study. However, references to some of these may be made, because they have been introduced and have contributed to creating the controversy.
- B. *Topics addressed.*
 1. **Romans 14 in Context**
 2. **Romans 14 Examined**
 3. **Divorce, Remarriage and Conversion**
 4. **History of The Controversy**
 5. **Issue of The Controversy**
 6. **Effects of Misusing Romans 14**

CONCLUSION: It is my prayer that by becoming familiar with the facts of this controversy, we can dispel misunderstanding and be able to fairly examine the teachings of men to see whether or not they are from God. The apostle Peter instructed, “*But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear;*” 1 Pet 3:15.

Romans 14 in Context

INTRODUCTION: The immediate context of Romans 14 begins with verse 1 and can be extended to at least verse 7 of chapter 15. However, in order to appreciate the distinctive nature of the fourteenth chapter, a quick survey of the entire book and a few remote contexts is necessary.

- A. Written by Paul, 1:1.
 1. During his third journey when he was on his way to Jerusalem to deliver benevolent aid to the needy saints in Jerusalem. 15:25-26; Acts 19:21; 20: 3, 16, 22; 24:17.
 2. From Corinth, compare 16:23 with 1 Cor 1:14, Acts 19:22; 2 Tim 4:20.
- B. Written “*To all who are at Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints:*” 1:1.
 1. Strong faith known throughout the whole world. 1:8, 12; 16:19.
 2. However, the church had its spiritual challenges to remain faithful. 2:1, 16:17.

I. Chapters 1-5 God’s provision for man’s salvation.

- A. Gospel saves. 1:16.
- B. Gentiles turned from God, He gave them up. 1:18-28.
- C. Jews also turned away from God. 2:1-6.
- D. Both Jews and Gentiles under sin and need Christ. 3:9-12, 21-26.

E. Through faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ, not in human works or the Law of Moses, both Jews and Gentiles are justified before God. 4:9-17; 5:1-9.

II. Chapters 6-11 Obligation to obey the gospel and remain faithful.

- A. Slaves of sin or of righteousness? 6:15-18.
- B. Old Law has "died". Now, "marriage" to Christ saves. 7:4-6.
- C. Living in the "*law of the Spirit*" to become children of God. 8:1-2; 12-17.
- D. Grief at the rejection of the gospel by many Jews. 9:1-3; 10:1-3; 11:11-14.
- E. Gentiles enjoy salvation through Christ. 9:25-26; 30-32, 10:19-20; 11:11-12.

III. Chapters 12-16 Principles of the gospel in daily life.

- A. Attitude toward self, brethren and non-Christians (enemies). 12:1-2, 9-21.
- B. Responsibilities toward government and fellowman. 13:1-3, 8-14.
- C. Exercise love and patience on matters of opinion and personal conscience related to authorized liberties in God's word. 14:14-20; 15:1-7.
- D. Various personal matters related to Paul's ministry. 15:20-25.
- E. Commendations, salutations, warnings and benedictions. 16:1-2, 3-4, 16, 17-18, 25-27.

IV. Contrasting Romans 14:1-15:7, with Context.

A. *Immediate Context*

- 1. Preceding passages, 13:11-14.
 - a. "*Cast off the works of darkness*" v 12.
 - b. "*Walk properly...not in reveling....*" v 13.
 - c. "*Make no provision for the flesh*" v 14.
 - d. **Moral sin** and strife is condemned.
- 2. Succeeding passages, 16:17-19.
 - a. "*Note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them.*" v 17.
 - b. "*By...fair speech they beguile*" v 18.
 - c. **Doctrinal sin** condemned.

B. *Remote Context*

- 1. **Moral sin** condemned.
 - a. Gal 5:19-21, works of flesh.
 - b. Col 3:5-11, "*put to death*" our earthly members.
 - c. Eph 5:3-14, reprove unfruitful works of darkness.
- 2. **Doctrinal sin** condemned.
 - a. 2 John 9-11, not go beyond doctrine of Christ.
 - b. 1 Tim 1:3, not to teach another doctrine.
 - c. Gal 1:6-9, not to teach another gospel.
 - d. Tit 3:9-11, reject heretics.
- 3. No fellowship with sin allowed
 - a. 2 Cor 6:14, it is an unequal yoking.
 - b. Eph 5:11, have no fellowship, rather reprove.

CONCLUSION: Romans 14 teaches that brethren should recognize fellowship with one another even when they sometimes disagree on spiritual matters. However, the contrasting "Contexts", both *immediate* and *remote*, teach that we are not to have fellowship with those with whom we disagree. Why the difference?

- A. Romans 14 teaches that brethren should recognize fellowship with each other when disagreements are the result of differences of opinions or convictions determined by personal conscience and not by the violation of God's law.
- B. The *immediate* and *remote* "Contexts" show that when disagreements are over moral or doctrinal violations, brethren **must** reject the violators as sinful and not worthy of fellowship with God and faithful brethren.
- C. Problems arise when disagreements over moral or doctrinal violations are included with differences of opinions or convictions, which are determined by personal conscience and are handled by the teaching of Romans 14.
- D. Using Romans 14 to justify continued fellowship with those teaching and practicing sin would be a violation of both biblical hermeneutics and the divine purpose God intended for this chapter.

Romans 14 Examined

INTRODUCTION: Rom 14:1-15:7, sets the parameters of our liberties in Christ.

- A. It establishes a balance between the tendency to bind where God has not bound and giving license to sin. It advocates fellowship while respecting each brother's liberties. Without the truth of these verses, Christians will be hopelessly splintered in as many pieces as there are opinions, or else be invaded by sinful doctrine and practices.
- B. The sufficiency of God's revelation clearly defines what is required or forbidden. In these areas we have no choice but to obey, 2 John 1:9-11, Jude 3.
- C. Sufficient revelation also establishes the category of things allowed, also known as authorized liberties, options and expediencies, matters of indifference to God. In this, we may allow differences among brethren without compromising any principle of truth. The early preachers in America recognized this as they sought to restore pure religion in their generation. Their cry was, "In matters of faith, unity; in matters of opinion, liberty; in all things, charity."
- D. Texts: Rom 14:1-15:7, companion texts 1 Cor 8, 9:19-23, 10:23-11:1, cf. Gal 5:6, 6:15.

I. Textual considerations.

- A. V 1, "*disputes over doubtful things*" (NKJ). "*doubtful disputations*" (KJV),
 1. *Decisions* (ASV): *diakrisis* (Gk) - "A distinguishing, and so a decision..." "...in Rom. 14:1, `not to (doubtful) disputations' is more literally rendered in the margin `not for decisions (of doubts)'"¹
 2. *Doubtful* (Gk) - *dialogismos*, "the thinking of a man deliberating with himself; hence 1. a thought, inward reasoning"²
 3. Thus, our "receiving" a brother into fellowship is not conditioned upon an agreement or forced decisions concerning all his internal doubts. Brethren may worship together even when they disagree in matters about which God is indifferent. 1 Cor 8:8. A weak brother may have personal, inward doubts about authorized liberties that a strong brother may practice, but fellowship is not restricted because of this disagreement. Obviously this "agreeing to disagree" **does not** involve sinful doctrines and practices but things inherently "*good*," "*clean*," and "*pure*." v 14, 16, 20.
 4. "*Disputes*" are forbidden concerning these things. There must be **no** "*contention*," as is necessary with doctrinal matters, Jude 3. There must be no judging. Clearly, these instructions apply to matters of liberty, but could never apply to sinful matters condemned by God.
- B. V 2-4, "*God has received him*". All fellowship in "*doubtful things*" is founded upon the fact that "*God hath received him*" in innocent ("*good*," "*clean*," "*pure*") practices. The brother, specifically the meat eater, is in fellowship with God, therefore the brethren must receive him. He stands safe before God, God supports him in his stand.
- C. V 5-6, Categories under consideration: *Meats* and *Days* (and things of like category, ex: "*circumcision*", Gal 5:6, 6:15), are "authorized liberties," those doctrines and practices that are neither sinful nor condemned, but allowed. Since "authorized liberties" permit options, the practice or non-practice by saints is a matter of indifference to God. Rom 14:1, describes "*disputes over doubtful things*" as options. 1 Cor 8:9, (a parallel passage) declares options as "liberties." This is a Biblical description. 1 Cor 10:23, options as "*lawful*," and "*expedient*." or "*helpful*". Therefore, the "*disputes over doubtful things*" under consideration are matters of "authorized liberties," practices that cannot in themselves be sinful or condemned, but are allowed.
- D. *Meats* and *Days* are not just randomly selected examples of liberties. The theme of Romans is "Justification by Faith", ch 1-11, with special relationships of Jews to Christ, ch 9-11 in view of Gentile salvation. Therefore, "*meats*" and "*days*" are items that exemplify the theme - justification by faith as it relates to the Jew/Gentile problem. Both "*meats*" and "*days*" were problems created by the integration of the two races in Christ, Eph 2:11-22. What had previously been bound to Jews (meats and days) was now loosed in Christ. What had previously been a sinful practice among Gentiles (meat sacrificed to an idol) no longer mattered in Christ. This was the truth of the gospel, but "*there is not in everyone that knowledge*" 1 Cor. 8:7. Rom 14, addressed the liberty in Christ of both Jew and Gentile, which some wanted to limit. The **weak brother** wanted to bind where God no longer bound and Paul instructed him to stop doing so, v 3, 4, 14. The **strong brother** was told not to flaunt his knowledge and liberty of conscience, v 3, 15, 14. **Neither** brother sinned in the matters before them unless the weak brother

¹ W.E. Vine, *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, Old Tappan, New Jersey, Fleming H. Revell Company, ©1981, p 281

² Joseph Henry Thayer, D.D., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Zondervan Publishing House, ©1976, p 139

wanted to bind where God had not bound, or the strong brother despised the one who would not eat. There was no inherent sin in the practice or non-practice of meats or days.

- E. *Strong and Weak*. Obviously, prior to this epistle, instruction was given to the saints concerning the "doubtful things", because some brethren already understood the liberties concerning these things. However, after the writing of this epistle, there would have been no doubt as to the truth concerning "doubtful things", but there could still be the lingering, immature conscience for some saints. The following describes both brethren before and after the instructions of Romans 14.
1. *Strong brother, 15:1*.
 - a. Considered the "taught" brother, 14:2, 14, 23; 1 Cor 8:1-7; 1 Tim 4:1-5. He knew what had been revealed about meats and days.
 - b. Knew their (meats, etc.) proper relation to God, 1 Cor 8:8; Col 2:16.
 - c. Knew that an idol was nothing, 1 Cor 8:4.
 - d. Was innocent before God when he ate meats and did not observe certain days.
 - e. Did it to the Lord, giving thanks, 14:6.
 - f. Was convinced in his own mind, v 5.
 - g. Was tempted to "despise" the weak brother, 14:3, 10.
 - h. **With this epistle** he was warned not to be puffed up in knowledge and cause his brother to stumble, 14:21; 1 Cor 8:1-13; 10:32.
 2. *Weak Brother, 14:1; 15:1*. Whether or not he simply did not know God's truth on these matters, or refused to accept what other brethren taught, he was not believing the truth about these liberties.
 - a. Considered the "untaught" brother, 1 Cor 8:1-7, esp. v 7.
 - b. Did not understand God's requirements on these liberties.
 - c. Did not know their (meats, etc.), proper relation to God.
 - d. Feared that eating meats would commend idols.
 - e. Refusal was "to the Lord", 14:6.
 - f. Was convinced in his own mind, v 5.
 - g. Was innocent before God when he did not eat meat or observed certain days.
 - h. "Weak in the faith" did not necessarily mean he was a weak Christian or was without zeal, for he was ready and willing to contend for his position.
 - i. Did not have the proper knowledge with his conscience, yet his lack of knowledge did not turn a lawful act into an unlawful act.
 - j. Was "judging" the strong brother to be sinful.
 - k. **With this epistle** he was commanded to stop contending and judging, 14:3, 10, 13, while being warned not to violate his own conscience, 14:23; 1 Cor 8:10.
- F. *Relationship to Each Other*. Romans 14 tells of the proper relationship brethren should have in regard to "authorized liberties."
1. Both were brethren, received by God, 14:3; 15:7.
 2. Were innocent of any wrongdoing in the practice or non-practice of "meats" or "days," and were to recognize fellowship with each other.
 3. *Strong* was not to despise the *weak* nor act so as to cast a stumblingblock before him.
 4. *Weak* was not to condemn the *strong* as sinful, yet was not to violate his own conscience.
 5. Were to act toward each other so as to "make for peace", 14:19, not division.
- G. *Relationship to Meats and Days*.
1. Both practices were "good," "clean," and "pure," and were to be considered as "authorized liberties" 1 Cor 8:9; 10:23, to men and "matters of indifference" to God, 1 Cor 8:8; Col 2:16. Therefore, neither brother was practicing sin, nor had to change their practice.
 2. Both brethren could continue in fellowship with God, being made to "stand", v 10, before Him.
 3. If the weak came to understand about meats and days, and still could not participate due to life-long custom, he must not cause strife about it.
 4. Each must be "fully convinced" as to their practice. This would not be possible if the practice under consideration was sinful.
- H. Now that Paul instructed these brethren on the truth of this issue, the only thing that would not have to change in these indifferent matters, is the conscience of the weak brother.
- II. **If Romans 14 authorizes sinful practices, as some contend, it makes havoc of the context. Please note:**
- A. The *strong* brother is the one who actively participates in the matter under consideration.
 - B. The *weak* brother is the one unable to actively participate because he believes it to be sinful.
 - C. If "eating meats" is sinful, this view requires that the *strong* be the sinner and the *weak* be the one refusing to sin.

- D. Let us try that reasoning on other sinful practices, such as social drinking, adultery, gambling, etc.
 1. The *strong* brother is the one who can practice social drinking, adultery and gambling!
 2. The *weak* brother is the one who cannot practice social drinking, adultery and gambling.
 3. But note in 15:1, Paul lists himself as among the *strong* brethren.
 4. Therefore Paul could engage in social drinking, adultery and gambling!
 5. But the context of Romans 14 is that both the *strong* brother and the *weak* brother are accepted by God.
 6. Therefore, it is equally right before God to drink or not drink, commit adultery or not commit adultery, gamble or not gamble!
 7. Can you imagine Paul committing these sins because he, as the *strong* brother, believed he had the liberty to do so?

III. Why the controversy?

- A. Some will argue that, "We would not use Romans 14 to justify fellowship with those who **practice** such sins as adultery." But, at the same time, they will use it to maintain fellowship with those who persist in **teaching** that these sins are not really sins.
- B. Question: How can brethren justify rejecting persistent sinners and not reject the one who persists in teaching sinners that they are not sinning?

CONCLUSION: Inclusion of *moral* and *doctrinal* error in the instructions of Romans 14 is misusing the truth and makes Paul into a defender of gross immorality as well as a practitioner of the very things condemned in chapters 13, 16, and other remote contexts in the New Testament.

Divorce, Remarriage and Conversion

INTRODUCTION: Homer Hailey's view on divorce, remarriage and conversion began to develop early in his preaching career, while preaching for the Fifth and Highland church of Christ in Abilene, Texas.

"He began a serious study of the subject, and reached the conclusion that 'God did not say a thing' about breaking up marriages when people became Christians."¹

I. Homer Hailey.

- A. Born August 12, 1903 near Marshall, Texas and died November 9, 2000 at the age of 97.
- B. Noted and highly respected gospel preacher, writer and college instructor for most of the 20th Century in the United States.
- C. However, for over 60 years, he held a position on divorce and remarriage that was not very popular, nor accepted by people on either side of the recent controversy involving Romans 14.
- D. 1987 marked the beginning of a widespread controversy centered on his teaching.

II. Homer Hailey's doctrine.

- A. In 1991, he published his teaching on divorce, remarriage and those who were converted to Christ in a book entitled, *The Divorced & Remarried Who Would Come To God*.²

"Does God require those who were married, divorced, and remarried while in the world, and who would obey the gospel, to separate after they become Christians, or does He accept their marriage as lawful?"³

"This book sets forth my position on the subject of the divorced and remarried who would come to God, and my reasons for holding it."⁴

- B. Basis of Homer Hailey's doctrine.
 1. Two spiritual laws for mankind today.
 - a. Universal moral law - to which all mankind is subject.
 - b. Law of Christ - to which only Christians are subject.

¹ David Edwin Harrell, Jr., *The Churches of Christ in the 20th Century: Homer Hailey's Personal Journey of Faith*, © 2000, The University of Alabama Press, pp 338-339

² Homer Hailey, *The Divorced and Remarried Who Would Come To God*, Las Vegas, Nevada, Nevada Publications, © 1991, revised edition, © 1998

³ *Ibid.*, revised edition, back cover

⁴ *Ibid.*, preface, p 5

2. The law of Christ contains greater details and requirements involving marriage, divorce and remarriage than does the universal moral law.
 3. The alien sinner is not amenable to the law of Christ until he obeys the gospel.
 4. A non-Christian couple living in adultery can remain in that marriage relationship after obeying the gospel.
 5. Repentance in conversion does not demand that the adulterous couple separate, but that they vow not to divorce again under Christ's law.
 6. Brethren should recognize fellowship with this newly converted couple.
- C. Errors with this doctrine. "All" mankind "is" amenable to Christ's law.
1. Christ's death ratified a covenant to be observed by all mankind. 1 John 2:1-2; Matt 26:27-28.
 2. Christ's law was addressed to all mankind, hence all are obligated to obey it. Mark 16:15-16; Acts 17:30.
 3. Christ is Lord of all, therefore all are to submit to him. Matt 28:18-20; Acts 2:36-37; Col 1:15-19.
 4. Mankind can only be judged by what they are amenable to and all will be judged by the gospel. Rom 2:16; 1 Tim 1:8-11; 2 Thess 1:6-9.
 5. Christ's death united the amenability of all mankind to the law of Christ. Eph 2:11-16.
 6. Christ's law demands repentance from sins before becoming a Christian. Acts 17:30; 1 Cor 6:9-11.

III. Homer Hailey's doctrine and the Romans 14 controversy.

- A. There is no significance in the fact that Homer Hailey held this doctrine. However, his popularity made not only his scholarship noteworthy, but his error as well. It should not matter who teaches this, it is still sinful doctrine. Brother Hailey's popularity and friendship with many has apparently caused them to minimize and overlook the persistent sinfulness of his teaching. If it were a person of lesser renown, would they have been treated in the same way?
- B. In this controversy, brethren on either side of the controversy have agreed that brother Hailey was wrong in this doctrine. Hence, the controversy was not over whether this doctrine was wrong. For the most part, brethren on either side claim a conviction on marriage, divorce and remarriage which states that:
 1. Marriage is for life.
 2. Divorce and remarriage for any cause other than fornication can lead to adulterous marriages.
 3. Only the partner who has divorced their mate for the cause of fornication can remarry.
- C. The controversy is over whether or not brethren should continue to recognize fellowship with those who persist in teaching this sinful doctrine that a couple can continue to live in adultery after obeying the gospel.
 1. Some believe that fellowship with this *adulterous couple* could not be handled by the principles of Romans 14, where they could be received in spite of their adultery.
 2. On the other hand, these same people would recognize continued fellowship with the *teacher of this sinful doctrine* on the basis of the teaching of Romans 14.

CONCLUSION: The controversy involving Romans 14 was sparked by the teaching of a prominent gospel preacher who taught that a couple, living in adultery, could remain in that adulterous relationship even after being baptized into Christ. Romans 14 has been used to justify continued fellowship with the teacher of this false doctrine even though he refuses to change his teaching.

History of The Controversy

INTRODUCTION: Much of the confusion and, unfortunately, dissension among brethren from this current controversy over Romans 14 and fellowship stems from a lack of understanding of the sequence of events that brought about the controversy.

- A. Historical chronology is important in any investigation of any controversy. In a court of law, "case law" involves the use of historical decisions of previous court cases and what influence they may have on present court cases. While accurate history and chronology cannot change the facts gathered in research, it can help put them in proper order so they can accurately represent what took place and when. Take things out of proper order and there is a distortion of cause and effect, or who is responsible for which elements in a controversy.
- B. The following quote is a sample of why historical and chronological information is important to the issue of our study.

"I am amazed at the number of brothers and sisters throughout the brotherhood that are so uninformed as to what happened in Belen in 1988. Just recently, a lady told me all about how brother

Hailey was mistreated in Belen, NM. She had no idea that I was there on the day that he spoke to the church, and that I was the one transporting brother Hailey from and to the airport. This lady was quite embarrassed. She did not agree with his position, but felt he was treated terribly. She wanted to know what happened. I told her. She said, ‘Thanks for setting me straight after all these past 12 years.’ Pretty sad when brethren let their emotions over a man override God’s truth on this matter under consideration...I’ve run into that several times with various individuals regarding their love for bro. Hailey---‘emotions’ – ‘emotions’ – ‘emotions’ dominating their thinking!’¹

- C. This lesson will cover the sequence of events that generated the controversy on Romans 14 and fellowship. A discussion of the controversy itself during this historical account will be the subject of our next lesson.

- I. **Homer Hailey speaks publicly.** It has been thought by many that brother Hailey held his views on divorce and remarriage to himself, expressing his thoughts only when asked to, and that he did not set out to publicly teach it until later in his life. Consequently, criticism has been raised against those who publicly exposed him for teaching his personal conviction on the subject. At the 1989 Florida College Lectures the statement was made:

“Brother Hailey holds a view on one phase of the marriage question with which I differ. He has held that view for more than forty years. He believes it to be right and has not hesitated to express this view when questioned. His general practice has been to discuss it only when questioned. He taught 10 to 12 Bible classes per year at Florida College for 22 years. I do not know of his ever bringing up this issue in a single class.”²

- A. **1930’s, Homer Hailey with the Fifth and Highland church in Abilene, Texas.**

“Hailey recalled being instructed by the church’s elders not to baptize a certain prospect he had been teaching unless the man would separate from his wife. Hailey was shocked by the seeming harshness of the directive. He began a serious study of the subject, and reached the conclusion that ‘God did not say a thing’ about breaking up marriages when people became Christians. For many years, Hailey’s analysis of the subject did not progress far beyond that conclusion. He continued to believe that ‘divorce and remarriage is contrary to God’s law,’ but he was not convinced that ‘God dealt with the question with regard to the heathen.’ Consequently, he concluded, ‘These people who are telling individuals...you have got to separate...are acting where God never did legislate and they are setting themselves up as judges in this matter.’”³

- B. **1950’s, Florida College.**

“Wiley Adams told of several preachers who had come to accept brother Hailey’s view as a result of private discussions while at Florida College in the 50’s”⁴.

- C. **1958, Lectureship with the Husson Avenue church, Palatka, Florida.** Brother Hailey participated in a lectureship in Palatka, FL, in the late fall of 1958. Dennis Reed, the preacher for that local church at the time, gives an account of the events which led to this lecture series.

“We had a man and woman in the congregation who had been baptized by the previous preacher. This man was living with his second wife and was the admitted fornicator in the dissolving of his first marriage...there were faithful brethren in the congregation who were totally convinced that this was an adulterous relationship.

“After a few weeks, it was obvious that this church was openly divided. Some of us were pleading with the supporters of this couple to let us invite some gospel preachers to come in and teach us on this subject, and we were pleased that they did agree to this arrangement. Late in the year of 1958, possibly in November or December,... four men were invited to come to Palatka and preach on the subject of marriage, divorce, and remarriage. The supporters of the adulterous couple insisted on having someone who would preach what they believed, and brother Homer Hailey was just about the only one who was known at that time who would support their views. Along with brother Homer Hailey, brethren Harry Pickup, Sr., Harry Payne, Sr., and H. E. Phillips each preached one sermon.

¹ Tim Stevens, e-mail correspondence from Tim P. Stevens to Jimmy Stevens, April 19, 2000

² Bob F. Owen, “Policy Statement” made at 1989 Florida College Lectures, January 30, 1989

³ David Edwin Harrell, Jr., *The Churches of Christ in the 20th Century: Homer Hailey’s Personal Journey of Faith*, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, The University of Alabama Press, © 2000, pp 338-339

⁴ Harry Osborne, letters dated November 10, 1988, to Melvin Curry, Bob Owen, Colly Caldwell, who were associated with Florida College at the time. Written because of the connection and influence brother Hailey had with Florida College.

“It was...clear that what brother Hailey taught was not what the Word of God teaches. I don't know that brother Hailey's teaching was the cause of some brethren to continue their support of the adulterous couple, only God knows, but his teaching was all that they wanted or needed to hear for them to continue standing firm against the truth. They totally disregarded what the other three had preached. The three other brethren...all preached the truth on this matter.

This church divided, with about half the congregation leaving to start a new work in the community of San Mateo, just across the St. John's river from Palatka.”⁵

D. 1960's on various occasions both public and private.

1. Early 60's,

“I personally attended a gospel meeting Homer held at the Glendale, AZ congregation in the early 1960's. He preached the false doctrine on marriage, divorce and remarriage in that meeting. Those of us who ‘grew up’ with Homer in Arizona never quite understood how so many could hold him in such high regard.”⁶

2. 1964, In a letter, dated January 7, 1964, addressed to a brother Ercel Ray Warren of Las Cruces, New Mexico, who was dealing with some brethren who were sympathetic to Hailey's view, brother Hailey stated,

“As to the matter of what individuals who have been divorced while in the world and then marry, and later obey the gospel are to do about their relation, I know not a word in the Bible.”...“I cannot tell a couple under these conditions to separate, for God did not so say. I prefer to think that God has accepted them and would have them continue from there to live the faithful life, since he told me not what to tell them, than to tell them something that he did not say. This is my position in the matter.”⁷

3. 1960's, Florida College. A brother said that...

“...brother Hailey spoke his convictions on the matter in a class at Florida College he attended during the 60's.”⁸

“Most of the teachers and students at Florida College knew about Hailey's views and they occasionally discussed the subject with him. ‘Anybody ask me about it, I would tell them,’ Hailey insisted, but ‘I didn't try to promote it.’ ‘They all differed from me,’ Hailey recalled. But it was not a problem. ‘When it came up in class, I would tell them briefly’ and then proceed to other subjects.”⁹

E. 1976, West Anaheim, California.¹⁰

“James W. Adams remembered an occasion when Hailey preached on the subject in Anaheim, California, at the request of the elders:...”¹¹

F. 1980's.

1. 1985, A Commentary on Isaiah,

“We know that the Gentiles were never under the Mosaic covenant, and they were not under the covenant of Christ until they brought themselves under it by individual obedience to its terms.”¹²

2. October 1987, Belen, New Mexico, brother Hailey met privately with a couple who lived in adultery prior to their baptism and explained his view on divorce and remarriage.¹³

3. February 25, 1988, El Cajon, California, brother Hailey included his view on divorce and remarriage without request. In the sermon he said of his comments on the subject, “I didn't intend to say much about that or anything about it, really.”¹⁴

4. March 22, 1988, Belen, New Mexico. brother Hailey flew to Belen to present his views on divorce and remarriage to the brethren there. This two and one half hour session was video taped.

⁵ Dennis Reed, “The Palatka, FL Meeting (1958)”, *Watchman Magazine* at www.watchmanmag.com, Vol. 2, No. 5/6, May/June 1999. (A transcript of brother Hailey's sermon is available.)

⁶ Ken Leach, e-mail to Jimmy Stevens, December 20, 2000

⁷ Homer Hailey, letter to Ercel Ray Warren of Las Cruces, NM, January 7, 1964

⁸ Ron Halbrook, letter dated April 15, 1988, to Homer Hailey

⁹ David Edwin Harrell, Jr., *The Churches of Christ in the 20th Century: Homer Hailey's Personal Journey of Faith*, p 339

¹⁰ Harry Osborne, letters dated November 10, 1988, to Melvin Curry, Bob Owen, Colly Caldwell

¹¹ David Edwin Harrell, Jr., *The Churches of Christ in the 20th Century: Homer Hailey's Personal Journey of Faith*, p 339

¹² Homer Hailey, *A Commentary on Isaiah*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, © 1985, p 538

¹³ Homer Hailey, “Soundings: Homer Hailey Speaks”, *Christianity Magazine*, Vol 5, No 11, November 1988, p 7

¹⁴ Homer Hailey, transcribed from audio sermon at A.M. Session, El Cajon, California, February 25, 1988

- G. **1991, Book published.** Stanley W. Paher with Nevada Publications published the book, *The Divorced and Remarried Who Would Come To God* by Homer Hailey:

“This book sets forth my position on the subject of the divorced and remarried who would come to God, and my reasons for holding it...The question is: Does God require those who were married, divorced and remarried while in the world and who would obey the gospel to separate after they become Christians; or does He accept their marriage as lawful? I believe that He accepts them without requiring their separation and I shall show the reasons why.”¹⁵

- H. **November 9, 2000**, Homer Hailey died at the age of 97 years, 3 months.

- I. **Summer 2004**, in the *FLORIDA COLLEGE MAGAZINE*, advertisements for recordings of class lectures and studies included this ad:

“Sit at the feet of Homer Hailey again...or for the first time. Superb scholar, prolific author, tireless preacher, and a fine example of faith in our time, Homer Hailey is thought by many to be the single most influential preacher of the 20th century. “Through faith, though he is dead, he still speaks.””¹⁶

1. Contrast this with how brethren have tried to minimize his power of influence in the area of his teaching on divorce and remarriage. Shall we believe that his influence just suddenly disappeared?
2. Harry Osborne noted in a letter to brother Hailey,

“Most of my meetings have been in the West. I normally give at least one sermon on the broad issue of marriage, divorce and remarriage during a meeting. When one disagrees with the conclusions I present, they almost always bring your name out as one who disagrees with those conclusions. In the past four years or so, I have seen an increase in this trend.”¹⁷

II. Homer Hailey in Belen, New Mexico

A. 1987, New work in Belen, New Mexico.

1. **June**, Tim Stevens, an employee for Santa Fe Railroad, and some other brethren helped get the church started.¹⁸ Tim also preached for the church in the beginning.
2. **October 5-9**, a group of preachers¹⁹, including Homer Hailey, and other brethren from around the country converged on Belen to help strengthen the church and make contacts for future studies.²⁰ While there, brother Hailey met privately with a couple who was visiting the new congregation from the institutional church. It was thought that brother Hailey was going to study with the couple regarding institutional practices in the church from which they came. He indicated that they had expressed a desire to place membership, and they did that same evening. It was not known to the brethren of Belen for another five months that brother Hailey had discussed the marital status of this couple during his private visit with them. They had an unscriptural marriage before obeying the gospel, and brother Hailey had told them that, according to his understanding, their marriage was acceptable to God.

B. 1988, Problems arose over marriage, divorce and remarriage in the church at Belen and efforts were then made to resolve the differences personally and privately.

1. **March 6-11**, Harry Osborne held a gospel meeting. He was asked by Lee Stewart, the local preacher, and Tim Stevens “to preach on the subject (of marriage, divorce, and remarriage, js) since they believed there might be a problem regarding the marriage of one member.”²¹
 - a. **Wednesday, 9th**, He taught God’s law on marriage, divorce and remarriage. The member under consideration was a young lady who had recently been baptized and it was thought she might be in an unscriptural marriage. Harry did not give an extensive study on the subject. After the sermon the young lady talked with Lee and Harry, indicating to them that she was not scripturally married. Her husband had been married twice before and divorced for reasons other than fornication. She expressed an intent to put away her husband if that would make her right with God. Before she took

¹⁵ Homer Hailey, *The Divorced and Remarried Who Would Come To God*, Las Vegas, Nevada, Nevada Publications, © 1991, revised edition, © 1998. pp 5, 8

¹⁶ *Florida College Magazine*, Summer 2004, Vol 6, No 1

¹⁷ Harry Osborne, letter dated May 13, 1988, to Homer Hailey

¹⁸ Ron Halbrook, Harry Osborne, Lee Stewart, Tim Stevens, “To Set The Record Straight: Recent Studies With Homer Hailey On Divorce and Remarriage”, *Guardian of Truth*, November 17, 1988, p 17

¹⁹ Tim Stevens, e-mail dated April 19, 2000 to Jimmy Stevens, indicates that Homer Hailey, Harry Osborne, Bill Robinson, Jr., and Dan Petty were among those present.

²⁰ Tim Stevens, e-mail dated April 19, 2000 to Jimmy Stevens

²¹ Harry Osborne, letter dated May 13, 1988, to Homer Hailey

any action against the husband Harry advised her to be sure that the reasons for her husband's earlier divorces were indeed unscriptural, in case she did have a right to be married to him.

- b. **Thursday, 10th**, This young lady went to the home of the older couple from the liberal church whom brother Hailey had advised five months earlier concerning their marriage. They told her to disregard what Harry had taught, continue in her marriage and don't bring up the matter to others. It was at this point that brother Hailey's teaching on the issue was brought out. This couple also told her that brother Hailey did not believe what Harry preached and that he believed none of the marriages and divorces of her husband would matter since that all happened before she was baptized.
 - c. **Friday, 11th**, Harry ate supper with this couple. The husband brought up the issue. Harry tried to reason with him from Scripture without any progress. At that point the husband became upset and again spoke of how brother Hailey disagreed with Harry's teaching.²² This was the first that the church in Belen knew about brother Hailey's advising the older couple concerning their marriage five months earlier. During the following week after the gospel meeting there continued to be much disagreement on this issue.
2. **March 20.** Sunday, Lee Stewart called brother Hailey in hopes of going to his home in Tucson, Arizona to discuss his teaching more thoroughly. Brother Hailey offered to give his teaching over the phone so it could be recorded. That same evening, Lee called brother Hailey again to ask if five or six brethren from Belen could come to Tucson, but brother Hailey suggested coming to Belen to save plane fares.²³
 3. **March 22.** On Tuesday brother Hailey came to Belen and presented his views to the brethren there in about a two and one half hour presentation. It was video taped with brother Hailey's consent. It was thought that this would help resolve the problem, but it only created more confusion. In a letter written later by the church at Belen to brother Hailey after his visit, it said,

"Some in the audience that day you were here, immediately felt the church in Belen had been 'straightened out' on this issue by your presentation. However, some of us felt the need for further study. Efforts were made to bring us all together to discuss your position, but to no avail. We then believed the church should hear the 'other side' by someone knowledgeable in the scriptures and well respected among brethren, as yourself. It was our hope that this would finally persuade the brethren here to study and discuss together, 'both sides of the coin'."²⁴

- a. Remember that during his gospel meeting a week and one half earlier, Harry Osborne had not spoken extensively on the subject of marriage, divorce and remarriage and the brethren there felt they needed a more in-depth study on the subject from that view point.
- b. Originally Harry Osborne was asked by Tim Stevens to respond to brother Hailey. Harry noted in a letter to brother Hailey.

"I suggested however, that an older man be brought in to present the other side of the issue in the same detail you (Homer Hailey, js), were allowed to present your convictions. Originally, I had asked Elmer Moore to do this, but he was out of state in a meeting and unable to get back in time. Ron Halbrook was then asked and I went with him to Belen on March 31"²⁵

- c. During his visit on March 22nd, brother Hailey indicated that he was considering coming out more publicly on his position.²⁶
4. **March 31**, Ron Halbrook went to Belen to present his material on the subject. It was video taped and both presentations were put together for future review.
5. **April 13**, A letter was composed by the brethren in the Belen church and sent to brother Hailey with the video tape of both his and Ron's presentations to review and respond to.²⁷
6. **April 15**, Ron wrote a letter to brother Hailey to encourage him to review the videos and respond.²⁸
7. **May 4**, Brother Hailey answered Ron's letter indicating that he had not had time to review the tape carefully. At that time he stated,

"This is a question that must be settled in the mind of each as a result of his study of the word. Debates seem not to have settled anything, consequently I have avoided such and will pursue the same course."²⁹

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Tim Stevens, letter dated January 27, 1989, to Homer Hailey

²⁴ Rio Grande Valley Church of Christ, letter dated April 13, 1988 to Homer Hailey, p 1

²⁵ Harry Osborne, letter dated May 13, 1988, to Homer Hailey

²⁶ Tim Stevens, October 14, 2000, to Jimmy Stevens in a visit in Jimmy's home.

²⁷ Rio Grande Valley Church of Christ, letter dated April 13, 1988 to Homer Hailey, p 1

²⁸ Ron Halbrook, letter dated April 15, 1988, to Homer Hailey

- a. This is the language of Romans 14 and indicates that brother Hailey would place this matter in the application of that chapter. Ron made this observation in a later letter to brother Hailey.³⁰
8. **May 13**, Harry Osborne wrote brother Hailey to explain his part in the conflict at Belen and that he only briefly spoke on the subject of divorce and remarriage when he held his meeting in March. He expressed a desire to discuss this matter further with brother Hailey sometime during the time of the Southside Lectures (Southside Church of Christ, Pasadena, Texas) June 17th. He also urged him to “take the time to listen to Ron Halbrook's discussion (video tape, js) of this issue.”³¹
9. **May 25**, In response to Harry's letter brother Hailey indicated that he had not had time yet to listen to and study Ron's tape from Belen. He also expressed the same sentiments as stated to Ron about each person's needing to make up his own mind about the issue.³²
10. **June 1**, Harry responded to brother Hailey with further discussion of the issue. In this letter he made this observation of brother Hailey's comments about each person making up his own mind.
- “In your letter, you suggest that the points of our differences must be left to personal conscience and imply that either conclusion would be acceptable to God.”³³
11. **June 7**, Brother Hailey responded to Harry's letter,
- “I in no wise consider the question lightly or indifferently; I have probably devoted as many hours to its study as any other, with a few exceptions. What I conclude is on the tape. My position is not taken so dogmatically as some, but I believe it is sound. So, with so many matters pressing me for time, I propose for my part to leave it as it is.”³⁴
- a. It appears at this point that brother Hailey chose not to respond to the tape. This becomes more evident later when the brethren at Belen were needing to make public explanation of the events to dispel rumors circulating about the incident there.
- b. This exchange was kept as a fairly private exchange until October. That is, there were no publications of these events in any periodicals by the men involved.
12. **June 21**, Harry responded to brother Hailey, continuing to urge further discussion, since brother Hailey had refused to at this point.
- “I also realize that someone of your years and understanding has to budget his time in a wise manner. At 31 years of age and far less ability, I readily admit that I may not be the one you could discuss this issue with at your level of depth. But brother Hailey, please discuss it with someone in whom you do have confidence so that many of us might be benefited and truth might be seen. That is my desire. I offer my help in trying to arrange such a study with someone in whom you do have confidence.”³⁵
13. **July 6**, Brother Hailey responded to Harry and indicated that he was going to “try to write a clear and cogent presentation of why I believe as I do. But I know it will be after August.”³⁶
14. **July 10**, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. R.J. Stevens and Homer Hailey were in attendance at the lectures conducted by one of the congregations there. R.J. encouraged brother Hailey to arrange a meeting to discuss the differences with him, Harry, Marshall Patton, Ron Halbrook, and perhaps others. At that time he understood that brother Hailey was willing to do so, but setting a specific time would be uncertain. R.J. related this information to Harry Osborne.^{37, 38, 39}
15. **August 10**, Harry responded to brother Hailey with an expression of anticipation of receiving a copy of his written presentation on the subject. He also expressed his joy that brother Hailey had agreed to study with him on this matter.⁴⁰
16. **August 16**, Brother Hailey responded to Harry and indicated that he had not committed to a discussion but that he was only considering it.⁴¹

²⁹ Homer Hailey, letter dated May 4, 1988, to Ron Halbrook

³⁰ Ron Halbrook, letter dated September 8, 1988, to Homer Hailey

³¹ Harry Osborne, letter dated May 13, 1988, to Homer Hailey

³² Homer Hailey, letter dated May 25, 1988, to Harry Osborne

³³ Harry Osborne, letter dated June 1, 1988, to Homer Hailey

³⁴ Homer Hailey, letter dated June 7, 1988, to Harry Osborne

³⁵ Harry Osborne, letter dated June 21, 1988, to Homer Hailey

³⁶ Homer Hailey, letter dated July 6, 1988, to Harry Osborne

³⁷ R.J. Stevens, letter dated September 5, 1988, to Homer Hailey

³⁸ Harry Osborne, letter dated August 10, 1988, to Homer Hailey

³⁹ Ron Halbrook, letter dated September 8, 1988, to Homer Hailey

⁴⁰ Harry Osborne, letter dated August 10, 1988, to Homer Hailey

17. **August 30**, Harry responded to brother Hailey with his disappointment that brother Hailey continued to avoid a meeting and discussion with him, R.J. Stevens, Ron Halbrook or anyone else, and urged him to reconsider.⁴²
18. **September 5**, After having heard that brother Hailey was not committing to a discussion, R.J. Stevens wrote brother Hailey and expressed his surprise that brother Hailey told Harry that he had not agreed to a study. He continued to urge brother Hailey and stated,

“I still would love to see you have a study with Ron Halbrook or Harry Osborne or both...I know of no other man in the brotherhood who has the influence you have to keep this problem from tearing the church asunder.”⁴³

19. **September 8**, Ron Halbrook wrote brother Hailey with disappointment that he would not be studying with them and, again urged him to reconsider.

“You may be wondering what my attitude is after these several months and you may have heard some rumor as to my thoughts, words, or deeds. I want you to know the door is still open for study. I am still open to consider any thought or suggestion you might offer on my presentation at Belen.”⁴⁴

Ron observed brother Hailey placing his view in the realm of personal choice and Romans 14.

“I realize that some questions such as eating meats can be left to the personal conscience and choice of each individual (Rom 14)...But the question of whether God’s law of morality in marriage as taught by His Son applies to all people or not is not a question of personal choice.”⁴⁵

20. **September 20**, Because of rumors circulating among brethren about how things were handled in the Belen incident, and because brother Hailey would not commit to a discussion on this matter, brethren Halbrook and Osborne wrote brother Hailey and encouraged him to critique a statement about the Belen incident that they, along with Lee Stewart and Tim Stevens, were considering having published. It was entitled “To Set The Record Straight.” The letter stated:

“Just as we have tried to be open and fair toward you since this matter first came up, we are taking another step so that nothing will be ‘done in a corner’ You are receiving this advance copy of the article from us before publication in order that you may prepare an ‘addendum’ adding any clarification, criticism, or other comment which you deem appropriate. Or, you may wish to prepare a full article separately, which could be published alongside our article. If you do wish to prepare something to appear along with our article, please send it to us by 19 October.”⁴⁶

Again, the observation is made of brother Hailey’s associating conviction on his position with such matters as would fall in Romans 14.

“Brother Hailey, if what Jesus said about marriage were a matter of indifference in the gospel system, if it were left to personal taste and choice like circumcision or eating meats, we would be compelled to recognize the liberty of the individual conscience in this matter (Romans 14). We could then say with Paul, ‘Our personal application of God’s marriage law commendeth us not to God; for neither, if we leave an adulterous marriage, are we the better; neither, if we abide in it, are we the worse’ (1 Corinthians 8:8). Were such the case, we could rejoice in the beautiful words, ‘Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity’ (Psalm 133:1).”⁴⁷

21. **October 17**, Brother Hailey responded, critical of how this matter was being handled and stated,

“If at a later date I choose to make a statement concerning these events, it will be made public, at which time you will be given the information along with others.”⁴⁸

- C. **Decision to go public with this information.** It should be obvious by now that many attempts were made by those involved in the Belen incident, who believed that brother Hailey was teaching error, to try to meet with him in a direct and personal way to discuss these matters without publicizing the exchanges. In the meantime, rumors were flying around the country on both sides of the issue about what was going

⁴¹ Homer Hailey, letter dated August 16, 1988, to Harry Osborne

⁴² Harry Osborne, letter dated August 30, 1988, to Homer Hailey

⁴³ R.J. Stevens, letter dated September 5, 1988, to Homer Hailey

⁴⁴ Ron Halbrook, letter dated September 8, 1988, to Homer Hailey

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Ron Halbrook & Harry Osborne, letter dated September 20, 1988, to Homer Hailey

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Homer Hailey, letter dated October 17, 1988, to Ron Halbrook

on with the brethren involved with the Belen incident. Much false information was being surmised and the misunderstandings were escalating.

1. "To Set The Record Straight"⁴⁹ became the first published document to inform brethren of what had transpired in Belen, New Mexico in March and the months following. The decision to put this information in print was finally confirmed when brother Hailey refused to comment or offer any rebuttal to the article by the submission date for publication of October 19, 1988.
2. Concerning the video tape of the Belen presentations by Homer Hailey and Ron Halbrook:

"When brethren began asking for the video tape, the church at Belen refused to give it out. (Ask Harry and Ron). We sent it to you first so that you could view your presentation and that of Ron's. We asked for a response from you, but it never came. It is my understanding that you viewed the tape some time between the Southside Lectures (June 17) and the Oklahoma City Lectures (July 10). We sent the tape to you April 13. Eventually, we felt we had no other alternative but to give it out to the elders of churches (two) who requested it prior to you conducting meetings for them. We saw division at Belen as a result of your teaching."^{50, 51}

III. The Controversy Is Published.

A. November 1988

1. **"To Set the Record Straight: Recent Studies With Homer Hailey On Divorce And Remarriage."**⁴⁸ *Guardian of Truth*. In order to try to dispel rumors and misinformation, Ron Halbrook, Harry Osborne, Lee Stewart and Tim Stevens, all involved with some part of the incident, compiled this explanation about what took place at Belen, New Mexico related to Homer Hailey's teaching of error on divorce and remarriage there.⁵²
 - a. Since brother Hailey was to be honored at the 1989 Florida College Lectures in February, just prior to its publication, Harry Osborne sent a copy of this article along with his correspondence with brother Hailey to three staff members at the college to make them aware of what had transpired in 1988 with the man they were about to honor.⁵³
 - b. Before the lectures, brother Hailey chose not to be on the program because he understood that his presence, in light of the controversy, would cause some not to attend the lectures. At the lectures, Bob Owen read a statement to that effect, explaining brother Hailey's absence. He stated,

"Brother Homer Hailey holds a view on one phase of the marriage question with which I differ. He has held that view for more than forty years. He believes it to be right and has not hesitated to express this view when questioned. His general practice has been to discuss it only when questioned. He taught 10 to 12 Bible classes per year at Florida College for 22 years. I do not know of his ever bringing up this issue in a single class."⁵⁴
2. **"Homer Hailey Speaks Out"**, After having received a copy of the article "To Set The Record Straight" for review before publication brother Hailey wrote a letter giving his version of the events that took place at Belen, New Mexico and arranged to have it published in the religious periodical *Christianity Magazine*.⁵⁵ It was also later published in *Searching The Scriptures*⁵⁶ and *Guardian of Truth*.⁵⁷
3. **"Homer Hailey: False Teacher?"** In the same issue of *Christianity Magazine*, under the section called "Past, Present and Perfect", Ed Harrell wrote a defense of brother Hailey based on the letter received from him.⁵⁸ Brother Harrell did not contact anyone at Belen to try to get the whole story before publishing this response, and apparently used only brother Hailey's view of the events.^{59, 60} In his

⁴⁹ Ron Halbrook, Harry Osborne, Lee Stewart, Tim Stevens, "To Set The Record Straight: Recent Studies With Homer Hailey On Divorce and Remarriage", *Guardian of Truth*, November 17, 1988, p 17

⁵⁰ Tim Stevens, letter dated January 27, 1989, to Homer Hailey

⁵¹ Tim Stevens, "An Open Letter to Sam Dawson", *Guardian of Truth*, October 1, 1992, p 18

⁵² Ron Halbrook, Harry Osborne, Lee Stewart, Tim Stevens, "To Set The Record Straight: Recent Studies With Homer Hailey On Divorce and Remarriage", *Guardian of Truth*, November 17, 1988.

⁵³ Harry Osborne, letters dated November 10, 1988, to Melvin Curry, Bob Owen, Colly Caldwell, who were associated with Florida College at the time.

⁵⁴ Bob F. Owen, "Policy Statement" made at 1989 Florida College Lectures, January 30, 1989

⁵⁵ Homer Hailey, "Soundings: Homer Hailey Speaks", *Christianity Magazine*, Vol 5, No 11, November 1988, p 7

⁵⁶ Homer Hailey, "A Statement From Homer Hailey", *Searching The Scriptures*, January 1989, p 4

⁵⁷ Homer Hailey, "Comments Regarding My Views on Divorce and Remarriage", *Guardian of Truth*, February 2, 1989, p 6

⁵⁸ Ed Harrell, "Homer Hailey: False Teacher?", *Christianity Magazine*, Vol 5, No 11, November 1988, p 6

⁵⁹ Tim Stevens, October 14, 2000, to Jimmy Stevens in a visit in Jimmy's home.

⁶⁰ Tim Stevens, "An Open Letter to Sam Dawson", *Guardian of Truth*, October 1, 1992, p 19

article he recognized fellowship with brother Hailey even though he believed he was not “correct” on the divorce and remarriage issue, and he believed that brethren could still recognize fellowship with him by using him for preaching in spite of the differences. ***It was in this article that the use of Romans 14 was first introduced into the controversy*** to justify ongoing fellowship with one who persisted in teaching a erroneous doctrine of considerable moral and doctrinal importance.^{61, 62} Until this time the only mention of Romans 14 was in personal correspondence with brother Hailey, challenging his view that brethren should decide for themselves on this question of divorce and remarriage.

- B. **January 24, 1989**, After brother Harrell’s defense of brother Hailey was published he received many written responses asking what he meant by his comments on fellowship with brother Hailey and the use of Romans 14. In a letter of response, addressed to “Friends” he stated that,

“Hailey’s letter raises questions about the subject of fellowship, however, that I think have not been addressed very clearly in my generation. In April, I intend to begin a series of twelve articles on the subject.”⁶³

- C. **February 1989-May 1990**, Brother Harrell then wrote a series of 16 articles in *Christianity Magazine*⁶⁴ in an attempt to explain his position on fellowship and Romans 14 with regard to those who teach false doctrine.
- D. **Post-Harrell Series Reactions.** When brother Harrell wrote “Homer Hailey: False Teacher?” he indicated that he violated several editorial rules. In the judgment of the editors of *Christianity Magazine* the teaching of this magazine would avoid personal exchanges.⁶⁵ The “Prospectus” indicated that it would avoid religious writings that were polemical⁶⁶ (involving dispute; controversial; argumentative).
1. Brother Harrell used the magazine to enter the “polemic” arena, yet it was not allowed to be used for rebuttal from those who opposed his view on Romans 14 and fellowship. Not only was there no allowance for rebuttal, but because the other editors took no public action to challenge brother Harrell’s published view on Romans 14 the indications were that they either agreed with him or did not think it was an issue significant enough to dispute in a public format.
 2. *Christianity Magazine* with its editors Ed Harrell, Dee Bowman, Paul Earnhart, Sewell Hall and Brent Lewis, fell under criticism, being perceived to be sympathetic to brother Harrell’s view on Romans 14 and fellowship.
- F. **1990’s**
1. **1991, Homer Hailey’s Book published.** *The Divorced and Remarried Who Would Come To God.*
 2. **1993, Earl Kimbrough’s Material.**⁶⁷ Earl Kimbrough published a booklet entitled, *How Shall We Treat Brethren With Whom We Disagree?* In it he argues,

“...for tolerance of differing doctrinal views on divorce and remarriage. That point is evident in brother Kimbrough’s citation of selective cases of such tolerance as well as his conclusion plainly admonishing brethren not to silence those teaching different doctrinal views on divorce and remarriage.”⁶⁸
 3. **1993+ Bob Owen** preached for several years on various occasions, in different states in the U.S. on the matter of fellowship as it related to the issue involving brother Hailey. In some of his lessons he used Romans 14 in a way which would allow brethren to maintain fellowship with teachers of error on divorce and remarriage, like brother Hailey. He highly commended Earl Kimbrough’s material, *How Shall We Treat Brethren With Whom We Disagree?*, in his sermon in Temple Terrace, Florida, in 1993.

⁶¹ Ron Halbrook, e-mail correspondence from Ron Halbrook to Jimmy Stevens, September 17, 2000

⁶² Harry Osborne, e-mail correspondence from Harry Osborne to Jimmy Stevens, September 18, 2000

⁶³ Ed Harrell, letter dated January 24, 1989

⁶⁴ Ed Harrell, “Past, Present and Perfect: The Bounds of Christian Unity” (1-16), *Christianity Magazine*, Vol 6, Nos 2-12, p 6, Vol 7: Nos 1-5, pg 6, February 1989 thru May 1990

⁶⁵ Ed Harrell, “Homer Hailey: False Teacher?”, *Christianity Magazine*, Vol 5, No 11, November 1988, p 6

⁶⁶ Dee Bowman, Paul Earnhart, Sewell Hall, Ed Harrell, Brent Lewis, editors, “Prospectus”, *Christianity Magazine*, January 1984, p 3

⁶⁷ Earl Kimbrough, *How Shall We Treat Brethren With Whom We Disagree?*, Brandon, Florida, Earl Kimbrough Publisher, © 1993

⁶⁸ Harry Osborne, letter dated February 12, 2001, to Brethren, p 1

His teaching on fellowship was much like the teaching of brother Harrell in his series of articles in *Christianity Magazine*.⁶⁹

G. 2000's

1. **2000, February 3-4, *Toward A Better Understanding: A Discussion of False Teachers, Romans 14, Fellowship***,⁷⁰ discussion in Burnet, Texas took place.
 - a. Toward the end of 1998 Wayne Moody and Jim Everett...

“...began to format a discussion involving eight men on the topics of ‘Romans 14,’ ‘False Teachers,’ ‘Fellowship’ and ‘Congregational Autonomy.’”
 - b. Through the year of 1999 finalizing the discussion took place, ultimately settling on three topics, with the deleting of “Congregational Autonomy”. The discussion was held in Burnet, Texas. The participants were Paul Earnhart, Ron Halbhook, Jesse Jenkins, Bob Owen, Harry Pickup, Jr. and Tom Roberts.
2. **2000, Ed Harrell's Book, *The Churches of Christ in the 20th Century: Homer Hailey's Personal Journey of Faith***.⁷¹ In this book he criticized those who attempted to study with brother Hailey and later publicly exposed his doctrine on divorce and remarriage after the Belen incident.⁷²
3. **2001, February, Florida College Lectures.** Donnie Rader spoke on the topic “What God Has Joined Together – Jesus on Marriage”. In his written lecture he makes reference to men who teach that it would be wrong to have fellowship with those living in adultery, but that brethren could maintain fellowship with those who teach that the adulterous relationship is not adulterous. He referenced the works of Ed Harrell and sermons preached by Bob Owen.⁷³

“After brother Rader's lecture, Colly Caldwell commended the lecture and then gave Bob Owen time to respond to a reference made in the documentation of Donnie's manuscript in the book, though Donnie never mentioned Bob in the lecture. Donnie was told about 5 to 10 minutes before the lecture that Bob Owen would be allowed to give a response and that Donnie would not be allowed a rejoinder. Brother Caldwell told the audience that three men (Bob Owen, Ed Harrell and Earl Kimbrough) had objected to references made to their teaching in brother Rader's manuscript. While the three men objecting agreed to the decision allowing only one to make oral objections, brother Caldwell did tell the audience that printed material from all three men would be available following the session. At that time, statements from Bob Owen, Ed Harrell and Earl Kimbrough were distributed to the audience. In fact, brother Buddy Payne (Vice-President and Academic Dean of FC) passed out the statements of Bob Owen and Ed Harrell to those leaving the auditorium.”⁷⁴

All three men in their responses failed to address the charges of continuing fellowship with one who persists in teaching error on divorce and remarriage. Bob Owen and Ed Harrell stated their unwillingness to continue in further discussion on this matter. This indicated that they had not changed from their teaching on fellowship and the persistent sinner.⁷⁵

- H. There were many other written exchanges and discussions that took place during this time of controversy, but these will represent the general idea.

CONCLUSION: This was a presentation of a historical chronology of the current controversy involving Romans 14 and fellowship. With this chronology in mind let us expand on the causes of the controversy in the next section.

⁶⁹ Bob Owen, sermon transcripts of audio taped sermons, “Fellowship”, Temple Terrace, Florida, September 2, 1993; “Local Church and Salvation”, AM Class, & “We Differ, Can We Fellowship?”, PM Worship, Concord, North Carolina, February 19, 1995; “Local Congregational Fellowship”, Temple Terrace, Florida, March 28, 1996; “Is It Necessary To Draw Lines?”, Florence, Alabama, June 1996; “Fellowship”, Annandale, Virginia, November 12, 1996; “Common Mistakes Concerning Fellowship”, Temple Terrace, Florida, March 3, 2000

⁷⁰ Jim Everett and Wayne Moody, editors, *Toward A Better Understanding*, Beaumont, Texas, The Preceptor Company, ©2000

⁷¹ David Edwin Harrell, Jr., *The Churches of Christ in the 20th Century: Homer Hailey's Personal Journey of Faith*, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, The University of Alabama Press, © 2000

⁷² *Ibid.*, pp 339-340

⁷³ Donnie V. Rader, “What God Has Joined Together”, *Jesus for a New Millennium, Florida College Annual Lectures: February 5-8, 2001*, Temple Terrace, Florida, Florida College Bookstore, ©2001, pp 177-188.

⁷⁴ Harry Osborne, letter dated February 12, 2001, to Brethren

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp 2-4

Issue Of The Controversy

INTRODUCTION: In our last lesson, we followed a historical chronology of the controversy which included occasions when brother Homer Hailey taught his views on divorce, remarriage and its effect on the Lord's church.

- A. We noted the events in Belen, New Mexico in 1987, which sparked discussion and correspondence between brethren associated with the Belen church and brother Hailey.
- B. We saw the inevitable need to go public with this doctrine and its teacher in order to dispel rumors and misunderstandings about the church in Belen.
- C. The publication of the explanations of events by both the brethren from Belen and brother Hailey drew attention from men who began using Romans 14 to defend brother Hailey's right to fellowship, in spite of his teaching of error.
- D. At this point a controversy ensued, practically nationwide, over whether or not Romans 14 could be used to allow continued fellowship among brethren when they differed on matters of "moral and doctrinal" teaching from the Bible.
- E. It will be the purpose of this lesson to look more closely at the arguments which created the controversy. Also included toward the end of this lesson will be a study entitled "**Fellowship and the Teacher of Error**"

I. Controversy begins, November 1988.

- A. **"To Set the Record Straight: Recent Studies With Homer Hailey On Divorce And Remarriage."** *Guardian of Truth*. In order to try to dispel rumors and misinformation, Ron Halbrook, Harry Osborne, Lee Stewart and Tim Stevens, all involved with some part of the incident at Belen, compiled this explanation about what took place at Belen related to Homer Hailey's teaching of error on divorce and remarriage.¹
- B. **"Homer Hailey Speaks Out."** After having received a copy of the article, "To Set The Record Straight," for review before publication, brother Hailey wrote a letter giving his version of the events that took place at Belen, and arranged to have it published in the religious periodical *Christianity Magazine*.² It was also later published in *Searching The Scriptures*³ and *Guardian of Truth*.⁴
- C. **"Homer Hailey: False Teacher?"** In the same issue of *Christianity Magazine*, under the section called "Past, Present and Perfect," Ed Harrell wrote a defense of brother Hailey based on the letter received from him.⁵ In his article he recognized fellowship with brother Hailey even though he believed he was not "correct" on the divorce and remarriage issue, and he believed that brethren could still recognize fellowship with him by using him for preaching, in spite of the differences. ***It was in this article that the use of Romans 14 was first introduced into the controversy*** to justify ongoing fellowship with one who persisted in teaching a erroneous doctrine of considerable moral and doctrinal importance.^{6, 7}
- D. **"Past, Present and Perfect: The Bounds of Christian Unity 1-16"** After brother Harrell's defense of brother Hailey was published he received numerous written responses asking what he meant by his comments on fellowship with brother Hailey and the use of Romans 14. He responded with a letter indicating that he would be addressing this matter in a series of articles.⁸ He later wrote this series of sixteen articles from February 1989 to May 1990, in *Christianity Magazine*,⁹ in an attempt to explain his position on fellowship and Romans 14 with regard to those who teach false doctrine.

II. Introducing Romans 14 into the controversy. "Homer Hailey: False Teacher?" by Ed Harrell.¹⁰

- A. *Defended Homer Hailey.*

¹ Ron Halbrook, Harry Osborne, Lee Stewart, Tim Stevens, "To Set The Record Straight: Recent Studies With Homer Hailey On Divorce and Remarriage", *Guardian of Truth*, November 17, 1988

² Homer Hailey, "Soundings: Homer Hailey Speaks", *Christianity Magazine*, Vol 5, No 11, November 1988, p 7

³ Homer Hailey, "A Statement From Homer Hailey", *Searching The Scriptures*, January 1989, p 4

⁴ Homer Hailey, "Comments Regarding My Views on Divorce and Remarriage", *Guardian of Truth*, February 2, 1989, p 6

⁵ Ed Harrell, "Homer Hailey: False Teacher?", *Christianity Magazine*, Vol 5, No 11, November 1988, p 6

⁶ Ron Halbrook, e-mail correspondence from Ron Halbrook to Jimmy Stevens, September 17, 2000

⁷ Harry Osborne, e-mail correspondence from Harry Osborne to Jimmy Stevens, September 18, 2000

⁸ Ed Harrell, letter dated January 24, 1989, to "Friends" to answer responses to his article "Homer Hailey: False Teacher?" *Christianity Magazine*, Vol 5, No 11, November 1988, p 6

⁹ Ed Harrell, "Past, Present and Perfect: The Bounds of Christian Unity" (1-16), *Christianity Magazine*, Vol 6, Nos 2-12, p 6, Vol 7: Nos 1-5, pg 6, February 1989 thru May 1990

¹⁰ Ed Harrell, "Homer Hailey: False Teacher?", *Christianity Magazine*, Vol 5, No 11, November 1988, p 6

“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...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.”¹¹

In a personal letter he wrote,

“I have always had a reason for my willingness to fellowship Hailey and that was the point of my article.”¹²

B. *Prejudicial remarks.* He used remarks which could mislead and prejudice a reader to sympathize with brother Hailey.

1. At least four times he described brother Hailey as being “attacked”. For example,

“I confess that the recent personal attacks on him seem to me to be an unheroic assault on an 85-year-old warrior.”¹³

2. Remember that brother Harrell had not consulted those associated with the Belen church in this incident except brother Hailey, and apparently had written using only brother Hailey’s letter.^{14, 15, 16} He stated,

“Homer Hailey’s letter seemed to me to call for some comment.”¹⁷

a. Brother Hailey in his letter to brother Harrell used the word “attack” which unfairly described the correspondence with the brethren associated with the Belen incident. He wrote,

“All at once I find myself under attack by some, being charged as a false teacher, unfit for the fellowship of certain ones who differ with me. This attack began in the spring, following a study with the brethren in the church at Belen.”¹⁸

b. Perhaps this was a poor choice of words by brother Hailey. Nevertheless, brother Harrell capitalized on brother Hailey’s use of these words.

3. As brother Hailey noted in his comments above, the so-called “attacks” started in the spring after his discussion at Belen, before brother Harrell’s article, brother Hailey’s article and the brethren’s article from Belen had been published in November, 1988.

a. From the time of the incident in March, personal correspondence between brother Hailey and the men directly involved with the church in Belen was conducted in a gentlemanly fashion with extreme respect. If there were expressions of so-called “attacks” it would have had to come from those not directly associated with the events. Whether or not that was the case, my confidence will lie with the eye witnesses involved.

b. Consider a sample of the language used by so-called “attackers” who were personally involved with the Belen incident. Remember that brother Harrell had not talked to anyone associated with the Belen church about this incident, except brother Hailey, when he wrote this article.

“Words cannot convey the pain and sorrow we have felt as we have become more fully aware of your private and public teaching on the matter at hand, and as we have therefore recognized our responsibility to respond to it. We love you deeply and genuinely but must love the truth even more. Each of us is indebted to you for good you have done us, but we are indebted to the Lord even more. It grieves us greatly to oppose what you have taught, but the error of your teaching and the damage it does to the cause of Christ grieves us even more. Where the purity of the gospel is concerned, we ask for no quarter and we can give none. No doubt you endorse these sentiments as true to the teaching of Christ.

“As you know so well, the depth of our love for truth may be measured by the depth of our hatred for error. There are some phases of worship which are left to judgment, such as whether the Lord’s Supper comes before or after preaching, but instrumental music does not fall into that category in spite of the insistence of Christian church preachers that it does. We realize there are some phases of the marriage issue which must be left to judgment, such as what is spelled out on the divorce papers

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Ed Harrell, letter dated January 24, 1989

¹³ Ed Harrell, “Homer Hailey: False Teacher?”, p 6

¹⁴ Tim Stevens, October 14, 2000, to Jimmy Stevens in a visit in Jimmy’s home.

¹⁵ Tim Stevens, “An Open Letter to Sam Dawson”, *Guardian of Truth*, October 1, 1992, p 19

¹⁶ Ed Harrell, letter dated January 24, 1989

¹⁷ Ed Harrell, “Homer Hailey: False Teacher?”, p 6

¹⁸ Homer Hailey, “Soundings: Homer Hailey Speaks”, *Christianity Magazine*, Vol 5, No 11, November 1988, p 7

when there is a divorce on the grounds of fornication. But the claim that God's marriage law as announced by Christ has no application to alien sinners goes beyond the realm of private judgment. Such teaching deludes people with the idea that they are saved while continuing in adulterous marriage. Souls for whom Jesus died are in the balance.

"Brother Hailey, we plead with all the love of our being for you to restudy and reconsider this matter, and to make the correction needed while you still have time and opportunity."¹⁹

- c. Inflammatory remarks like brethren Hailey and Harrell used only fuel unnecessary animosity in a discussion of this kind. It is a tactic used in an attempt to cloud the real issue. When people cannot defend the truth they will often resort to these measures in order to prejudice their listeners or readers.
- C. *Brother Hailey's view treated as just another option on divorce and remarriage.*
1. Brother Harrell diluted the seriousness of brother Hailey's teaching by comparing it to disagreements on other questions on divorce and remarriage, as if brother Hailey's view was a plausible option among many. In other words, since there are many views, then we should not reject Homer Hailey because of his view.
 2. There is no other apparent reason to argue this way than to support his conclusion in the article that he "can work and worship with Homer Hailey in spite of our differences," that is, have fellowship with him.
- D. *Misapplied principles.* He placed brother Hailey's false teaching on divorce and remarriage on the level of other matters where brethren have disagreed and yet still recognized fellowship with each other (ex: head covering, serving in the military, marriage ceremonies in the church building).
1. He wrote,

"What of those who believe Christians cannot serve in the military? What of those who believe a woman must wear a covering? What of those of us who believe that it is unscriptural to conduct marriage ceremonies in a church building?"²⁰
 2. Regardless of how we may deal with these matters, they are not the reason for this present controversy.
- E. *Introduction of Romans 14.* He used Romans 14 as a means to justify fellowship in spite of differences.
1. He considered brother Hailey's view as a matter of "doubtful disputations".

"One of the principles that limits our disagreements is a ban on "doubtful disputations" (Rom 14:1). If one is factious or schismatic, others should not tolerate his destructive teaching and conduct. Some of Hailey's critics have surmised that he has become, or is about to become, a dangerous schismatic, that he is going to 'come out' on this heated question. Hailey's letter denies that accusation."

"Nor shall I consider him an agitator and schismatic until he begins destroying the congregations across the country that he has done so much to build."²¹
 - a. Brother Hailey's letter said, "...I do not intend to contribute to any division in the church over this issue."²² This was in spite of the fact that he had already taught his doctrine to many, and that he had contributed to the dividing of some churches because of this teaching.
 - b. Tim Stevens answered brother Hailey's comment best,

"We saw division at Belen as a result of your teaching. Three families left and reverted to 'liberalism' once again. You also said in your recent article, that you do not intend to contribute to any division in the church over this issue. Brother Hailey, can't you see you already have? The division that resulted in Belen in March 1988 was brewing since October 1987 when you spoke 'privately' your views to the couple in their home. When you say that this is a personal matter and not a church issue, you are sadly mistaken. How many other churches are suffering now and those that will suffer in the future from such 'private' teaching?"²³
 - c. Brother Hailey's denial of the effect of his teaching did not keep his teaching from doing damage.
 2. Brother Harrell indicated that even though a person teaches error which causes souls to be lost he can still be received in fellowship if he is honest, sincere and has accumulated good deeds.

¹⁹ Ron Halbrook & Harry Osborne, letter dated September 20, 1988, to Homer Hailey

²⁰ Ed Harrell, "Homer Hailey: False Teacher?", pp 8-9

²¹ *Ibid.*, p 9

²² Homer Hailey, "Soundings: Homer Hailey Speaks", *Christianity Magazine*, Vol 5, No 11, November 1988, p 7

²³ Tim Stevens, letter dated January 27, 1989, to Homer Hailey

“Several principles come into play when one decides the limits of fellowship. Clearly, one must consider the honesty of the other person, and his apparent sincerity in following God’s directions (Romans 14:1-6). One must consider the public effect of the disputed teaching (1 Corinthians 5:1). There are several other guiding principles in the New Testament, but two seem particularly pertinent to the life of Homer Hailey.”²⁴

While we must certainly be patient with an honest seeker of truth who may waver during his struggle to a mature understanding of the truth, brother Harrell applied these principles to an impenitent, persistent teacher of error.

“Disagreements must take place within an atmosphere of mutual respect for another’s commitment to God, biblical seriousness, depth of knowledge and moral honesty. I think I see flaws in brother Hailey’s reasoning on the subject of divorce and remarriage, but I have never for a moment doubted his integrity, his character, or his devout desire to please God.”

“With regard to Hailey, however, I think the answer is that through sixty years of service Hailey has proven himself to be a tireless student, a profound preacher, and a selfless builder of the cause of Christ. He has left behind a trail of praiseworthy achievements. I suspect that most people who invite Homer Hailey to preach do so because they admire his life and have been enriched by his preaching, in spite of his views on divorce and remarriage. He is a great and good man, and brethren have sought to use him and to honor him. At this late date, he deserves nothing less.”²⁵

F. *Teachers of error should be allowed to teach their error.* Brother Harrell stated that,

“In all honesty, I would be hard pressed to justify a standard of fellowship that allowed one to hold a view so long as he did not tell anyone what he believed.”

Yet, in the same paragraph he follows with,

“If brother Hailey should write a summary of his views on this subject I would regret that he might convert people to a view that I think is wrong.”²⁶

1. When brother Hailey exercised his right to teach his view he was challenged because of its error and destruction to a local church.
 2. Brother Harrell considered this challenge as an “attack” that should not have taken place.
 3. Therefore, it appears that brother Harrell’s solution to this dilemma is to recognize brother Hailey in fellowship and allow him to teach his error. It would be regrettable if people became lost because of his teaching, but that should be no reason to deny fellowship with him, nor stop him from teaching his view.
 4. Brethren, we cannot have it both ways. Brother Harrell teaches that although brother Hailey supposedly handled his teaching “with dignity and reserve”²⁷, he has the right to teach it publicly.²⁸
 5. However, if brother Hailey has the right to teach error, then local congregations have the right to identify and mark that error wherever it may be spread by whoever spreads it.
- G. *Local churches and individuals have the right to determine fellowship with others.* While brother Harrell granted the rights of both local churches and individuals to decide fellowship with a teacher of error, he wrote this article to criticize those who did just that when they made a sound decision to reject and mark a persistent teacher of error.
1. *Local churches.*

“First,...Each congregation decides the limits of its associations. That is a God-given responsibility that cannot be shunned (1 Corinthians 5:12). Many congregations would not accept into their fellowship the divorced persons accepted by Hailey, and many would not invite him to preach because of the view that he holds...It is perfectly proper that some congregations have not, and would not, invite Homer Hailey to preach because of the position that he holds on this subject. Others, rightly I believe, have decided to use him in spite of the difference.”²⁹

²⁴ Ed Harrell, “Homer Hailey: False Teacher?”, p 9

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ M.C. Kurfees, *Instrumental Music in the Worship*, Nashville, Tennessee, Gospel Advocate Co., 1969, pp 198-249.

Historical examples alone do not determine doctrine. However, since history has often been appealed to in this controversy consider that scholars of the Restoration movement of the 19th century “insisted...that all matters on the side of opinion...be held ‘private property’ without ever ‘publishing or practicing’ them ‘so as to give offense’ to others.” p 198

²⁹ Ed Harrell, “Homer Hailey: False Teacher?”, p 9

2. *Individual rights.*

“Second, we all have a personal responsibility to endorse or repudiate the teaching of others with whom we come into contact. Every man should be willing to take the consequences of his teaching...Homer Hailey understands that others have the right to challenge his views and to warn others that he holds them if they think that he constitutes a threat to sound teaching.”

“Brother Hailey’s standing ‘among us’ will be decided by congregations and individuals throughout the country, as it has been in the past. That is as it should be.”³⁰

3. Even though “That is as it should be”, when that right was exercised by brethren, brother Harrell criticized them.

H. *Encouraged continued fellowship.* Based on the arguments in his article he believes that in spite of brother Hailey’s false teaching he can continue to have fellowship with him and encourages other to do so.

1. He acknowledged fellowship with brother Hailey.

“I have always had a reason for my willingness to fellowship Hailey and that was the point of my article.”³¹ “Without pretending to exhaust the arguments on the subject of fellowship, I confess that consistency is a formidable reason why I can work and worship with Homer Hailey in spite of our differences.”³²

2. Others should too.

“It is perfectly proper that some congregations have not, and would not, invite Homer Hailey to preach because of the position that he holds on this subject. Others, rightly I believe, have decided to use him in spite of the difference.”

“He is a great and good man, and brethren have sought to use him and to honor him. At this late date, he deserves nothing less.”³³

I. *Things he avoided.*

1. He issued no serious warning of the danger of adultery associated with brother Hailey’s teaching.
2. He said nothing about brother Hailey’s teaching contributing to the division of the church at Belen, New Mexico, which took place just months before this article was written.
3. He did not warn about the damage that would continue to follow in churches which practice their own local autonomy to by deciding to accept brother Hailey and his teaching.
4. Instead, his harshest criticism was against those who had supposedly “attacked” brother Hailey on his erroneous doctrine of adultery.
5. And he emphasized that brother Hailey’s good qualities should be sufficient to out-weigh any negative effect on fellowship that may be created by his doctrine of adultery.

III. **Sixteen articles in *Christianity Magazine*.** Ed Harrell wrote this series as a follow-up of his article defending brother Hailey.

- A. He presented some interesting information on how brethren handled conflicts of the restoration movement in the 19th century and the institutional questions of the 1950’s. There are a number of points which I found very enlightening.

- B. However, with his comments on the use of Romans 14 and fellowship I must disagree.

1. He recognized that Romans 14 does involve matters of indifference before God, but also included matters of “faith”, or moral and doctrinal importance.

“The subject of conscientious disagreement is addressed in Romans 14.” “Specifically, Paul teaches that those who retained conscientious scruples about various rituals of the law should understand that those issues were not matters bound by God. But the intent of the passage clearly encompasses more than that clarification. The subject of Romans 14 is the question of brotherly disagreements...Neither can one argue that the passage simply proves that we can disagree about indifferent matters...The issue in Romans 14 is precisely the establishment of the right of brethren to differ in matters of faith.”³⁴

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p 8

³¹ Ed Harrell, letter dated January 24, 1989

³² Ed Harrell, “Homer Hailey: False Teacher?”, p 8

³³ *Ibid.*, pp 8-9

³⁴ Ed Harrell, “Past, Present and Perfect: The Bounds of Christian Unity”, *Christianity Magazine*, Vol 6, No 4, April 1989, p 6

“It is obvious that Christians sometimes disagree about scriptural instructions, even in matters of considerable moral and doctrinal import. In spite of these disagreements, we work and worship together, leaving many matters of individual judgment in the hands of God. That behavior, uniformly practiced throughout the history of Christianity is, I believe, the issue addressed in Romans 14.”³⁵

2. In the fuller context of his use of Romans 14 in the series, he supported his earlier conclusion in his defense of brother Hailey, that on the basis of Romans 14 he could continue to recognize fellowship with a brother who persisted in teaching this error.
- C. He introduced other issues which clouded the main issue and shifted arguments on fellowship to other matters such as head covering, war question, etc. He also introduced a strained use of the concept of false teachers and local church autonomy.
- D. He equated brother Hailey’s position on divorce and remarriage with other differences on divorce and remarriage, where fellowship is still recognized.
 1. In essence, his own position on divorce and remarriage appears to be just as plausible as brother Hailey’s when it comes to fellowship with the teachers of such doctrines.
 2. Rather than holding to the higher standard of God’s truth on divorce and remarriage and demanding brother Hailey’s position conform to it, he lowered God’s standard with its rights and privileges of fellowship to the level of brother Hailey’s view.

IV. Bob Owen on Fellowship.

- A. He preached for several years on various occasions, in different states in the U.S. on the matter of fellowship as it related to the issue involving brother Hailey.³⁶
- B. *Like Ed Harrell in many ways.* He followed essentially the same line of reasoning as brother Harrell on Romans 14.
- C. *Sermons implied the issue with Homer Hailey.* His sermons, while not directly mentioning brother Hailey by name (except in question and answer format), were presented as a proof of how to maintain fellowship with a persistent teacher of his error.

“Unless you’ve been on Patmos with John recently, you’re fully aware that both of these subject matters have been written about, debated about, spoken about, and differed upon, extensively throughout our brotherhood in recent years. Both of them are current issues. Both of them are critical issues. And, I welcome the opportunity to talk with you about what I understand Scripture to teach on these topics.”³⁷

1. The “subject matter” to which he is referring in 1993 was fellowship and false teachers as related to the controversy involving brother Hailey’s teaching.

“I cannot address this subject without everybody in this audience being aware that not only is it an issue among brethren, but it is one where considerable differences have been expressed, and where feelings have become tenuous, and on certain occasions even division has come, lines have been drawn.”³⁸

2. To confirm that he was referring to the issue involving brother Hailey, he criticized brethren who were challenging brother Hailey’s teaching.

“There are number of brethren who have written extensively and preached extensively in recent years and have repeatedly said, the only things you can deal with in Romans 14 are matters of indifference.”³⁹

3. He also alluded to brother Hailey’s doctrine.

“The whole question is not a matter of what about the aliens who divorce and remarry and come to the Lord. The whole question is not just a matter of a Christian repenting.”⁴⁰

³⁵ *Ibid.*, No 5, May 1989, p 6

³⁶ Bob Owen, sermon transcripts of audio taped sermons, “Fellowship”, Temple Terrace, Florida, September 2, 1993; “Local Church and Salvation”, AM Class, & “We Differ, Can We Fellowship?”, PM Worship & Question & Answer, Concord, North Carolina, February 19, 1995; “Local Congregational Fellowship”, Temple Terrace, Florida, March 28, 1996; “Is It Necessary To Draw Lines?”, Florence, Alabama, June 1996; “Fellowship”, Annandale, Virginia, November 12, 1996; “Common Mistakes Concerning Fellowship”, Temple Terrace, Florida, March 3, 2000

³⁷ Bob Owen, “Fellowship”, Temple Terrace, Florida, September 2, 1993

³⁸ Bob Owen, “Is It Necessary To Draw Lines?”, Florence, Alabama, June 1996

³⁹ Bob Owen, “Is It Necessary To Draw Lines?”, Florence, Alabama, June 1996

⁴⁰ Bob Owen, “Fellowship”, Temple Terrace, Florida, September 2, 1993

4. On the other hand, he insisted that his sermons were not intended to address this matter of fellowship with one like brother Hailey. He is either denying that he is addressing the issue with brother Hailey, or he is acknowledging that brethren should continue in fellowship with brother Hailey in spite of his persistent teaching of error. Which is it?

“I indicated to the audience last night that I started thinking of these things and preaching this same thought 30 years ago. And contrary to what has been the presumption of some, I’m not driven by some attempt to find a way to loosen our bonds of fellowshiping...I have no hidden agenda. Brethren, the kind of practice that has generally characterized the people I’ve been associated with in all of my years as a Christian is what I understand I’m teaching. I am not calling for some new bonds of fellowship that would embrace something that we have commonly not embraced. It has been reported that I have. Not true...For example, much of this controversy has evolved after the issues on divorce and remarriage. And I’ve heard a few statements ascribing to me the position based on my interpretation of Romans 14 that are totally untrue.”⁴¹

- D. *Romans 14, indifferent and doctrinal matters.* He taught that Romans 14 includes both matters of indifference and doctrinal.

“And many brethren today have come along and have said, ‘These passages cannot be applied to any matter where the Scripture teaches on it.’ The only thing that they, that this, these passages can be used to answer, are matters of indifference. Those are our terms.’ And I have heard this preached. I can show it to you in print and you can too. You know it. They say it’s only on matters of indifference.”⁴²

“Some people have come along and have said, ‘Okay now, Romans 14 and 1 Cor. 8 and 10 both deal with things that are innocent within themselves. But where a person thinks something to be wrong, where in reality it’s not wrong.’ And so, they have made this statement, ‘Romans 14 deals only with matters that are matters of indifference.’ That becomes a watchword. And they turn it around and they say, ‘You can’t put under Romans 14 anything that’s a matter of faith.’ Now that sounds good on the surface. And yes, I recognize that the cases here were matters that were indifferent. Somebody says, ‘Where is the example that the Bible takes a matter of faith and tells you can do it either way?’ That’s self-defeating. You couldn’t find that. Because if it is a violation of law and you find it, God’s going to tell you here’s the right way. But if only matters that are matters of indifference can be handled among brethren in the church of the Lord today, I want you to tell me what issues could be dealt with among brethren?”⁴³

“Now let me readily admit...that the question of eating of meat in Romans 14 and the question of observing of days in Romans 14 would fall in what we have commonly called matters of indifference...that the two examples in Romans 14 are dealing with things that in and of themselves were indifferent or innocent.”⁴⁴

- E. *Misused Romans 14.* Brother Owen indicated that the weak brother would reject the inspired instructions of Paul’s letter concerning liberties, and continue to believe God required something of him which God did not. Lending to the confusion is the jumping back and forth between matters of doctrine and matters of conscience in this text.

“So in Rome and in Corinth you had brethren who differed in what they believed. You have brethren who differed in their practice. One believed it was a sin to eat meats that had been sacrificed to an idol, so he wouldn’t eat them. Another believed that those meats were acceptable and he did eat them. Now the fellow who thought it could be a sin to eat those meats had to look at the other fellow and think he was sinning. Had to. In Rome, the fellow who thought it was a sin to eat any kind of meat would have to think you sinned if you ate a piece of meat. And yet Paul taught them that they should accept each other.”⁴⁵

“The man at Rome had to feel that the man who ate meat was a false teacher. And a false practice.”⁴⁶

⁴¹ Bob Owen, “Is It Necessary To Draw Lines?”, Florence, Alabama, June 1996

⁴² Bob Owen, “Fellowship”, Temple Terrace, Florida, September 2, 1993

⁴³ Bob Owen, “We Differ, Can We Fellowship?” PM Worship, Concord, North Carolina, February 19, 1995

⁴⁴ Bob Owen, “Is It Necessary To Draw Lines?”, Florence, Alabama, June 1996

⁴⁵ Bob Owen, “We Differ, Can We Fellowship?” PM Worship, Concord, North Carolina, February 19, 1995

⁴⁶ Bob Owen, “Local Congregational Fellowship”, Temple Terrace, Florida, March 28, 1996

“If we start with that premise, the person who was in Rome or in Corinth who thought it was a sin to eat meat would have been obligated to withdraw from any brother who did eat the meat or who failed to observe the days, because they had to feel that other brother was doing something wrong. You and I know from Paul’s statement that it was an innocent act. That it was a matter of indifference. But he didn’t know that. And he still had his conviction and Paul’s letter to him presumed that not everyone would be converted even by his letter. So he tells him, ‘If your conscience still bothers you, don’t you eat it, or don’t you practice it.’”⁴⁷

“Now, you and I understand there was nothing wrong with those meats but that brother in Rome thought it was a matter of God’s law. Telling him it is a matter of indifference would not fly. To him, it was a matter of faith. It was a matter of conscience. He ate or refrained from eating unto the Lord. He believed, ‘This is what I have to do to be pleasing to God.’ You couldn’t tell him, ‘Oh, it’s just a matter of indifference. So go on about it.’

“Paul presumed in his letter that even after he told them it was a matter of indifference, some of them would still have a conscience problem. And in view of the conscience problem, he said, ‘Keep your conscience.’ As I understand that passage, you would have in Rome some people who differed in their belief and in their practice with regard to service before God and yet they not only were told that they could continue in fellowship, they were told that they should continue in fellowship.

“I have had a number of brethren who have taught that the only thing that can be included in Romans 14 are things that are matters of indifference. I have a problem with that statement...And I believe that the statement the only thing that can be applied to the principles of Romans 14 are matters of indifference cannot be followed through. It won’t fly. Why? Oh, somebody says, ‘But those matters in Romans 14 were matters of indifference.’ And you’re right. I agree wholeheartedly. But to the man in Rome and the man in Corinth it was not a matter of indifference. It was a matter of conscience to him. It was a matter of his faith. He ate or refrained from eating unto the Lord.

“Now, does Romans 14 include matters of faith? The very text says it does. Oh, somebody says, ‘But that’s not the faith.’ That’s their personal faith. And you and I agree with that. That was not the truth revealed from God. It was faith in the sense of that person’s conviction, that person’s conscience, but listen carefully. To him he thought it came from the faith. Just like when you look at that long list, and somebody differs with you on any one of these things. He says, ‘But I’m doing it because that’s what I believe God teaches.’ To him it is faith—conviction—that he believes that’s what God teaches.”⁴⁸

- F. *Fellowship with brother Hailey.* He recognized fellowship with brother Hailey in spite of his persistent teaching of error. Carefully observe the implication of fellowship with brother Hailey when he disagrees with “a bunch of brethren.”

“I differ with brother Hailey on some issues on divorce and remarriage. And frankly, he could fellowship some people, some divorced people, that I couldn’t fellowship. I’m an old time conservative on the divorce and remarriage issue. But a bunch of brethren have come along and they list me as a false teacher because I do not agree with them that I can’t have any relationship with brother Hailey. Since we differ on the divorce question, they say, if I have fellowship with him, then I’m a false teacher on fellowship.”

“Is the divorce thing a matter of...is it an issue? Sure it is. How should it be decided? Let me tell you how it ought to be decided. Every local congregation is going to take each individual case and pass its own judgment what would be the impact in this congregation if we accept that couple. If it’s going to be harmful to the group, then that group, they ought not accept them. But I can’t sit in Tampa, FL and write the prescription for all the situations that might come up on divorce and remarriage for all the churches in the country. And nobody else can, by the way. Some are trying to do it, but they can’t do it. Just like I can’t pass the judgment for everybody who differs with me on the war question, or the covering question.”⁴⁹

- a. Here, he obviously equates decisions about brother Hailey’s teachings with the war question and head covering.
- b. He also implies that brother Hailey’s view is not a significant enough “issue” about which he could advise another church of the grave sin associated with it.

“On the marriage question, as I’ve indicated I’m a conservative. And there are some people who have been very critical of brother Hailey and I agree with those people who are critical of him on the

⁴⁷ Bob Owen, “Is It Necessary To Draw Lines?”, Florence, Alabama, June 1996

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Bob Owen, PM Question & Answer, Concord, North Carolina, February 19, 1995

Bible teaching with regard to divorce and remarriage. But I differ with them on their interpretation and application of the fellowship issue.”⁵⁰

- G. *However, no fellowship with one who practices brother Hailey’s teaching.* He would not have fellowship with those who would practice what brother Hailey teaches.

“Lest it be misunderstood, I want to add this codicil in the beginning. To my knowledge I have never accepted into a local fellowship someone who was divorced on some grounds other than adultery. And I have had a part, a leading part, in refusing in a local fellowship, people who were divorced and remarried prior to obeying the gospel without fornication involved. And I have been a part of refusing fellowship to people who had committed adultery, or who had been divorced and remarried without adultery or the guilty party role. And I do not understand my teaching or my convictions on Romans 14 to offer any kind of latitude for acceptance of those things. Lest that be misunderstood I wanted to add that in the beginning.”⁵¹

- H. *Right to publicly teach error.* Brother Owen, like brother Harrell, taught that men teaching error like brother Hailey had the right to publicly teach their error, but was critical of brethren who publicly warned other brethren about his teaching.

“They don’t believe the same things. And if the question comes up in a Bible class, each could express her own view. And unless one or the other or both of them become factious, and demanding, and wedge driving, they could express their views, continue to practice individually and not compromise each other and not divide the church.”⁵²

While brother Owen is referring to the differences on a woman’s headcovering in worship in this context, the reason for this illustration is to justify continuing fellowship with brother Hailey with his error.

- I. *Don’t tolerate public error after damage done.* Brother Owen taught that a person should be allowed to teach his own personal erroneous view, and as long as it does not hurt anyone else in the church or cause problems in the church, the church should not reject him in his teaching.
1. To apply brother Owen’s reasoning with Romans 14, this brother should not be contended with on this teaching.
 2. Yet, should he or those taught by him practice the error and problems arise in the church as a result, the church must act against those in error.
 3. **When brethren react only after the damage is done, a local church has waited too long in the matter!**

“Brethren, if a local church harbors a member practicing things that is commonly seen as wrong, you have undermined the standard of authority, you’ve shamed the church in the eyes of everybody, you’ve destroyed any influence for good that it might have, by which it might appeal to people to obey the Lord. Paul said, ‘Don’t tolerate that.’ What else?”

“In Romans the 16th chapter, verses 17 and 18, Paul said, ‘Mark and avoid them that are causing division, and giving occasion of stumbling contrary to the doctrine which you learned.’ He goes on to say, ‘They are such as by their smooth and fair speech beguile the hearts of the innocent.’ Is this saying, ‘Withdraw from anybody who differs from you on doctrine?’ No. As a matter of fact, two chapters earlier in Romans 14, he was going to tell them that they should fellowship those that they had differences with like the eating of the meats and the observing of days. We’ll come back again to those. But in Romans 16, he talks about those who were causing division in the local churches, whose teaching was such that it was driving a wedge in the local congregation, upsetting the peace and harmony, splitting brethren apart, and leading them into error. Paul said, ‘Don’t tolerate that.’”⁵³

“There is the answer to it, ‘Oh, well, it’s all right for him to be here even though he believes something different as long as he never says anything about it.’ No, that’s not the answer. You get in a Bible class. The question of carnal warfare comes up, and he tells why he believes his position, and I tell why I believe mine. Yet, each of us can practice his own conscience and not involve the other. It’s not a matter that the fact that he goes to war, doesn’t go to war compromises me because I do the other.

“There are some things that are individually practiced. Now, is that the only criterion? No sir. Drunkenness could be individual practice, but it shames the church publicly. The incestuous man. I

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Bob Owen, “Is It Necessary To Draw Lines?”, Florence, Alabama, June 1996

⁵² Bob Owen, “Fellowship”, Temple Terrace, Florida, September 2, 1993

⁵³ Bob Owen, “Local Congregational Fellowship”, Temple Terrace, Florida, March 28, 1996

don't know whether that woman that he was living with was a member of the congregation or not. He was. You say, 'Well, that was his private practice.' But it was shameful in the eyes of all. Church ought not accept people whose personal behavior would shame the congregation, and shame the body.

"It's not just a matter that it's individual practice. It's not just a matter that it's private conscience. Other principles have to be brought to bear."⁵⁴

- J. *Avoids the issue of the controversy.* Instead of addressing how brethren should handle the matter of fellowship with an impenitent, persistent teacher of error, he used matters of personal differences as if those who were challenging brother Hailey's teaching just simply *disagreed with him* instead of confronting his doctrinal error which *disagrees with God*.

1. He frequently used such expressions as...

"you don't agree with", "just differs", "something that I consider error", "differ with me", "friends with whom I differ", "we differ with", "may differ", "than I have reached", "that you think is wrong", etc.⁵⁵

2. He often posed challenging questions using personal disagreements as a basis for his arguments, instead of what God thinks about it.

"Would it be fair to say, a false teacher is anybody who teaches something that I consider error or that you consider error?" "Is the guy that teaches something different than you a false teacher?" "Would it be fair in light of the Biblical use of the term, to say everybody that teaches something that I differ with or we differ with on all those issues, bears the label, quote, 'He is a false teacher?'"⁵⁶

This mixing of principles and their applications only confuses the issue. It appears that this is brother Owen's way of avoiding addressing the fact that brother Hailey's teaching disagrees with God and therefore with faithful brethren.

3. He equated recognizing fellowship with an impenitent, persistent teacher of error with examples in local churches in which fellowship was recognized with novice, learning, struggling, weak, or growing Christians. While I may agree with some of his thoughts about local church edification, keep in mind his effort with these arguments is to apply it to continuing fellowship with a persistent teacher of error.⁵⁷

I agree that "participation together in a local church does not mean that everybody has reached the same degree of maturity. As a matter of fact, one of the purposes of their being together is so those who are mature can help those who are immature. It doesn't mean that all of us had grown the way we ought...It doesn't mean that all of us agree on every point of doctrine and that we all practice the same thing"⁵⁸

"You may have some member in the congregation who hasn't grown, who after 30 or 40 years is still a babe in Christ and would fall into that condemnation of Hebrews 5, that 'when by reason of time you ought to be teachers of others you have need that somebody come and teach you.' This person's never grown. You might say, 'I wouldn't want to be in his shoes in Judgment.' You're not really approving the way he has handled himself with the Lord. Does that mean you've got to withdraw fellowship from him? Of course not."⁵⁹

"Does the Bible teach that there can be differences among us and yet we can continue together? I think the answer is yes. Does that mean that it doesn't matter what people believe, what they teach, what they practice? Of course that doesn't mean that. But when their practice is private, when their behavior is not disruptive, when their practice does not shame the church and divide the church, we need to work for ways that we can continue together, to study together, to work together, to pray together."⁶⁰

- d. However, brother Hailey was not a novice, immature Christian still seeking to understand more about the error he taught, nor was his influence just a private matter. He was set on his conclusion and

⁵⁴ Bob Owen, "Is It Necessary To Draw Lines?", Florence, Alabama, June 1996

⁵⁵ Bob Owen, "Fellowship", Temple Terrace, Florida, September 2, 1993

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Bob Owen, "We Differ, Can We Fellowship?" PM Worship, Concord, North Carolina, February 19, 1995, "...there are some major discussions going on and major issues at hand among some brethren across the nation, centering on this passage (Romans 14, js). And if I understand it, I'm going to deal right now with the little end of the tap root."

⁵⁸ Bob Owen, "Local Church and Salvation", AM Class, Concord, North Carolina, February 19, 1995

⁵⁹ Bob Owen, "We Differ, Can We Fellowship?" PM Worship, Concord, North Carolina, February 19, 1995

⁶⁰ Bob Owen, "Local Congregational Fellowship", Temple Terrace, Florida, March 28, 1996.

refused to change even after many attempts to study with him. In this case we are dealing with a persistent sinner. Brother Hailey wrote:

“What I conclude is on the tape. My position is not taken so dogmatically as some, but I believe it is sound. So, with so many matters pressing me for time, I propose for my part to leave it as it is.”⁶¹

“I make no apology for my position; I believe it to be correct. I have no intention of becoming the focal point in a brotherhood discussion of the subject. But neither do I intend to be put in a position where I cannot express my views on this or any other subject in which the truth of God is involved.”⁶²

- K. *Regarding local church autonomy.* Brother Owen indicated that each local church has the right to determine who to accept into their fellowship and who to reject. However, when a congregation decides that something is sinful according to scripture, and it takes action to mark the sinner and warn other brethren in other congregations, he denies the autonomous right of brethren to teach or warn beyond the local church.

“Let me tell you where the answer lies as I understand it. And that is, each local congregation has the responsibility of passing its judgment and making its decisions on each individual Christian and each individual case on marriage or the other questions that are involved. And although there is nothing in the world wrong with teaching something publicly and saying, ‘Here’s what I believe and here’s why I believe.’ There is nothing wrong in writing it, and putting it in a gospel paper.”⁶³

1. He acknowledges his own right to preach the gospel all over the country.

“I go all over the country preaching. I preach the same thing everywhere I go. Same doctrines, same questions answered, that kind of thing. Am I trying to teach the same things every...? Yes, I am. Could I write that in a paper? Sure, I could. Could brethren read it all over the place? Sure they could.”⁶⁴

2. Yet, he denies the right of others to preach the truth against such teaching as brother Hailey’s and insinuates that when they do so they are involved in...

“brotherhood decisions, brotherhood fellowship and brotherhood directors”⁶⁵

“When a major issue comes up among brethren, it is not uncommon for some people to want to not only teach and preach where they are, but maybe to make sure that everybody in the world does what their belief is...I don’t want to be guilty of judging the brotherhood when I criticize some who I think are trying to run the brotherhood. I don’t want to be guilty of trying to run the brotherhood when I tell them they ought not to be trying to run the brotherhood...it appears to me that there are some who are really not just dealing with their opportunities in their places, but they’ve got an attitude that they’ve got the charge to speak to the whole brotherhood and to direct the whole brotherhood.”⁶⁶

- L. *No warning of sin.* Like brother Harrell, brother Owen avoided calling brother Hailey’s persistent teaching of error on divorce and remarriage sinful, and gives no warning of the seriousness of this sinful teaching.
- M. *Cannot, but can, but cannot determine fellowship. Which?* Brother Owen denied that we can determine ones fellowship with God, then said we can only determine fellowship with God by their actions. However, when brother Hailey’s actions of persisting in teaching error and helping divide churches were well established, brother Owen still could not tell whether brother Hailey was in fellowship with God.

“But the statement, ‘I can’t be in fellowship with somebody who is not in fellowship with God.’ implies that I am in position to determine whether every individual is in that relationship with God or not. And you know as well as I do, I am not in position to know that. All I can do is judge on the basis of the things that I see and the things that I hear.”⁶⁷

In a personal discussion with brother Owen he told me that one could not sit in the position of God to determine who is or who isn’t in fellowship with God. We can only tell a person’s spiritual condition with God by his conduct. Obviously, by that reply and by his own teaching on withdrawing from an erring brother, he does believe that one can tell whether or

⁶¹ Homer Hailey, letter dated June 7, 1988, to Harry Osborne

⁶² Homer Hailey, “Soundings: Homer Hailey Speaks”, *Christianity Magazine*, Vol 5, No 11, November 1988, p 7

⁶³ Bob Owen, “Fellowship”, Temple Terrace, Florida, September 2, 1993

⁶⁴ Bob Owen, PM Question & Answer, Concord, North Carolina, February 19, 1995

⁶⁵ Bob Owen, “Fellowship”, Temple Terrace, Florida, September 2, 1993

⁶⁶ Bob Owen, PM Question & Answer, Concord, North Carolina, February 19, 1995

⁶⁷ Bob Owen, “Is It Necessary To Draw Lines?”, Florence, Alabama, June 1996

not one is in fellowship with God. The fruits of brother Hailey's teaching on divorce and remarriage were obvious.⁶⁸

- N. Both Ed Harrell, and Bob Owen became the target of criticism in this controversy because of their teaching. They have been publicly outspoken in defense of brother Hailey's right to the privileges of fellowship, through the use of Romans 14, by way of the widespread medium of written publications and gospel meetings. They apparently continue to hold these views since, to my knowledge, they have not shown any signs of repentance.
- V. **Not vital to the controversy, but confusing and diverting.** From the sources of the above quoted material of both Ed Harrell and Bob Owen, other topics were introduced into the controversy which only clouded the issue and proved to be a means of avoiding a straightforward answer to the real issue of the controversy.
- A. **False Teachers.**
1. These brethren denied that a person is a false teacher if his motives are honorable and good. Hence, if he does not fit a certain strained description of a false teacher, brethren should not reject fellowship with him.
 2. Whether or not one is willing to use the expression "false teacher" is immaterial to this controversy. It does not change the need for brethren to reject fellowship and publicly identify an impenitent, persistent teacher of false doctrine.
 3. Apparently, the reason some have introduced this topic is that if one cannot be classed as a false teacher then the teacher of error becomes "off-limits" to any kind of scriptural rejection through either withdrawal and marking in the local church, or public marking to warn brethren in general wherever this teacher of error may have influence.
 4. The apostle Paul never used the term "false teacher" yet most of the teaching we have on "withdrawing" and "marking" a teacher of error comes from his epistles.
- B. **Local Church Autonomy.** This is the God-ordained privilege of self-government used in the organization and function of each local church. Some have introduced this as another means of placing the teacher of error "off-limits" from any act of rejection and public marking.
1. It is taught that only the local church has the right to determine if a teacher of error would do harm to the local congregation, therefore determine whether or not to recognize fellowship with him.
 2. Brethren from one local church cannot reject, mark and warn other brethren in other local churches about this teacher of error if he is not a member of that local church.
 3. With this concept, the cautious and faithful brethren are prevented from warning other brethren about this teacher of error whoever he may be, while the teacher of error is allowed to go to and fro teaching his error.
 4. There is something wrong when there is a plea for autonomy of local churches, yet when churches practice autonomy by sending out a warning of evil, those who make the plea say a church cannot do that. Who is violating local autonomy now?
- C. **Lack of Biblical Clarity** on questions of marriage, divorce, remarriage.
1. In an effort to dilute the seriousness of the doctrine brother Hailey taught on divorce and remarriage, his teaching was compared with a number of other questions on which brethren have disagreed on the subject of marriage, divorce and remarriage.
 2. However, the irrelevance of this point is seen in that brethren on both sides of the controversy of this study agree that what brother Hailey taught was wrong.
- D. **Other unrelated Issues.**
1. Headcovering, military service, use of the church building for weddings and funerals, TV sets, Christmas trees, Halloween costumes, etc., have been used as parallel examples of issues to defend the right of fellowship with an impenitent, persistent teacher of error on divorce and remarriage.
 2. When asked about fellowship with a teacher of error such as brother Hailey invariably the response is, "Well, what about the headcovering or war question?" By the use of this retort, many brethren continue to refuse to address the heart of the issue, "Can we continue in fellowship with a persistent sinner?"
 3. Using this line of reasoning, the defenders of a persistent teacher of error on divorce and remarriage either don't want to do anything that may jeopardize a longtime friendship with one they have held in

⁶⁸ Bob Owen, Private discussion between Bob Owen and Jimmy Stevens to discuss this matter concerning brother Owen's teaching on Romans 14 and fellowship. Also present, Ernest Finley and Wayne Moody, building of the Centerville Church of Christ, Centerville, Texas, September 13, 1999.

such high esteem, or they view his teaching of no greater significance than questions on headcovering, war question, etc.

CONCLUSION: The Controversy.

- A. *The Issue:* Can brethren recognize fellowship with one who persists in teaching error that causes people to lose their souls?
- B. *The Response:* Some brethren believe and teach that fellowship can still be recognized with this brother, because his teaching of error can be handled by applying the principles of Romans 14.
- C. *The Controversy:* Other brethren oppose this teaching since a persistent sinner is not in fellowship with God, and should not be recognized in fellowship with saints, thus the controversy.

Fellowship and the Teacher of Error

INTRODUCTION: This section of study is intended to complement the lesson "Issue of the Controversy". Its main purpose is to address the erroneous idea that a local church cannot warn others of a teacher of error who may not be a member of that local church.

I. Fellowship and the church.

- A. Brief description of Bible fellowship.
 1. **Generally**, sharing something in common.
 2. **Biblical, non-spiritual** uses are found when the basic Greek words for sharing are translated into English words such as
 - a. "partners" in a fishing business, Luke 5:10.
 - b. "partaken" as in Christ sharing features of humanity, Heb 2:14.
 - c. "partakers" as in sharing in killing the prophets, Matt 23:30.
 3. **Biblical, spiritual** use.
 - a. Communion, sharing or participating in a common faith based on God's only revealed truth. 1 John 1:1-5.
 - b. Negatively, sharing in sin and evil which opposes that truth. 2 Cor 6:14-16.
- B. All true Christians, everywhere, are united together with God and with each other on the basis of obedient faith in the Word of God. This is called fellowship.
- C. This condition or relationship of fellowship with God and fellow Christians is called the church. Eph 2:14-22.
- D. But how does this fellowship relate to the Lord's church in a given location, sometimes called the Local Church?

II. A distinction needs to be made between the "organized functioning" and "non-organized, non-functioning" nature of the church.

- A. All those saved according to God's revealed truth make up the church. Sometimes called the **Universal Church**. Matt 16:18, Eph 1:22-23, Heb 12:22-23.
 1. God did not reveal a design for organization and function of the church in this sense, **except** that **Christ is the head** and all faithful **saints are members**.
 2. God wants those who make up this "universal church" to carry out the task on earth of "evangelism" and "edification". Matt 28:18-20, 1Th 5:9-11.
 3. **Evangelism** and **edification** are God's revealed purpose for every Christian who is in fellowship in the universal church.
 4. **But how is it possible for saints to function together to perform this purpose when God has not revealed an organizational structure by which the universal church can function?**
- B. The Bible teaches that the **Local Church** is that arrangement through which God intends to accomplish the work of evangelism and edification.
 1. A local church is a group of saints who are bound together for doing the work of evangelism and edification. 1 Cor 1:2, Rom 16:16, Gal 1:2, Rev 2-3.
 2. The agreement between brethren of a specific geographical location, to be organized together to do the work of evangelism and edification, is sometimes called "**local church fellowship**."
 3. However, this local church fellowship is based upon the same revealed truth that establishes the universal fellowship that all Christians have with God and each other.
 4. For our purpose of study we will use the terms "**local church fellowship**" and "**universal church fellowship**."

III. What about fellowship with a teacher or preacher of error who is a member of another local church?

- A. First, fellowship with those teaching truth. We recognize fellowship with brethren wherever they may be, because we recognize their fellowship with God, demonstrated by their obedient faith in the truth. 1 John 1:3.
1. **INDIVIDUALLY:** This can apply to gospel preachers, elders, family members, etc., who are not local members. We recognize fellowship with a visiting, faithful, gospel preacher, not because he is a member of the local church where he visits, but because of our fellowship in the universal church. We commend his preaching of truth to other brethren, wherever he may go. 1 Cor 16:10.
 2. **OTHER CHURCHES:** We recognize fellowship with brethren in other sound local churches, not because they are members of this local fellowship, but because they are in fellowship in the universal church.
 - a. We recommend these churches to other brethren or our children who may be moving away from home to another location. 2 Cor 9:2.
 - b. All Christians should be supportive of all other faithful Christians wherever they may be, regardless of which local church they are members.
 - c. The action of a local church promoting truth is not restricted to the local church only.
- B. Now consider fellowship and those brethren who fall away from the truth. They must be identified as having severed their fellowship with God. They are to be publicly rejected and marked as enemies of the truth, not because they violated the agreement of the local church fellowship **of which they are not members**, but because they have violated that common faith which establishes universal fellowship.
1. **INDIVIDUALLY:** Warning of teachers of error and their doctrines should be announced. 1 Tim 1:20, 2 Tim 2:17, Gal 2:11, 14.
 2. **OTHER CHURCHES:** Churches were also publicly noted for their misconduct. Rev 2-3, Five of the seven churches were publicly declared by this letter to be unfaithful. One letter was to be distributed to all the churches, so all would know the condition of each local church. Rev 1:11.
 3. Local churches which persist in practicing error should be publicly identified and warned against, not because they have broken some kind of local fellowship, but because they have violated the standard of truth which establishes the universal fellowship all Christians share.
 4. Christians have as much right to publicly identify a violator of God's truth who is not a member of the local church as they do to praise a faithful Christian who is not a member of the local church. This principle of truth and error knows no bounds. 2 John 9-11.
 5. It is not brotherhood control when faithful brethren identify sin wherever it may be. It is simply a defense of the gospel which brings all Christians into fellowship with each other wherever they may be.

IV. Local church fellowship exists by agreement among Christians in a given geographical location to work together as a church ON THE BASIS OF DIVINE TRUTH. IT IS NOT JUST A WILLINGNESS TO GET ALONG WITH EACH OTHER AT ALL COST.

- A. This arrangement in fellowship is different from the universal fellowship in that it is limited to the number of saints living in the area who can commit to being involved in the local work, and it establishes an autonomic government which cannot be controlled by any Christians or churches outside of its membership.
- B. While I can have fellowship with all faithful Christians worldwide, I cannot have local fellowship with all churches. In that sense, I am not in fellowship with most Christians in the world. That fellowship is a fellowship of sharing the responsibilities confined only to that particular local church. However, ***that local fellowship is to be guided by the same truth which should guide all other local fellowships.***

V. Local church fellowship exists in correlation to each member's determination to obey the truth.

- A. It exists on the same basis as it exists in the universal sense, on the truth. When a brother ceases serving the Lord, he is no longer in fellowship with God and is therefore no longer in fellowship with other Christians anywhere on earth. Since local fellowship is based on an agreement to serve God together according to that same truth, and this brother chooses to reject that truth, he has also severed himself from his part in the local church fellowship.
- B. ***"What is the relationship called during the period of time when brethren try to restore the erring?"***
1. It cannot be called fellowship, because fellowship is an agreement based on mutually following the truth. No fellowship can exist while sin separates the sinner from the righteous.
 2. The relationship becomes one of **teachers of truth and lost sinners**. The very fact that a local church is trying to restore a fallen brother indicates that he is lost and out of fellowship with both the universal and local agreement of fellowship based on truth.
 3. To say he remains in local fellowship while the restoration process continues is to say that he remains in fellowship on the basis of VIOLATION and REJECTION of truth.

4. To say he remains in local fellowship when he is not in fellowship with God is to suggest that the local church is in fellowship with error. 1 Cor 5:2, 6.
 5. **WHEN ONE VIOLATES THE AGREEMENT, HE DESTROYS THE RELATIONSHIP PRODUCED BY THE AGREEMENT.**
- C. ***“Every member sins from time to time. Does that mean he violates the agreement upon which local church fellowship is established?”***
1. If it is every member's desire to rebel against and reject the agreement in truth with other brethren, then YES! In essence they are saying, “I don't want to agree to the terms!” “I don't want to share in the scriptural work of this local church!”
 2. However, if a Christian makes mistakes and sins in his development toward spiritual maturity while seeking to honor the agreement, the Lord has designed the local church to provide an environment where these weaknesses and sins are overcome and the brother becomes stronger.
 3. There is a world of difference between a member who sins while diligently seeking to follow the terms of local church fellowship, and one who has chosen to willfully reject the terms of local church fellowship through persistent sin.
 4. God provides for fellowship to remain with one seeking to serve him, but he does not provide a way for one to remain in fellowship while he rejects God's will.
- D. Within that framework of local church fellowship is the joint participation in spiritual matters that have a strengthening effect on the local church as a whole.
1. The fellowship that I have with you is for the purpose of helping you go to heaven.
 2. Your fellowship with me is for the purpose of helping me go to heaven.
 3. Together we not only work to help each other go to heaven but we work together to help save the lost.
 4. ***That is the whole of the work of the church--***salvation for both the lost and the saved.
- E. God provides for brethren to develop to maturity within the local church. That implies that there will be times of immaturity and sins. 1Th 5:14, 1 Pet 2:2, Heb 5:12-14, Col 1:9-11.
- F. How is this done?
1. Assembly, Heb 10:25, Col 3:16, 2 Tim 4:2.
 2. Bible Classes- broaden understanding of truth. If Bible classes are used for any other reason it is a misuse of the command to teach.
 3. Visiting, encouraging, and studying with one another privately and with our families, etc. 1Th 5:14, Gal 6:1, Eph 6:1-4.
 4. Defeating false doctrine by study and discussion. 2 Cor 10:4-6.
- G. Our individual weaknesses are a threat to our fellowship with God and therefore with one another. This is the very reason for the activities of strengthening that must take place in the church, Bible classes, home studies, personal studies, preaching, teaching, gospel meetings, etc. It is also the reason for such passages as Eph 4:11-16, 29.
- VI. Teachers and preachers of error, regardless of what local church they are members, must be recognized and warned against.**
- A. They must be challenged to change from the error of their way. If they refuse, they must be rejected because of their alignment with Satan and his doctrine of error. Brethren need to be warned about them as teachers and preachers of error.
 - B. This warning is no more simply a matter of local church fellowship than sin is. Sin is universal and the warfare must also be universal.
 1. Withdrawing from a member of a local church is only one way of dealing with persistent sinners and false teachers within a local congregation.
 2. Challenging and opposing teachers of error with the truth, wherever they may be, is another part of the work of faithful Christians.
 - C. One of the reasons elders and leading brethren in a local church are justified in not inviting a preacher to move to and work with a local church or hold gospel meetings is because of doubt in his stand on vital matters of truth. Acts 20:28-31.
- VII. What about fellowship with someone who has fellowship with someone who has fellowship, etc., with a teacher of error?**
- A. Our first priority in our own faith is to avoid fellowship with darkness. 2 Cor 6:14-18.
 - B. This may even demand giving up family ties to serve God. Matt 10:35.
 - C. We are obligated to teach and warn others who may be caught up in or influenced by this error. Acts 20:30-31, Col 1:28, Jas 5:19, Gal 6:1-2.
 - D. As long as one is willing to study, learn and grow, keep the doors of study open. 1 Th 5:14.

- E. If our relationship shows endorsement, acceptance or appreciation of error, we should not maintain that relationship. 2 John 9-11, Rom 1:32.
- F. The men discussed in this lesson have determined to continue believing and teaching this error on Romans 14. Titus 3:10. DON'T BE THROWN OFF BY THEIR BLAMING OTHERS FOR DIVISION. THEY WERE THE ONES WHO INTRODUCED THE ERROR ON ROMANS 14 WHICH NEEDED TO BE ADDRESSED AND WHICH HELPED CREATE THE DIVISION.
- G. **CAUTION!** If you ask certain brethren about their thoughts on Romans 14 and the current controversy, don't let them dodge the issue of the controversy as brother Harrell and brother Owen did. Write down and make sure that they address the issue. And write down their answers.
1. Don't get caught in the trap of chasing arguments or questions that are unrelated to the real issue. Kindly listen and then bring them back to the questions of this controversy.
 2. Ask them these questions about the issue:
 - a. Do you believe one can stay in an adulterous marriage after being baptized?
 - b. Do you believe a brother who teaches such a doctrine is sinning when he teaches it?
 - c. Do you believe brethren should have fellowship with a brother who impenitently persists in teaching this sinful doctrine?
 - d. What is your idea of how a church should handle an impenitent, persistent teacher of error?
 - e. Do you believe that Romans 14 teaches that brethren can remain in fellowship when they disagree on matters of the doctrine of Christ?
 - f. Do you believe that Romans 14 teaches that brethren can remain in fellowship with the brother who impenitently persists in teaching the error already mentioned?

CONCLUSION: The issue of the controversy is whether or not brethren should recognize fellowship with one who persists in teaching error. The defenders of the teacher of error contend that fellowship can and should be recognized on the basis of Romans 14. Hence, uncontested, continuing fellowship with sin is justified.

Effects of Misusing Romans 14

INTRODUCTION: In the closing segment of this study on Romans 14, I would like to examine the effects of misusing Romans 14 to include matters of moral and doctrinal importance.

- A. We have already noted that nearly all who were involved in the controversy agreed that Romans 14 discussed matters of indifference to God. However, some wished to "add", without scriptural evidence, that it can also be used when brethren differ over moral and doctrinal matters. Personal interpretation has been used to justify this line of reasoning either by showing an arbitrary "respect of sinful issues" to be included in the text, or by appealing to historical practices among brethren ("How we have always done it.").
- B. This lesson will cover not only what the misuse of Romans 14 can lead to, but what it has already led to.

I. Remember what Romans 14 teaches.

- A. Whatever can be placed in Romans 14 works within its principles.
 1. V 1, No disputes over differences.
 2. V 3, No relevance to salvation.
 3. V 3, No despising others.
 4. V 4, No judging others.
 5. V 5, Each allowed to be right in his own mind.
 6. V 5, Did not have to agree.
 7. V 12, Each will face God with his choice.
 8. V 13, Tolerate each other.
 9. V 13, Don't cause the other to sin.
 10. V 21, Yield to the other's conscience.
 11. V 22-23, Keep convictions of conscience to self.
 12. V 14, 16, 20, Things good, clean and pure.
- B. Violation of doctrinal or moral matters cannot be handled by the points just shown. Instead, strong opposition and, if necessary, division must be used to address such matters.
 1. *Contend for.* Jude 3
 2. *Involves salvation.* 2 Tim 3:16-17, 2 Pet 1:3, 2 John 9
 3. *Toleration is sinful.* Eph 5:11, Gal 1:8-9, 2 Cor 6:14-16, 1 Cor 5
 4. *Sinful to keep silent.* Ezk 3:18, 1 Cor 9:16

II. The teacher of error on divorce and remarriage and Romans 14.

- A. Claims have been made that adding matters of moral or doctrinal importance will not lead to a broader reception of error among brethren. A typical comment made is,

“Please deal with my beliefs/teachings/actions and do not build a case on ‘I think this will lead to...’ I’ve taught my beliefs on Romans 14 for 35 years. No one other than my recent critics (like you) have connected these views to MDR. I have never known of anyone using my views on this passage to ‘clear himself’ on MDR. I deny what I teach leads to...Deal with the teaching – not with suppositions.”¹

Yet, misuse of Romans 14 **has** led to justifying the receiving of a brother who has persisted in teaching error on divorce and remarriage.

- B. Here is how the issue of this controversy evolved.
1. A very close friend teaches a sinful doctrine on divorce and remarriage.
 2. To prevent severing fellowship with this friend, there needs to be a way developed where fellowship can remain in spite of the teaching of error.
 3. Romans 14 tells how brethren should coexist in fellowship in spite of disagreement on indifferent matters.
 4. It is suggested, without scriptural justification, that Romans 14 can **also** include matters of doctrinal and moral importance.
 5. Therefore, place this brother’s teaching of error in this newly defined principle of Romans 14.
 6. NOW WE CAN CONTINUE TO RECOGNIZE FELLOWSHIP WITH THIS PERSISTENT TEACHER OF ERROR.
 7. Are you ready to accept this conclusion?

III. Where has the misuse of Romans 14 led to in the past?

- A. Historically, progressive trends have typically used Romans 14 or 1 Corinthians 8-10, in an attempt to justify fellowship with those who believed it was wrong to progress beyond the doctrine of Christ.
- B. Some of the subjects in earlier years:²
1. Late 1800’s to early 1900’s. Instrumental music³, premillennialism, missionary societies, unity-in-diversity between the Christian churches and churches of Christ.
 2. Mid 1900’s, church involvement in institutionalism and centralized sponsoring church arrangement for evangelism and benevolence.
- C. A few more recent abuses:
1. From the 1950’s until today two men, Carl Ketcherside and Leroy Garrett, promoted a doctrine of unity-in-diversity among churches of Christ. From his book, *A Lover’s Quarrel*, Leroy Garrett stated,

“Behind all the disputation about unity and fellowship was a more seminal question, one that goes back to the struggles of our Restoration pioneers: ‘Who is a Christian?’ Carl Ketcherside and I questioned what lay at the root of Church of Christism, the dogma that we are the true church and the only Christians. When we began this renewal effort, that mindset was alive and well among us. We were heretics because we taught that the body of Christ and the Kingdom of God reaches far beyond what we call ‘the Church of Christ.’ Our sin was compounded when we pointed out that the Churches of Christ were a denomination not all that different from other denominations...A related issue was the distinction we drew between the gospel and the apostles’ doctrine—or between preaching and teaching.”⁴

In 2002, in Lubbock, Texas the Restoration Forum XX “with the theme ‘With One Heart and Mouth’ drawn from Romans 15:6”, was conducted. “The Forum opened on a Sunday evening at the Broadway Church of Christ with a Communion service attended by upwards of 900—from all three wings of our heritage. For the first time the Forum had invited the Disciples of Christ to participate. Royce Money, president of ACU (Churches of Christ) and Bob Wetzel, president of Emmanuel School of Religion (Christian Churches) spoke...the Forum closed by inviting all to sign a ‘Covenant of Unity,’ pledging ‘To be part of the answer to our Lord’s prayer for unity among believers in Christ’ and ‘To turn away from any kind of divisive or factious spirit which is not characteristic of the spirit of

¹ Bob Owen, e-mail correspondence from Bob Owen to Jimmy Stevens, July 14, 2000

² Ron Halbrook, “Romans 14 Abused to Accommodate False Doctrine”, *Guardian of Truth*, January 2, 1992, p 17

³ M.C. Kurfees, *Instrumental Music in the Worship*, Nashville, Tennessee, Gospel Advocate Co., 1969, pp 198-263

⁴ Leroy Garrett, *A Lover’s Quarrel, An Autobiography: My Pilgrimage of Freedom in Churches of Christ*, Abilene, Texas, ACU Press, © 2003, pp 127-128

Christ...It was awesome to see 302 people—of diverse backgrounds—lined up to sign a pledge to be peacemakers amidst our divided people.”⁵

“If there was one defining moment, it may have been in 1957 when Carl Ketcherside and I had a debate on instrumental music with Seth Wilson and Don DeWelt, both of Ozark Christian College, in Nowata, Oklahoma.”

“On that occasion, we publicly stated what Churches of Christ had never said before—we can differ on such issues as instrumental music and still be a united people. For the next three decades until Carl’s death in 1989—that was our message. We unite on the Center who is Christ; we allow for differences in the margins.

“But long before Carl’s passing we began to be listened to. The ‘unity-in-diversity heresy’ became increasingly less heretical!”⁶

2. Christian Church, Churches of Christ and Rubel Shelly. In a speech entitled “A Call to Biblical Action”⁷ given by Rubel Shelly, November 3, 1994, he advocated unity between churches of Christ and Christian Churches.

“My comments here will be based on Romans 14:1-15:13. This section of Paul’s most sublime epistle deals with doctrinal differences among baptized believers...Some of us have been told that these verses relate to issues of taste, personal judgment, and speculation. The things Paul had in mind here, we have been told, were ‘mere matters of opinion.’”

- a. He advocated continued fellowship with brethren involved in errors related to such matters as premillennialism, drinking alcoholic beverages, instrumental music, church organization, women in leadership roles in the church, etc.
- b. He also advocated recognition of fellowship with the Christian Church.

“We are free to hold and practice our different points of view, but we are not free to judge one another any longer...The Woodmont Hills Church of Christ and First Christian Church of Nashville are sharing a worship facility and having occasional shared or exchanged uses of personnel. We are co-hosting some events of worship and ministry. Other local churches are having fellowship in a variety of ways...It is time for us to proclaim that gospel boldly, while simultaneously living a unity in Christ that honors and preserves our historical distinctives—minus the judgments and condemnations.”

- c. In his book, *The Jesus Proposal*⁸, Rubel Shelly expands on this speech. He justifies such things as fellowship with denominations, no set day for the Lord’s supper, women’s role of leadership in the church, etc., on the basis of his interpretation of Romans 14.
3. Darwin Chandler’s apostasy. In 1982-83, a formerly, faithful gospel preacher by the name of Darwin Chandler began preaching false ideas about God’s grace and fellowship. This was much like the doctrine taught by Carl Ketcherside, Leroy Garrett, Arnold Hardin and others. (the doctrine that there are Christians in all churches; we should recognize fellowship with others only on the basis of a common faith in Christ [gospel], and not question other matters of the faith [doctrine]).

“In October of 1983, brother Darwin Chandler was informed by the elders of the House Street congregation in Alvin, Texas that his services as a local preacher would no longer be required...Brother Chandler, according to the elders at House Street, had been preaching some of this ‘grace-fellowship doctrine’ making a distinction in [sic] ‘gospel’ and ‘doctrine’ which the Bible does not make.”⁹

- a. On March 25, 1984, after he and his family had identified with the Johnson Street church of Christ (institutional), he preached a sermon entitled “How Did I Get Here?” In it he stated his belief in a special indwelling of the Holy Spirit, no distinction between the church and individual in doing the Lord’s work, orphan’s homes run by the church, fellowship halls, mechanical instruments of music, dancing and shouting in worship, etc.¹⁰

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp 137-138

⁶ *Ibid.*, p 139

⁷ Rubel Shelly, former preacher for 27 years for the Woodmont Hills Church of Christ in Nashville, Tenn. (renamed The Family of God Church), and now a professor at Rochester College of Rochester Hills, Mich., gave this speech, “A Call To Biblical Action” at Restoration Forum XII, a meeting between invited members of the Independent Christian Churches and the Churches of Christ, held on the campus of Abilene Christian University, Abilene, Texas, November 1-3, 1994. Tape transcription by Tom Roberts.

⁸ Rubel Shelly and John O. York, *The Jesus Proposal*, Siloam Springs, Arkansas, Leafwood Publishers, © 2003

⁹ H. Osby Weaver and J.T. Smith, “A Report We Would Rather Not Have To Make”, *Searching the Scriptures*, ? 1984, p 11

¹⁰ Ernest A. Finley, “They Went Out From Us”, *Guardian of Truth*, June 6, 1985, p 11

- b. Consider the digression of brother Chandler since the eighties. In 2003 he published a book entitled *The Royal Law Of Liberty: Living In Freedom Under Christ's Law Of Love*.¹¹ Using as its basis Romans 14 (along with 1 Tim 4:1-5, 1 Cor 6:12, 10:23-29, Titus 1:14-15) he concludes that “*nothing is unclean of itself*”, that “*all things are pure*”, and one must be “*fully convinced in his own mind*,” in order to engage in many things the Bible calls sinful. The “law of love” is considered to be the only governing factor in the matter of fellowship. One may engage in an activity as much as he wishes as long as it does no harm to another person. Because he claims they are inherently clean, he teaches one can practice the following: smoking or other tobacco use, drinking alcohol, gambling by playing the lottery, poker, slot machines, dancing, wearing shorts or bathing suits in public, viewing erotica (pornography).
4. Local church divided. In a letter to the church here in Centerville, Roy Fenner was seeking support to preach in Metairie, Louisiana. He stated,

“The congregation here is small with 27 members. When I began my work here we were a bit larger, about 35, but have had some to move away. Also some have left over doctrinal matters. One of the members believed that Romans 14 included matters such as drinking, dancing, etc. Eventually, after some discussion, the family of five left along with another couple who were in agreement with him.”¹²

III So, where has the misuse of Romans 14 led and where will it go?

- A. It has led to the perversion of the text itself, by adding things that do not belong, namely, moral and doctrinal matters.
- B. It has led to recognizing fellowship with an impenitent, persistent teacher of error, and prevented brethren from rejecting and marking this persistent sinner. If brethren can remain in fellowship with a persistent sinner who teaches this false doctrine on divorce and remarriage, what other “moral and doctrinal” sins should we allow?
- C. It has led to the idea that only ones arbitrary, personal inhibitions would prevent an indefinite list of sinful matters from being included in the principles of Romans 14.
1. The so-called right of some to arbitrarily select sinful practices to be put in Romans 14, allows others the same right to arbitrarily select different sinful practices to put in it.
 2. Why not have fellowship with a Christian couple living in adultery if we can have fellowship with the one who taught them they could remain in that relationship?
 3. Why not have fellowship with one who teaches that homosexuality, premarital sex, dancing, mixed swimming in immodest attire, social drinking, etc., are acceptable?
 4. It is interesting to note that Paul used several lists in other scriptures that contained matters of moral and doctrinal importance (Rom 1:20-32, 13:8-14, 1 Cor 6:9-11, Gal 5:19-21, Eph 4:25-31, Col 3:5-9). Yet in Romans 14 the only things listed were matters that were not sinful. Why didn't Paul use one of his lists of sinful things in this text?
- D. Moral and doctrinal matters will, in time, become matters of opinion or indifference.
1. If Romans 14 is understood to deal with only matters of opinion or indifference.
 2. Yet, matters of doctrine are put in Romans 14 along with matters of opinion or indifference.
 3. Then those things which were once considered matters of doctrine would now be considered matters of opinion.
 4. With such a subjective use of Romans 14 to include matters of doctrine, what will prevent this from happening? One writer noted this happening,

“It is, therefore, a source of frustration and spiritual indignation when some brother (to brethren) fails to understand the teachings of Romans 14, and consequently, attempts to make Paul (and the Holy Spirit) teach something which is not at all taught in Romans 14! But, some are determined to try to apply these verses (which discuss matters of opinion and indifference) to matters of faith and doctrine. A liberal bulletin, published in Richardson, Texas, recently carried the following article, written by a liberal Texas preacher...’I realized our history of division over the issue of *instrumental music* is truly ridiculous. The Christian Church folk all confessed willingness to lay aside the use of the instruments for the sake of unity. The whole discussion called to mind Paul’s advice to the weak and the strong in fellowship (1 Cor. 8, 10; Romans 14-15). Implicit in our dialogue was the realization that our division in the past has been over an issue of opinion not revelation. From my perspective in a non-instrumental

¹¹ Darwin Chandler, *The Royal Law Of Liberty: Living In Freedom Under Christ's Law of Love*, Victoria, Canada, Trafford Publishing, © 2003

¹² Roy Fenner, letter dated October 9, 2003, to Centerville Church of Christ, Centerville, Texas.

congregation, it seems that I stand in the camp of the weaker brethren. I was glad last week at the generosity and maturity of my stronger brothers from the Independent Christian Churches.”¹³

- E. When one changes the meaning of a text he also changes how it can be used. This is called perverting the truth. Gal 1:6-9. Adding “moral and doctrinal” matters to Romans 14 goes beyond the doctrine of Christ, 2 John 9.

IV. What changes does the misuse of Romans 14 affect?

- A. Minimizes the danger of error.
1. If we must receive a brother who teaches or practices error without disputation, we will minimize the dangerous effect of his sin.
 2. We would be unable to warn against such danger.
- B. Prevents aggressive constructive and/or punitive discipline intended to strengthen the church.
- C. Contributes to a spirit of relativism.
1. Secular humanism affirms that all truth is relative, subject to whatever the human wants.
 2. There is no such thing as absolute right and wrong, or absolute truth.
 3. Many are being told that we just can't really know for sure what the truth is on many subjects.
 4. Some respond to disagreements among brethren by saying:
 - a. “We have good folks who take one position and good folks who take another.”
 - b. “After all, we have disagreed on this and that question for years, so we are not going to be dogmatic about those things now.”
 - c. “The worst thing in the world is to be dogmatic.”
- D. Promotes soft and secular preaching.
1. If truth is relative, then no preacher can afford to boldly proclaim it with absolute clarity and application to his audience.
 - a. Consequently, we see a change in the content of preaching with less education and exhortation from the Bible and more entertainment from jokes and stories.
 - b. Sin and personal discipline are minimized.
 - c. Preaching is soft on social drinking, dancing, immodest apparel, gambling, etc.
 - d. There are preachers who just can't get their mouths fixed right to say, “That is sinful!”
 2. The danger that false teachers pose is trivialized.
 3. If preaching compromises on these issues, the church becomes an attraction for those who are in sinful marital relationships, or who are worldly-minded.
 - a. Churches that follow this course lose their distinctiveness.
 - b. Purity is exchanged for popularity.
 - c. Congregations become filled with spineless people who have no conviction as to what truth is, nor do they want to hear anything about error, hear names of dangerous teachers of error, or hear lessons which expose false doctrines.
 4. Deceptively shallow preaching. In some so-called “sound” churches of Christ, soft preaching may not be so much a matter of preaching error as it is not preaching all truth, especially about sensitive and moral issues, and making practical applications to daily life.
 - a. Some preachers seem to avoid preaching on some subjects with specific applications for fear of possible adverse reactions. The result is an untaught and unconvicted body of saints who generally become tolerant of many compromising choices related to moral and doctrinal issues in that local church.
 - b. After a Sunday morning worship assembly, a visiting brother asked me to explain more clearly what I meant when I referred to “soft preaching” among brethren. I explained that there may be preachers of the gospel who do not necessarily preach error to what may be considered ‘sound’ congregations. Instead, they will either not preach on needed subjects or will not make an application of the general principles they do preach. Therefore, the audience is not offended at the expense of clear, sound doctrine. Thinking that I was being challenged on my comments during my preaching, I was surprised when this brother responded that he was afraid that is the kind of preaching he was hearing where he was a member.
- E. Causes a respect of persons involved in error.
1. Brethren are willing to overlook the dangerous teaching of a person because of other exemplary traits in his life.
 2. Remember Paul's public criticism of one of the greatest preachers in the church, Peter. Gal 2:11-21.

¹³ Roy C. Deaver, “Who Is The ‘Weak Brother’ Of Romans 14”, *Spiritual Sword*, Vol 18, No 1, October 1986

3. If God is no respecter of persons, neither should we be. Rom 2:11, Col 3:25, 1 Pet 1:17, Jas 2:1, 1 Cor 4:6.
- F. It prevents discussion and debate on the subject.
1. The point of Romans 14 is that differences are not to be disputed or debated.
 2. If one can put differences of moral or doctrinal importance in Romans 14 then there should be no discussion or debate on those matters. Is it possible that is why some brethren who use Romans 14 in this way have quit responding to questions about their position on this text?
 3. Could this be the reason why they consider their opponents trouble makers who want to continue the unfinished discussion?
 4. The nature of the misuse is toleration of error, so why should one debate it when they believe that there is nothing to debate?
- G. Long range effect.
1. Following generations are not taught to be on guard against sin.
 2. Following generations are not taught to aggressively seek to remove sin, by rebuke, admonition, exhortation, study, etc. Just tolerate it.
 3. Leadership material does not develop, creating a shortage of sound men and women in the church and a shortage of elders and gospel preachers who will lead and teach the truth in completeness and purity.

CONCLUSION: Who is at fault for creating this present controversy with the misuse of Romans 14?

- A. Before Romans 14 was introduced, a local church was simply doing its scriptural duty by dealing with an impenitent, persistent teacher of error on divorce and remarriage who had contributed to the division of a local congregation. No controversy existed until brother Ed Harrell publicly introduced a misuse of Romans 14 in an effort to justify continued fellowship with this teacher of error. That is the answer to the question.
- B. Study Romans chapter 14. Study it carefully. Properly apply the principles that are dealt with in the chapter. But please, please, don't try to crowd into it something that the Holy Spirit never intended. Don't try to use it as a justification for any and everything that comes along that brethren want to defend, and don't know how else to defend it.

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