

# The Editor's Views On "The Questionnaire"

by J. T. Smith

AS I stated in the April issue of GT it was my intention to make that issue a "Special" on "the questionnaire" and let it drop. However, since that time a number of things have happened that makes that virtually impossible. At least one other congregation has sent out the questionnaire (Wonsley Drive in Austin, TX). A copy of "The 28" (the 28 questions) was sent (unsolicited) to an elder in Beaver Dam, KY with the suggestion that since they are looking for a fulltime evangelist they might want to use "The 28" to help in that effort. Others have also received it with a similar suggestion. Also, it is my understanding that a congregation in Washington is using "The 28" to decide who can and cannot be members there. In addition to this, correspondence regarding "The 28," as well as phone calls, continues to come in as many brethren are concerned with what the outcome is going to be. In fact, the stack of correspondence is now approximately two to three inches. So it appears that the end of this controversy is yet to come. Brethren at Hebron Lane in Louisville, KY; Pruett and Lobit in Baytown, TX; West Columbia, TX; Wonsley Drive in Austin, TX and perhaps others, seem determined to use "The 28" even if division comes over it.

In the April issue of GT there was a letter by Jack L. Holt that was written to the West Columbia, TX elders. I received a letter from those elders in which they said, "We are enclosing a copy of our February 7 response to Jack Holt because we think your sense of fairness will lead you to publish it." It is included in this issue.

Because it is being reported that my position on sending out, filling out and signing "The 28" is a matter of expediency, this editorial is deemed necessary.

Now let's get down to the problem at hand. No one objects now, nor to my knowledge has anyone ever objected to asking and answering questions about what one believes. I would in no way impugn the motives of the elders of the congregations who sent out the questionnaire. Neither do I believe the elders who sent out brother Halbrook's "The 28" intended to create a creed. If elders are considering supporting someone, they surely would not want to support a person who is teaching error. And if the person was unknown to them, there might be various questions these elders would want to ask different men. However, the problem arises when brethren attempt to devise a human document with a set number of questions that must be answered before fellowship can be confirmed or repudiated. By definition this constitutes a catechism and is therefore creedal in its nature. "Catechism - 3. A formal series of questions; close questioning" (**Elwell Evangelical Dictionary**). Herein lies the problem.

Stop and think about this for a moment. If these churches using this document were in the position to have any one of the apostles or Timothy or Titus for a meeting or for support, they would have to fill out their questionnaire before they could receive such support. Do you suppose the churches of Macedonia asked Paul to fill out a questionnaire before they sent him support when he was in Corinth? After all, many did not believe he was actually an apostle.

It is said by proponents of this document that "the 28" are sent out for the purpose of determining the soundness of brethren. The facts are these. True, "The 28" was sent to brethren whom the elders did not know. But it was also sent to those who had preached in numerous meetings in the congregations (some as recently as last fall[1993]) as well as the local preachers who are preaching for these congregations. Do they not know what their local preachers believe? After preaching for these local congregations from 1 to 8 or 10 years do these elders still not know what these men believe? If they don't, either the preachers are not getting their message

across or the elders are not listening to what they have to say. The fact that they also sent "The 28" to those "whom they already know what they believe" has been brought up time and time again to try to show that "The 28" is not a catechism of orthodoxy. However, it proves just the opposite. If it is being sent to try to determine what brethren believe, why would it be sent to the local preacher(s) (Halbrook, Hafley, Alexander) and other brethren of repute — Elmer Moore, Connie Adams, Hoyt Houchen, Jack L. Holt, Dan Shipley, Tom Roberts and others? Brethren get "all bent out of shape" when they think the soundness and integrity of the elders who sent out the questionnaire are questioned. (Obviously that same rule doesn't apply for preachers). It is said that the elders who are sending out "The 28" are good and godly men— men of integrity. Some of these men I know personally and some only by reputation. On this basis the facts are accepted that they have been such—and I can say this without sending them "The 28." But, let's look at it from another standpoint. If you are not willing to take my word or the word of other faithful brethren who know them, how would you know—unless you send them "the 28" or a reasonable facsimile? (Perhaps since I have not been sent nor filled out "The 28" myself [nor would I do so] they would not consider me a faithful brother to recommend even them).

It would be interesting to know whether these elders sent each other the questionnaire to be filled out. We know that one of the warnings in the New Testament is directed directly to elders. "Of your own selves," Paul told the elders at Ephesus, "shall men arise speaking perverse things to draw away disciples after themselves" (Acts 20:30). The fact of the matter is, the very first apostasy that finally led to the election of a Pope *started with the eldership*. Would it not appear that the eldership would be the logical place to start?

And what about the members? If they do not believe the truth on these particular questions, as the elders understand the truth, are members teaching others in the congregation privately some untruth they believe? Shouldn't they answer these questions? And of course it goes without saying that all the Bible class teachers should answer "The 28." Did they? Oh yes, another thing. With the April issue of GT containing articles discussing both sides of this issue, I sent a number of copies to KY and both the churches in TX who were sending out "The 28." Yet I have not found a single person who saw a one of those papers I sent out. Could it be possible that brethren in conservative congregations have stooped to the level of what institutional brethren did in the 50s and 60s by not allowing their people to read both sides? God forbid!

Now what if, at a later date, the elders change their minds in regard to some of the answers to the questions? Will every person who fills one out have to fill out another and change his position also? It was interesting to me that one preacher who filled out two of the questionnaires for two different congregations gave the following answers to the same question. The question was, "Do you believe the practice of abortion-on-demand to be a matter of personal choice?" In reply to one questionnaire the respondent answered "no." In reply to the other he said, "Certainly. It's a 'personal choice, 'but still a sin! Rape, murder, are personal choices; but are sinful." Wonder which answer was correct? Were they both correct in the eyes of the elders who received them?

How often will "the 28" need to be filled out—every week, month, year? For example, if one is scheduled for a meeting in 1997 since men change positions, will he need to fill one out now and every year until 1997 with the last one being received the day before he comes for the meeting in order to be sure he is "sound?"

Can't we see this is entirely different from simply asking questions of someone we don't know or have heard that the person teaches error on a particular subject?

Also, it seems to me that a lot of time and effort could be saved if the eldership sending out the catechism (questionnaire) could give a "certificate of soundness" (we wouldn't want to call it

a license to preach) so that if another congregation who is sending out the same questionnaire wants that person to come for a meeting or to help with his support, all he would have to do is present his "certificate of soundness."

A friend of mine was recently approached about preaching in a meeting at West Columbia. He was told that in order for him to come the elders would want him to fill out "The 28." My friend asked, "If I refuse to fill it out would I be permitted to come and preach in the meeting?" The reply was, "no." My friend then asked, "If I did not answer the questions the way the elders would want them answered would I be allowed to come?" Answer, "Probably not!" (As brother Robertson pointed out in his February article on creeds, you either yield to the creed or you are denied fellowship).

In view of the above example, "The 28" is a document sent out to determine orthodoxy. If not, why is it sent out? Have the elders and the preacher in the congregation where you attend filled out "the 28?" If not, how can the churches mentioned above know they are sound? If one of the congregations in their area was having a gospel meeting, unless the elders and the preacher for that congregation had filled out "The 28," how could they consider

that congregation sound so they could announce their meeting? Oh yes, and let's not overlook the preacher who is coming to hold the meeting. Has he been tested? Someone may say, "We know that church is sound by its reputation." Why will that work for churches — without them filling out a catechism — but not for preachers? Are H. E. Phillips, James R. Cope, James P. Needham, Robert F. Turner, Ron Daly, Ward Hogland, Bill Robinson, Jr., Earl E. Robertson, Dudley Ross Spears and hundreds of other preachers that could be mentioned, sound? They haven't filled out the catechism — so how would the catechism congregations know?

Brother Ron Halbrook, the originator of the questionnaire, thinks it is a "better way" of finding out where brethren stand. But what about the need to find out where brethren stand on the subjects of fellowshiping brethren who uphold institutionalism; premillennial; the many questions concerning elders; Marshall Patton's position and the mental divorce position on divorce and remarriage. (I thought it interesting that of all the questions asked on the marriage and divorce issue these points were left out). I for one (because of the above reasons) do not think it is a "better way." Is the Lord's church going to be divided because of "the better way" that is said by these brethren to *simply be an expediency*? Are we going to have the "better way" congregations and (by misrepresentation) the "we don't believe in answering questions" congregations? What if one honestly thinks the questionnaire constitutes a catechism (creed)? If it is not filled out and returned, the person is *suspect*. He is unsound. It would appear to me that these brethren would see that this is an effort in futility and:

### **Cease and Desist**

Some are upset with me because I printed Earl Robertson's article in the February issue of GT blaming me with the problem "The 28" is causing. (However it now appears that Earl did the brotherhood a favor in bringing this thing to light so it could be exposed). In a letter to Larry Hafley I wrote the following:

"If you will go back and read the editorial policy in the December 1993 issue of GT you will observe: 'For those who might be interested in writing articles for this paper, we welcome material from you. Material approved for this paper will be the sole responsibility of the Editor. Each writer's views will be his own and will not necessarily represent the views of the Editor or any other person who writes for *Gospel Truths*? However even though this was stated and plain for everyone to see, you say in the third paragraph of your

letter: 'Though your February, 1994 issue does not directly cite the elder's letter to men with whom they and the church has fellowship, its resemblance to their own actions has caused more than a little wonderment and created some questions about your intentions and motivations?' Now Larry, do you really think that we should wonder about someone's intentions and motivations? How does that square with I Corinthians 13:5? Anyway, there is no need to wonder as far as I am concerned, for they were not mine even though you attributed them to me. Why would you attribute them to me when I did not write the article [The Credal System: Bondage and Tyranny, by Earl Robertson, jts]? Also, why would you try to put the blame on me or Earl or anyone else? After all, aren't you brethren the ones who started this whole thing? Perhaps instead of writing me a 10 page letter chastising me, your time could be better spent trying to figure out how you are going to stop the division that is going to tear our brotherhood apart as a result of the questionnaire.

"This is sent forth as a plea to you and the elders there to stop this thing by backing up and apologizing for all the confusion that has been caused. There are many brethren who view this as a creed. Perhaps one of the reasons is because it is being sent not only to those whose teachings or practices may be in doubt; but by your own statement it was sent to those [you for one] about which there is really no doubt. Now if it is just a matter of expediency, a matter of judgment as to *how* information regarding those whose teaching or practice may be in doubt, since the fruits of your judgment is causing confusion and dissension in our brotherhood that will not soon be stilled, why not use some other method? Haven't we urged the institutional brethren to quit the things they are doing for the sake of unity if they are just matters of judgment? I pray for the sake of unity that you brethren will practice what we have preached to them."

To this brother Hafley replied in a letter dated February 26, 1994:

"I will say that if the questions on the questionnaire 'tear our brotherhood apart,' it needs to be torn apart! Division is evil, ugly and bad, but there are times when it is necessary; there are times when it is a 'must' (I Cor. 11:19). Please get this in context: if the questions that were asked 'tear our brotherhood apart,' it is already a rag doll with the stuffing's coming out. If those simple, easy questions succeed in bringing division, then let her rip! There is not much substance to a unity that can be destroyed by those questions! So, if they 'tear our brotherhood apart,' we must have some brotherhood unity! (Let no one take the preceding statements out of context and unnecessarily misconstrue them—I Corinthians 13:5)."

What about those who filled out the questionnaire? Did they sin in so doing? When something of this nature first begins men oftentimes will, without thinking it through, act in a way they later regret. How many of us supported orphan homes and the Herald of Truth in the beginning only to have to oppose them after coming face to face with the fact that we were endorsing human arrangements in both benevolence and evangelism? We simply had to say we were wrong in doing what we did? But we did it without thinking the thing through.

Brethren don't you think it is time to cease and desist (as we did with our teaching and practice of the above mentioned human arrangements) sending out the catechism, "The 28,"

before this thing gets any worse? Already there are strained relationships between family members, between brethren, between elders and preachers *over a human document*. Will brethren allow this to go on and tear our brotherhood apart? Should we "let her rip" over an expediency—a matter of judgment? Surely harmony among God's people means more than that to brethren. We shall see!