

“...fear not, for I am with thee”

It is fashionable in Christian circles to wring the hands, hunch the back, and imply in feeble tones “I am ever so humble”, whilst seething with anger, pride, or loathing inside! But, let me tell you straight away – I am no man’s punch-bag. Nor am I a doormat, craving the crushing weight of sinful feet stamping all over me. I am a child of God, a royal prince in His household. I submit only to God, and to those He has appointed in truth to give me His word.

Today, amidst unbiblical ecumenical fervour and charismatic deception, it is deemed ‘Christian-like’ to allow all kinds of atrocity toward oneself, without a murmur. We must allow pseudo-Christians to run amok and preach lies, under the false notion that we must ‘let God deal with it’. I have said it many times before – many Christians are cowards, afraid to fight what they ought to fight. They hide behind the baggage and hurl insults at the faithful warriors who fight to the death. They turn aside in disgust when one of those soldiers of God returns covered in blood and filth, and wash their finery just in case the stench of battle somehow taints them.

In the past I have said that one of my favourite men in the Old Testament is King David. He epitomises everything that is noble and good, a true soldier of God with compassion. He made errors of judgement and sinned, just like us, but he was still the apple of God’s eye. But, how many of us wish to follow his example? Very few. We do not have to fight physical battles (though it might come to that at times), but we certainly have to fight spiritual war throughout our lives. Those who do not are already the slaves of the enemy!

As one who fights regularly, I am not saying that I am therefore a super-hero. I am not! When I fight this or that battle I am sickened to my stomach, and my heart trembles with fear. Yet, I know I have no choice: I must fight, because this is my destiny as a child of God. It is what we are all called to do... but, as always, the fight is left to the few, whilst the rest live in comfort or in league with the enemy. While they murmur about the warriors, viewing the war with distaste, they nevertheless enjoy the fruits of their battles, though they contributed nothing!

Often, in a spiritual fight, I look around and find no-one by my side, and it is frightening. Even so, alone, I fight on, for I know that God is with me and I should fear not. This does not mean I will never experience anxiety and fear. It means that I will not let fear get the better of me, but will fight on regardless. God is with me! He is with all His children who take up the call to arms. Do you fight God’s enemies? Or, do you hide behind the baggage, as most do?

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When we hide, we lose not just spiritual dignity, but we also lose self-respect and the benefits of God. In this chapter we find Isaac carrying on where his father left off. He also made mistakes, but God spoke to him... fear not for I am with thee. So, Isaac fought on, both physically and spiritually. We are all in the middle of a continuing war, whether we like it or not. We either fight as true soldiers of God, or we hide like cowards. Which is it to be?

Verses 1-6

1.

“And there was a famine in the land, beside the first famine that was in the days of Abraham. And Isaac went unto Abimelech king of the Philistines unto Gerar.

2.

And the LORD appeared unto him, and said, Go not down into Egypt; dwell in the land which I shall tell thee of:

3.

Sojourn in this land, and I will be with thee, and will bless thee; for unto thee, and unto thy seed, I will give all these countries, and I will perform the oath which I swore unto Abraham thy father;

4.

And I will make thy seed to multiply as the stars of heaven, and will give unto thy seed all these countries; and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed;

5.

Because that Abraham obeyed my voice, and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws.

6.

And Isaac dwelt in Gerar:”

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There was a 'famine in the land'. This term can be used to mean hunger caused by lack of food, or a lack of people, or a lack of God's word. In this instance it appears to refer to a failure of crops, leading to hunger. It could, however, also refer to a lack of godliness.

This famine was "beside the first famine" experienced when Abraham was alive, or separate from it. The word 'first' might seem to suggest that there had been no other famines before the one in Abraham's day, but the word *rishown* can mean the first, or it can mean 'the former', or 'first in time'. Thus, we take this text to mean 'there was a famine, after the famine known to Abraham'.

Isaac went to Abraham's old ally, king Abimelech, probably to seek food. He lived south of Gaza, in Gerar. Or, more precisely, Isaac moved his family and flocks so that he could live in a more fertile area. Isaac did not do this randomly, but was told by God to go there, and not to go to Egypt. God told him to stay in the land where he was, because He would give it, and other lands, to him and his descendants, as a blessing, in accordance with His promises to Abraham. In this we see the same promises and blessings given to everyone who is saved by grace. Whatever God has promised to His children is true, and we can expect Him to fulfil them in our own lifetimes – not because we deserve anything, but simply because He has promised.

God continued to say that in Isaac's descendants was the key not only to national inheritance and blessings, but also the salvation of all elect people to the end of time, in the form of Jesus Christ. It was all to be performed by God because Abraham obeyed His statutes and laws and commands. So, Isaac went to Gerar and dwelt there, thinking that his father's alliance would still hold good with the Philistines.

Verses 7-12

1.

"And the men of the place asked him of his wife; and he said, She is my sister: for he feared to say, She is my wife; lest, said he, the men of the place should kill me for Rebekah; because she was fair to look upon.

2.

And it came to pass, when he had been there a long time, that Abimelech king of the Philistines looked out at a window, and saw, and, behold, Isaac was sporting with Rebekah his wife.

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3.

And Abimelech called Isaac, and said, Behold, of a surety she is thy wife: and how saidst thou, She is my sister? And Isaac said unto him, Because I said, Lest I die for her.

4.

And Abimelech said, What is this thou hast done unto us? one of the people might lightly have lien with thy wife, and thou shouldest have brought guiltiness upon us.

5.

And Abimelech charged all his people, saying, He that toucheth this man or his wife shall surely be put to death.

6.

Then Isaac sowed in that land, and received in the same year an hundredfold: and the LORD blessed him.”

Here we see a repeat of Abraham’s folly, for Isaac, when asked about his wife, told the men of the area that Rebekah was his sister! Like the mother-in-law she never knew, Rebekah was also very beautiful, and Isaac feared that men might lust after her and kill him to get her for their own. Abraham did not lie when he said Sarah was his sister, but he did not give the full story. In this case, Isaac might have used a similar tactic, for Rebekah was of his family line and was a sister by way of being close kin. But, we do not know. I am just making a guess.

Isaac’s tent was very close to the abode of king Abimelech (in those days a king’s palace was usually no more than a solid building a little larger than the others), whose house must have been on the city wall. The king looked out and saw Isaac ‘sporting’ with his wife. This means to ‘toy with’ or to ‘play with’. In days when the relationship between unmarried men and women was strictly observed and followed, no man would play games with an unmarried woman, including his own sister. The king could see that Isaac’s relationship with Rebekah was more intimate than that expected between a sister and brother. No doubt the spectre of Abraham and Sarah came to mind as he realised Isaac’s story was not quite right.

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As a result the king summoned Isaac to his home and said, 'For sure, Rebekah is your wife! Why did you tell us she was your sister?' His query was like an echo from the past, and so was Isaac's reply... 'I said she was my sister, just in case I was killed for her sake.'

The king's reply was again similar to the one he gave to Abraham all those years before: 'What have you done to us? One of the men might shortly have had sexual relations with her, and thus you could have made my whole people guilty!' Yet again, the king was fearful of offending the God of Abraham, Who, on many occasions, proved His might and superiority over local gods. There was no way that he wanted to be under God's wrath for something Isaac had said to them.

Abimelech quickly called for the peoples' attention, both by word and by written edict, saying that any man who dared to lay a finger on either Isaac or Rebekah would instantly be put to death. His fears allayed, Isaac returned to live just outside the city walls, growing crops, which God blessed "an hundredfold".

Once more, we see that despite his errors of judgement, God blessed Isaac, just as He had done with Abraham. This does not mean we can deliberately flout God's word or laws, and disobey willingly with no regard for truth and proper behaviour. It is, rather, a confirmation of election and predestination, which ensures that God makes good His promises, because they are made in eternity. He does not look upon the many sins we commit, but He looks into our hearts, to see if they are pure. That is, He looks inward to see Christ, and not outward to witness our failings.

Yes, we must suffer the consequences of our sins, but this does not deter God from giving us blessings. This reinforces the fact that our worth is "in Christ" and not in our own selves. Let us, then, be greatly encouraged, that though we sin and let God down, He moves upon our lives, even secretly, to give us blessings we do not deserve. Repent, then, and determine to be holy.

Verses 13-16

1.

"And the man waxed great, and went forward, and grew until he became very great:

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2.

For he had possession of flocks, and possessions of herds, and great store of servants: and the Philistines envied him.

3.

For all the wells which his father's servants had digged in the days of Abraham his father, the Philistines had stopped them, and filled them with earth.

4.

And Abimelech said unto Isaac, Go from us; for thou art much mightier than we."

There is a myth amongst Christians that we must all bow to the dirt and pretend we are nothing (I say 'pretend' because many are not as humble as they openly state! Indeed, their very claim to humility is full of pride!). The truth is more rewarding: we are nothing in our own right, but we are royal children in Christ!

This means that though most of us will never be known to others or made famous to the world by our deeds, we nevertheless have nothing to prove, apart from our holiness. We are royal children for goodness sake, not paupers wriggling in the dust! Christians in many churches have an unhappy and curious form of self-effacement that enables them to overcome their secret desires to publicly announce that they are of no account. This is a convenient way to think, because they can then jump on others who might appear to be rising in spiritual power, telling them to be 'humble'!

Famous people must come from somewhere! Great Christians do not suddenly appear; they grow from amongst their fellows... some of whom believe that all Christians should be low to the ground and declare how worthless they are. Oh dear! What a gross misperception.

Those who go boldly forward as soldiers of the King, doing mighty deeds, are frowned upon, and are even called 'show-offs'. Those who try to teach the verities of doctrine are cast down and told not to be so proud. Others, who act according to God's will, are talked about in a

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derogatory manner. This shows just how mean and spiritually frugal many Christians really are.

You might well be the next Paul, or the next Spurgeon! You might be a growing influence in the world of theology, or spiritual action. Do what God tells you to do, and you may well be one of the great names in the Church. Do not be put down by your peers; theirs is a spiteful and selfish form of Christianity. Never be put off by this continuous false self-effacement, for it is not helpful, nor is it spiritually nutritious. Very often it is the sign of personal failure and refusal to be wise and holy, not a sign of wondrous spirituality.

In this text we see, immediately after a tale of his errors, a statement that God made Isaac not just great, but very great. In himself, Isaac was nothing, but as one chosen by God, he was made great. Not for his own sake, but for the blessing of his future nation and the whole world. In the midst of all this, like his father Abraham, Isaac did not walk around like a wilting flower, but took what was his from God, and lived in immense strength. And God blessed him. Take heart, then, and do not falter. Fight when you must, rest when you need to, and always do what God commands. Then you will be blessed, and might even become “very great”. Those who always pretend to be humble will get nowhere and are usually useless. Those who act out what God commands will rise and do good. It is these who are ‘humble’.

We are told that God made Isaac ‘great’, gadal – powerful, important, able to do great things. But, he “went forward”, halak, and by his manner of life lived in such a way as to attract God’s praise. His personal life thus grew in holiness and obedience until he was made “very great”, m@od - exceedingly and abundantly great.

I remember, when I was led to fight against the Toronto Blessing in the 1990s, feeling completely vulnerable, and was praying to God for strength every moment. For several years I was attacked viciously and continuously, particularly by pastors in my home city. But, I began to realise that I went forward with great boldness, for the presence of God exceeded my personal fear and anxiety. I knew without doubt that I was about my Father’s business, and though I feared, I also felt completely safe. I worked very long hours in the work, from dawn to dusk, before and after my ‘secular’ job, yet I never felt tired. That is God in action, not me!

Will I ever be ‘great’ in the Church or the world? I do not know. Will you be great? Maybe. What I am saying is this – if we live as we ought, God can use us in a marvellous way, and history might show us to be exceedingly great. So, each one of us must aim to be spiritually great. To live as spiritual wimps is degrading to God’s name! Live as spiritual giants and stride forward in

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strength, and wonderful things will happen. I have no doubt that my self-effacing humble critics will be counting the number of times I use the word 'I' in this passage... but how else can a man refer to himself, if he does not say 'I'? Look at how many times Paul uses the word! Does it mean he is not humble, or that he thinks himself to be something greater than he really is? No, of course not.

The truly great man or woman will be humble by spiritual nature; he or she will not need to continually tell everyone how humble they are. They will not bend in times of trouble, or hide their tracks when faced with opposition. Rather, they will not waiver, but fight on, in the knowledge that God is there for them and pushing them forward. We must all live like this. Sadly, most Christians leave the fighting to a few. Then they complain when the going gets rough. Let us all live as God's royal children, wearing full armour and marching boldly, without fear and the criticism of others to hamper us.

Isaac had "possession of flocks... herds, and great store of servants". God blessed him physically because he obeyed. The result? The "Philistines envied him." They were qana – jealous and made angry.

This occurs in so many local churches; what causes some to be cast out and charged with 'pride' is the jealousy in the hearts of their fellows. Those who strive and obey do not wait for human approval, but go onward. They are then targets of attack and spite. Envy causes many leaders to destroy the work and character of others who are doing God's will. They cannot stand the few working under God without reference to themselves! They have no control over such men and women, so they become very angry. Such is human arrogance.

The anger at Isaac's blessing and greatness caused the Philistines to fill-in the wells dug by Abraham. They did it out of sheer spite and jealousy, though Abraham and Abimelech had created a covenant. The same kind of activity occurs in modern days, when Christians with a ministry are opposed by others who consider themselves to be leaders, because they have no control over what is being done. Thus, they deliberately spoil the ministries of faithful servants, so as to bolster their own.

The result was not the stopping of the bad behaviour, but the casting out of Isaac! The king did not prevent his subjects from attacking Isaac. Instead, he threw Isaac out from his country. Again, this is seen in so many situations in our churches today, when legitimate workers of God are shunned for no good reason, when their attackers are left alone to continue their mischief.

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Isaac did not show any malice or threat toward the Philistines. They had attacked him and his property, yet it was they who 'won the day'. Stand and fight for what is true, and you will rarely be thanked for it, my friends. Instead, you will probably be castigated and made to appear sinful! Note this, however: though at the time Isaac was seemingly under threat, the whole situation was in God's hands and the Philistines were only doing what God commanded them to do, even though they did not realise it.

Abimelech was watching the scene as it unfolded. He knew that Isaac, like his father Abraham, was so great that he could, if he so wished, do battle with the Philistines and win. So, he pre-empted the situation and asked Isaac to leave. Any other leader, with numerically greater numbers, could have turned upon the king and destroyed his city. But, Isaac had no wish to do so and left peaceably.

Verses 17-23

1.

"And Isaac departed thence, and pitched his tent in the valley of Gerar, and dwelt there.

2.

And Isaac digged again the wells of water, which they had digged in the days of Abraham his father; for the philistines had stopped them after the death of Abraham: and he called their names after the names by which his father had called them.

3.

And Isaac's servants digged in the valley, and found there a well of springing water.

4.

And the herdmen of Gerar did strive with Isaac's herdmen, saying, The water is ours: and he called the name of the well Esek; because they strove with him.

5.

And they digged another well, and strove for that also: and he called the name of it Sitnah.

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6.

And he removed from thence, and digged another well; and for that they strove not: and he called the name of it Rehoboth; and he said, For now the LORD hath made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land.

7.

And he went up from thence to Beer-sheba.”

Isaac took his family and herds to the valley of Gerar. This probably means the wadi of Gerar, a place where water was plentiful, on the site of a dried up river bed, some way away from the king's city. Once there, he set his men to work, removing the earth from his father's wells that had been filled-in by the Philistines. As each well was re-dug, he gave them back the names given to them by Abraham. When the servants had dug the first well, they discovered that it was a spring.

No sooner had they re-dug the well than Philistine herdsmen came along to fight for the right to have the water. They had previously filled it in, but now that it was clear again, they fought to regain the rights to water their animals! Because the well was reclaimed by aggression, Isaac renamed the well 'Esek'.

Isaac fared no better with the next well; the Philistines again came to fight for ownership. Isaac's men again won, and he named the well Sitnah ('strife', something gained in spite of enmity). However, the next well had no opposition, so he named it Rehoboth ('wide places or streets'). This was not indicative of the well itself, but of what God had provided: He created a wide path along which Isaac and his descendants would travel to gain the promises. That is, a path that would not be impeded by anyone or anything – it would be fruitful. From there, Isaac and his men went to Beersheba.

Verses 24-31

1.

“And the LORD appeared unto him the same night, and said, I am the God of Abraham thy father: fear not, for I am with thee, and will bless thee, and multiply thy seed for my servant

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Abraham's sake.

2.

And he builded an altar there, and called upon the name of the LORD and pitched his tent there: and there Isaac's servants digged a well.

3.

Then Abimelech went to him from Gerar, and Ahuzzath one of his friends, and Phichol the chief captain of his army.

4.

And Isaac said unto them, Wherefore come ye to me, seeing ye hate me, and have sent me away from you?

5.

And they said, We saw certainly that the LORD was with thee: and we said, Let there be now an oath betwixt us, even betwixt us and thee, and let us make a covenant with thee;

6.

That thou wilt do us no hurt, as we have not touched thee, and as we have done unto thee nothing but good, and have sent thee away in peace: thou art now the blessed of the LORD.

7.

And he made them a feast, and they did eat and drink.

8.

And they rose up betimes in the morning, and sware one to another: and Isaac sent them away, and they departed from him in peace.”

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This next portion of the text seems to suggest that Isaac was fearful of the future, possibly because he had to fight for every inch and never be sure if he would be attacked. All Christians come to this point, maybe not knowing, even in their hearts, what is going on. It is at these times that God will reassure us, if we are quiet before His face.

Isaac was fearful, and God came to him when he reached Beersheba. He told Isaac that He was the God of his father, and He would be with Isaac also: Do not be afraid, for I am with you. I will cause your family to expand into a nation, for your father's sake. Do not fear if you belong to the Lord!

Greatly encouraged, Isaac built an altar to the Lord when he awoke, and prayed to God. He pitched his tent there and ordered his servants to dig another well. The Philistine herdsmen who attacked Isaac's men must have been talking when they got back home, for along went Abimelech, to see Isaac, with his friend Ahuzzath ('possession') and his chief captain or general, Phicol ('strong'). This was not an ordinary visit, as the high rank of the personnel proves.

Isaac was not that happy to see them, and asked Abimelech why he should come to see him, as he had thrown him out 'hatefully' not so long ago. Isaac might have heard the story of his father's alliance with Abimelech, but now he was re-enacting it himself. The king said that he and his courtiers had watched and observed that God was with him, and they wanted to swear not to attack each other. Though the herdsmen had done so, the king promised that there would be no official warring between them. The king pointed out that he had sent Isaac away in peace and not with intent to harm. Isaac, he said, was "now the blessed of the Lord".

What we are seeing here is not so much an acknowledgement of God as Saviour, but a simple life-preserving action that the king hoped would stave off any judgement against them by Abraham's mighty God. He had witnessed the way that Abraham grew from strength to strength, as a prince, ruler and wealthy man. Now it seemed that his son was enjoying the same privileges and protection. Isaac was by now himself a mighty ruler with great wealth, so it seemed prudent to Abimelech to forge an amicable link with him. We know that Isaac was, at this time, far greater in strength than Abimelech and the Philistines, and this is why the king was so keen to get on his side: "do us no harm."

Obviously, Isaac agreed to the terms, for he then made them all a feast. The guests slept in Isaac's company and left the next morning, repeating their promises to each other, and going in

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peace.

Verses 32-35

1.

“And it came to pass the same day, that Isaac's servants came, and told him concerning the well which they had digged, and said unto him, We have found water.

2.

And he called it Shebah: therefore the name of the city is Beer-sheba unto this day.

3.

And Esau was forty years old when he took to wife Judith the daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and Bashemath the daughter of Elon the Hittite:

4.

Which were a grief of mind unto Isaac and to Rebekah.”

Later that day, Isaac's servants returned home to tell him they had found water after digging another well. Of course, in such an arid area, a well was worth more than gold and added to Isaac's wealth, power and security. Isaac named the well Shebah ('an oath') after making his promises to Abimelech.

(We then have what appears to be an odd inclusion in the text – a sudden mention of Esau. It should be remembered that the divisions in the Bible were not there originally, but were later added for ease of reading).

Esau married at age 40, and although he and Jacob had not been friends for a long time (after Jacob had taken Esau's birthright), the news of this marriage caused much heartache to Isaac and his wife. Abraham had made an immense effort to bring a suitable wife to Isaac, one who would be compatible by race and religion. But, here was his son, Esau, marrying outside of that

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strict requirement. He married two wives, both of Hittite origin. One was Judith ('Jewess' or 'praised'), whose father was Beerli ('my well'); the other was Bashemath (possibly meaning 'perfume'), whose father was Elon ('mighty').

The text tells us that these wives were "a grief of mind unto Isaac and Rebekah." Jacob was probably not aware of the marriage yet, as he was with Laban, his mother's brother, in Haran, for 20 years. The grief was because Abraham had forbidden marriage to Canaanites. To make matters worse, Esau also married a third woman, a daughter of his uncle, Ishmael. In this we see a source of trouble, for the coming Hebrews would strictly adhere to same-religion same-nation marriage, in an attempt to maintain a godly line of people.

The account is suitable as a warning to all Christians, to remain within the guidelines set by God. He says that we should not be 'unequally yoked'. This applies to other relationships beside marriage, where an ungodly or unbelieving person can drag a Christian down, by open antagonism to God, or even by silence and indifference. Christians must be in the world but not of it. In my work for example, I have no option but to work with homosexual colleagues. They do their work and I do mine. I never join in with their talk of their 'partners', and I say neither yea nor nay. Nor do I join them in work-related social gatherings. In this way I am in the world but not of it.

It is difficult for young Christians to understand the reasoning behind this form of strictness, and so they join with members of the opposite sex on the basis of attraction alone. As the relationships grow stronger so the Christian will rationalise his or her continuing relationship by hoping that he or she will become a Christian. But this is not what scripture says: rather, it plainly states that we should not enter into such a relationship in the first place, because it can only lead to disruption of one's life and an insidious lowering of Christian standards and beliefs.

A relationship can be stopped immediately. If one we desire is not a Believer, then we are foolish to plan a second meeting. The worse thing we can do is allow the relationship to develop and then, when emotional bonds have been created, say "I cannot be with you because you are not a Christian." Inevitably, the other person, wishing to retain the relationship, will pretend to become a Christian, making the situation even worse and more complex. The Christian partner, inwardly wanting the same result, will then also pretend, and will 'accept' the claim of the other to be a Christian. The end result, though, is always heartache. Better to walk away straight away than to let the relationship grow in strength.

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Those who are young should bear this in mind...simply by being obedient, both Abraham and Isaac were given everything by God, including their partners. Though it is far more difficult to find fellow Believers today, you should not rush out to get any partner, simply on the basis of physical attraction.

If you truly believe God, you will relax and wait for God to show you who to be linked with. This can be when playing football, chatting socially, or even going out together and marriage. If you are 'desperate' you will fail miserably and fall foul of God's will. Just wait and He will provide the answer and the person. Better to be isolated and alone for a while than to go against God's word and will! Obedience brings God's blessings and rewards, so think about it.

All Christians must also bear these principles in mind when choosing not just friends, but, more importantly, 'soul mates' in doctrine. Many Christians go off at a tangent, by choosing one set of friends over others, because of some kind of 'similarity beliefs'. That is, most Christians choose a church not because of its truth or doctrinal purity, but because they like the singing, or the services, or the people and the social aspects.

Or, more likely, because they share the same 'favourite' teachings. The fact that they are 'favourite' shows that those who meet together are being selective. In brief, they are nothing more than informal sub-denominations, with partisan minds. It would be better to be with those who teach the whole of God's word as it is written, even if there are perceived 'flaws' in the group. I do not mean continual sins that are unchallenged; I mean those silly human traits that have no bearing on doctrine and which are not heinous behaviours. Let God be their judge, in order that you can gain in wisdom and knowledge.

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