



Minutes With Messiah

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Do We Celebrate?

Throughout most of my conservative upbringing I have been told why Christians should not celebrate Christmas as a religious holiday. On the other hand, I also hear people decrying the “rank commercialism” of the season and saying “Put Christ back into Christmas.” Sometimes I have been prompted to wonder if we are right to de-Christianize Christmas.

Yes, I can quote all the arguments why Jesus was not born in December. I understand that shepherds would not be out in the fields that late in the year. Galen Peterson (The Everlasting Tradition, 1995, Kregel Publications) presents a pretty compelling argument for a late September/early October birth based on Luke 1:5,9. He states that the priestly course of Abijah, of which Zechariah was, did their temple service in mid June and early December. Assuming a December date for Luke 1:9, he shows that Jesus was likely born during the feast of Succot, the Feast of Booths after Yom Kippur. (His argument could come up with an April date as well.) Either way, Jesus was certainly not born in December. I have even quoted the argument that we shouldn't celebrate Jesus' birth because it is his death that is what is really important.

That being said, I will also present two arguments on the other side of the coin. This is because I know Christians who argue, “If we don't teach about Christ when others are listening, we may not get another chance with them.”

First, the arguments that Jesus was not born on December 25 don't really amount to the proverbial hill of beans as far as choosing a date to celebrate a birth. I work with a man who was born on December 25. He celebrates his birthday in June. I also grew up with a person who was born on February 29. She celebrated her birthday March 1 three out of every four years. If someone wants to celebrate my birthday once a month, I won't object (if they give me presents). So just because Jesus was not born in December does not mean his birth can not be celebrated then.

A second argument has to do with whether we can choose to celebrate a “religious holiday” that the Bible does not specify. The Torah mandated holidays

for the Jews were the New Moon (the first day of each month), Sabbath, *Pesach* (Passover), *Shavuot* (Pentecost), the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Tabernacles. The book of Esther tells of the beginnings of another holiday, Purim, which was not mandated by the law. John 10:22 mentions another added feast, Hanukkah (see page 4). Because the Lord's Day is the only holiday that comes close to being mandated by the New Testament for Christians, many choose not to celebrate Christmas and Easter as religious holidays. But can those who choose not to celebrate them as such bind that non-observance on others? Because I am a gentile, am I obligated not to observe Passover? Can I not even hold a Passover seder to teach the Lord's Supper more fully? Can I, a gentile, forbid a Jew who becomes a Christian to celebrate Passover, or even observe Sabbath? Paul apparently thought the answer to all these questions was “no.” “Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ.” (Col 2:16-17) Just as no one can condemn me for not observing the Sabbath, I can not condemn them if they choose to observe it. I can not, and would not, bind it on anyone that they must celebrate Christmas or Easter (as some have tried). Nor can anyone bind it on another that they must not celebrate these days. Scripturally, it appears to be a matter of choice.

Please note the new web site address in the masthead above. I may soon phase out the old site.

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Congregational Autonomy

One of the principal differences between the churches of Christ of the Restoration Movement and the Roman Catholic, and Orthodox churches, and the Protestant groups coming from those traditions is the question of congregational autonomy. This is the concept that each congregation of the church is independent of all others, with no higher authority other than the scriptures themselves, autonomy being from two words meaning self rule. The opposite concept usually involves a person or group who have authority to make rules for several congregations or the church worldwide. (The Orthodox churches do grant autonomous status to some congregations, but even that status is granted by the hierarchy of the church.) Do those who follow a hierarchical government in the church have any support for their way, or is it simply based on tradition.

Many preachers would have us believe that the development of the Papacy, for instance, can be directly traced to one man or a group of men selfishly wanting the preeminence in the church. In truth, however, the practice likely developed more honestly. In an area where there were a number of new congregations, one older congregation would be looked to for guidance. Over time, an elder in that congregation would, for the good of the congregations, assume (perhaps in spite of

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his own objections) a leadership role over all the congregations. As this occurs in several areas, a group of these men would meet together to discuss problems. Thus a board of elders comes to make rules for a larger area or country. Naturally, these men would look to the scriptures to find out if what they are doing can be found there. So we need to look at some of the possible scriptural justifications they may have used.

Arguments Against Autonomy

One does not need to look far in the book of Acts to find a scriptural example of churches seeking advice from another, older area congregation. Chapter 15 is an account of Paul and Barnabas traveling from Antioch to Jerusalem to consult with the “apostles and elders” about the question of requiring Gentile Christians to be circumcised. Some might argue that this is a case of appealing only to the apostles, who obviously had special authority. Verses 2, 4, 6, 22, and 23 clearly include the apostles and the elders, and in one of those verses “the whole church.” It would seem, then, that this would be a precedent for the rulers of one congregation to exercise authority over another congregation.

On closer analysis however, this fails to qualify as such a justification. Why were Paul (himself an Apostle) and Barnabas sent to Jerusalem? It wasn’t because the Jerusalem church was considered to have authority over the church in the third largest city of the Roman Empire. The explanation can be found in the Jerusalem church’s response. In verse 24, their letter to the Antioch church begins: “Since we have heard that certain persons who have gone out from us, though with no instructions from us, have said things to disturb you and have unsettled your minds.” The Antioch church sent an embassy to Jerusalem to find out whether certain individuals were preaching what that congregation really believed. As it turned out, they were not. The “conference of Jerusalem” was not to determine doctrine for the whole church, but rather to clarify what they themselves believed.

The second argument for a hierarchy would be “apostolic succession,” the idea that the apostles passed their special authority on to others so they could continue to make decisions for the church throughout time. In the Roman church this authority is passed down specifically to the spiritual heir of Peter. The justification for this is found in Acts 1. In verses 21-22, Peter argues that someone must be named to take the place of Judas as “a witness with us to his resurrection.” If Judas was replaced after Jesus’ death, then would not also the other apostles be replaced when they died? If these successors moved to different parts of the world, as tradition says they did, then would they not exercise authority over certain regions, as do the Metropolitans of the Orthodox church?

That would possibly be true if: (1) the qualifications for Judas' replacement related to the exercise of authority; and (2) the authority and power of the apostles was capable of being passed on. Let us see if either or both of these conditions exist.

What were the qualifications of a replacement for Judas?

Of these men which have companied with us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John, unto that same day that he was taken up from us, must one be ordained to be a witness with us of his resurrection.(Acts 1:21-22)

The qualifications, and the reason for them, specifically related to being able to serve as a witness to the resurrection. The man had to have accompanied them throughout their time with the Lord Jesus. This had nothing to do with passing on any special authority to make laws for the church, but the fulfilling of scripture. In fact, these qualifications would disqualify anyone from apostolic succession past the latter part of the first century. No one in the past 1900 years can meet the qualifications.

Were the apostles even able to pass on any special authority or power? With the exception of this possible instance, there is nothing in scripture that would indicate anything, affirmative or negative, about the ability of the apostles to pass on special authority. Lacking that evidence, we must look at whether they could pass on even one special aspect of being an apostle. The most obvious special power they had was the ability to impart the gifts of the Holy Spirit to others. If they could pass this along, it could be argued that they could pass along other authority as well. If they could not pass along this ability, it is questionable whether they could pass on any other special authority.

The scripture that tells us that the apostles could give others the ability to perform miraculous spiritual gifts can also be used to show that they could not pass on that special gift. In Acts 18:3, we see that Philip had the power to perform "signs and great miracles." Obviously he could not give that power to others, because Peter and John were sent from Jerusalem and imparted the power. Verses 18 and 19 read: "And when Simon saw that through laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Ghost was given, he offered them money, saying, Give me also this power, that on whomsoever I lay hands, he may receive the Holy Ghost." He did not ask Philip to sell him this power, because Philip showed he could not pass on even what power he had. Only the apostles (and presumably Cornelius and his household later) could lay their hands on someone and give them

the gifts. If they could not pass that ability on to Philip, we may also presume that they could not pass on their authority as apostles. So we see that apostolic succession never existed (and coincidentally that the ability to perform miraculous gifts could not have existed beyond the next generation after the death of the apostles themselves).

Congregational Autonomy

Simply showing that the scriptures do not justify a church government in which certain individuals or congregations have authority over several congregations does not, in itself, mean that that form of

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government is unscriptural, just that it is non-scriptural. Can we show that each congregation was self-ruling, autonomous? I think we can.

The obvious plan of government was for each mature congregation to have elders (also called bishops, pastors, or presbyters). Acts 14:23 states that Paul appointed elders in "each church." Titus was to appoint elders in every town of Crete (Titus 1:5). These elders were given authority only in the towns (congregations) where they were appointed. That they did not have authority over several congregations is obvious from the phrases "each church" and "every town." In fact, we know that some congregations (Jerusalem, Ephesus), if not all, had a plurality of elders. This alone would argue against one bishop being over several congregations.

It has been a tradition eighteen hundred years in the making that someone outside the local congregation should rule the church. But God ordained otherwise. Congregational autonomy guarantees that one group falling away from the truth doesn't take everyone with them. As one Rabbi from Poland said after his whole village got electric lights: "Before this, when one kerosene lamp was empty, everyone else had light. Now when the power goes out in my house, everyone else is in the dark, too."

A Feast of Dedication

Hanukkah is the Feast of Dedication. It began as a celebration of the rededication of the Temple after it was defiled by Antiochus IV. Almost 300 years later someone wrote down the now-famous story that it celebrates a miracle of one day of the sacred lamp oil lasting seven days until more could be made. How can we view the holiday in view of its earliest origins?

Each year, Hanukkah should be a celebration of the rededication of the Temple. Since there is no longer a Temple in Jerusalem, it would seem that Hanukkah should no longer be a celebration, but rather a period of mourning. Instead it remains a celebration. Perhaps we can explain this in the identification of the table in the home with the altar. The Talmud says, "When the Temple stood, sacrifices would secure atonement for an individual; now his table does." (Hagigah 27a) Further, it is said that "if three have eaten at a table and spoke words of Torah, it is as though they ate at the table of the Lord." (Avot 2:4) In this light, Hanukkah is a celebration and a rededication of homes and families. The Days of Awe (Rosh Hashana through Yom Kippur) serve to all Jews as a time of personal rededication—a time of reflection and repentance. These are days of solemnity. Hanukkah serves as a celebration of family and friends. It is a joyous time to renew associations. "How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes." (Psa 133:1-2) Even David compared a happy family to the dedication of the *Kohen Gadol*, the High Priest.

Hanukkah is an excellent time to rededicate the family in unity. Throughout the year our families tend to be defiled by anger, indifference, laziness. We sacrifice the swine of pride, selfishness, and (pun intended) pig-headedness on the altar of the family table. We need to remove these things from our lives. We need to restore the sanctity of the family, and the joy of the family. This should be done on a daily basis, but if it is not, the Feast of Dedication serves as an appropriate, and a joyous, time to do so.

As importantly, Hanukkah serves as a time to dedicate families to God. Perhaps because of its proximity to Christmas, or because of its joyousness, or perhaps because of its Rabbinic rather than Biblical origin, many otherwise non-observant Jews celebrate Hanukkah. What better time is there to begin teaching children about God, and even having parents begin thinking about God, than this time of celebration. Dedication of the family to God necessarily involves teaching. "And ye shall teach them your children, speaking of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, when thou liest down, and when thou risest up." (Deu 11:19) Teaching is a daily thing, but it is so much easier when it begins at a time that is naturally a family time.

Yes, Hanukkah is a seven day celebration of the rededication of a formerly defiled Temple. But it can also serve as a time of rededication of families as well.

This year Hanukkah begins December 22.

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