



Minutes With Messiah

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Looking Back

One year ago seemingly everybody was unnecessarily worried about Y2K. Now as we really start the new millennium by our calendar, I thought I would look back at what has happened in that millennium.

It started with the year 1001 in what is called the Lower Middle Ages. (I will ignore oriental history.) Within 65 years William of Normandy had conquered England. Less than 100 years later Henry I of England had developed the basis of the modern jury system.

The high middle ages started with the 100 years war, in which gunpowder weapons were first used in Europe. The end of feudalism led to the development of a middle class with disposable income. This in turn led to the Renaissance, which planted the seeds of the "Industrial Revolution" of the 17th through 20th centuries. Warfare continued, which led to more technological advances. In the 20th century which just ended we saw the greatest technological leaps forward of any century, all at a time when great minds were saying there was "nothing new to discover." Nothing new except manned flight, television, personal computers, and quantum physics.

The millennium saw medical advances as well. We have gone from herbal remedies to artificial drugs to herbal remedies. No longer is anaesthesia administered by putting a bose metal helmet over the head and beating it with a hammer until the sound made the patient senseless (and temporarily deaf). Routine amputation is gone, replaced by transplants and microsurgery.

Why do I mention these things. Mainly to introduce the idea of changes in the practice of Christianity that accompanied all these other changes. The millennium began with the anti-semitic/anti-Muslim sentiments that resulted in the crusades of the 13th and 14th centuries. This developed into the inquisitions of the 15th and 16th. By the end of the 16th century the Reformation Movement had begun. Soon others abandoned the idea of reformation and established their own groups based on their ideas and interpretations, aided by the invention of the printing

press. In part because of this we have the multiplicity of churches that exist today. The Reformation, coupled with the mid-millennium discovery of the Americas, led to an expansion of the Catholic and other churches.

In America, the 19th century saw the Restoration Movement, whose idea was not to reform, but to restore New Testament Christianity from the root up. It also saw the beginnings of the Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Christian Science. The 20th century saw a writer become popular more for Scientology than for the rest of his science fiction, and New Age, which is really old paganism and eastern mysticism.

The truth is, though, that although what is considered Christianity has changed over the past millennium, the Bible has not changed. Yes, there are various translations (all made during the past millennium), but the Word of God has not changed. All those translations, if they are valid at all, say the same thing in new words or languages. The Word has not changed in almost two millennia. But this is hardly surprising. Jesus himself promised it. "Heaven and earth shall pass away: but my words shall not pass away." (Lk 21:33) He could be so confident in his pronouncement because he knew his nature, who is "the same yesterday, today, and forever." (Heb 13:8) Through all the changes and uncertainties of time, we can know stability, because the Christianity of the Bible, unlike some of the Christianity of this past millennium, is based on a foundation that knows no change.

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In Defense of Baptism

Perhaps the one doctrine that distinguishes between the church of the New Testament and almost all Christian denominations is that of baptism—either whether it is for believers or not, or its purpose. Now, I can hear a lot of “church of Christians” saying “what about instrumental music?” No, that’s not it. Most people will not insist that they *must* use instrumental accompaniment to their singing, and many in the churches of Christ will refuse to insist that they *must not* use one. I can also hear some from various denominations (and some “non-denominations”) asking, “Are you saying we aren’t the church of the New Testament?” All I can say in answer to that is, “read on” and see if your beliefs on this issue agree with what the church of the New Testament believed. If they don’t coincide, then it is the scriptures, and not I, who say that.

Of course, some will disagree with the conclusions that follow. If they can prove *from the scriptures* that those conclusions are wrong, then I am obligated to retract this article. I invite anyone to show me where I am wrong, if I am wrong.

What is baptism?

First of all, it is important to define what we are discussing. It is unfortunate that the translators of the

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King James Version of the Bible, and most subsequent translations, refused to translate the Greek word *baptizo*. Instead they “anglicized” it into “baptism.” It is also understandable that they did this. It was to avoid arguments on the nature of baptism.

Pure and simple, baptism means immersion. Any other meaning, such as can be found in most English dictionaries, is an outgrowth of doctrines that deny the original and scriptural meaning. Every scholar of Biblical Greek will admit that it means to immerse, dip, or plunge, as one does in dyeing cloth. It always had that meaning. If so, why is Alexander Campbell’s translation of the Bible the only significant English

translation to use the word “immerse” in place of “baptize?” Probably for the same reason James I’s translators chose not to translate it. Immersion is the least popular form of “baptism” in many churches.

The first century church had no problem understanding baptism was immersion, instead of such things as pouring or sprinkling. Those conventions were years away. John baptized where there was much water (Jn 3:23) and the Ethiopian waited until they got to a place where he and Philip could go down into the water (Acts 8:36-38) (even though he was doubtless carrying several jugs of water across the desert) simply because you could not immerse in even the largest jug or a shallow stream.

In addition, not immersing destroys the whole symbolism of baptism. Baptism is a burial (Col 2:12; Rom 6:1-9). Nobody buries a corpse by placing a little earth on his forehead. So how can anyone baptize in that manner, and call it scriptural?

Who should be baptized?

This question divides the Catholic Church and those closest to the Reformation from most churches before and since. I mean the question less in the sense of the purpose of baptism, which will be addressed later, as in the sense of whether a person must choose to be baptized or not. In other words, are there preconditions to baptism?

I think that question can be answered by looking at some of the scriptures that mandate the practice. If words are associated with baptism, they may be conditions for it. First look at Mark 16:16—“He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved.” Belief is irrevocably tied to baptism. In Acts 2:38, Peter says “Repent and be baptized.” So it appears repentance must also accompany belief in order to be scripturally baptized.

The belief and repentance must come from the one being immersed. And there is where many differ with the scriptures. It doesn’t say that my parents can believe and I be baptized. It requires a voluntary act of repentance on my part before I can be immersed. Such a belief and such a voluntary act are only able to be performed by one who is old enough to understand and choose to turn from sin. That age differs among individuals, but it is certainly not at eight days or even several months old.

What is the purpose of baptism?

This is probably the most debated aspect of the issue under discussion. Is one saved before baptism? If so, is baptism still necessary? Is baptism “an outward sign of an inward grace?” What do the scriptures say? Only by searching the scriptures can we find out what the New Testament church believed. These are questions that can not be answered by “I think” propositions. It is not what “I think” but what God thinks.

Go back to Mark 16:16 and see what it says: “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.” Salvation has two coequal preconditions in this statement, belief and baptism. It is not “He that believes will be saved and baptized.” Jesus made both belief and immersion as conditions for salvation. Nor does the second phrase negate the baptism provision of the first. Try telling a college that paying tuition is optional because “he who enrolls and pays tuition will be taught, but he who does not enroll will not be taught.”

Acts 2:38, also quoted above, says “Repent, and be baptized *every one of you* in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins.” (Emphasis mine.) Just as I argued that repentance necessarily accompanied baptism, so also must repentance and baptism necessarily precede remission of sins. In fact, a more accurate translation from the Greek would say “Every one of you repent and be immersed for the purpose of (or unto) remission of sins.” What is the purpose of baptism? This verse says it is to have your sins taken away.

Acts 22:16: “And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord.” Some would argue that it is the calling on the name of the Lord that leads to the washing away of sins in this passage. But to do so, you must argue that baptism precedes salvation. Most would say that baptism follows instead. The logical reading of this verse says that baptism (in water) washes away sins, and is a calling on the name of the Lord. Why would he use the phrase “wash away your sins” if it was the calling, rather than the immersion in water that was involved?

Romans 6:3-4: “Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.” Paul says that immersion/burial is a precondition to walking in a new life. The

whole context of the passage says that we are not dead to sin until we are buried with Christ, in baptism. If we are not dead to sin, we are not saved.

Galatians 3:27: “For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” One can not be in Christ, can not have put on Christ, without baptism.

1 Peter 3:20-21: “eight souls were saved by water, the like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” Peter equates salvation by water baptism to Noah’s salvation in the

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flood. Both Noah and we are saved, he says, by water. It is not washing away dirt, but washing away sin. It is salvation by the resurrection of Jesus, but it is through the means of water. Those who would argue that this does not say “baptism saves you,” that the clear meaning of the passage is not its true meaning, must explain why he brings this up in the context of Noah if it is not immersion in water that is being discussed. It is the answer of a good conscience toward God. But it is not the good conscience that saves. Otherwise Paul would have continued to persecute Jews (2 Tim 1:3) and Cornelius would not have needed Peter to preach to him. The good conscience is what motivates one to be immersed which is the point at which one is saved.

There are those who would say that “baptism saves you,” implies “salvation by works.” This is not what we believe. Is baptism any more a work than faith? Not according to the scriptures. Hebrews 11 indicates that faith is work (action). Faith, repentance, baptism are all “works” in response to a good conscience and in order to appropriate God’s grace.

If the purpose of baptism is salvation, as the scriptures teach, can one be saved without it? If grace saves us (Eph 2:5) is that independent of baptism? Can one person be saved by grace and another saved by baptism without grace? We are saved by grace, through faith, by means of baptism. But we are saved by all together, not any one separately from the others.

The Tunnel

On a recent trip through the mountains I had to drive through a tunnel. It was a short, straight tunnel, maybe a quarter mile in length. It was short enough that there were no lights in the tunnel, but it was long enough to get dark in there. As I approached I could see the light and trees and road at the other end, so I didn't turn on my lights. Almost half way through it got so dark I couldn't see the road directly in front of me. I turned on my headlights. It didn't help. I was far enough through that they only lit what was already lit. A moment of panic! "I can't see the road. What do I do?" Of course, I did nothing and the car moved steadily into the lighter part of the tunnel and then out the other end. But I still panicked. "What if the road turns and I don't? What if I drift into the other lane?" All I had to do, though, was keep the car going straight ahead.

Sometimes, I think, we all know that moment of panic. God has shown us the road. He even shows us the light of heaven at the end of the tunnel. But as we drive through this life, things get dark. Sin, temptation, peer pressure, lack of faith; all increase the darkness. Peter knew the feeling. It was dark, a little after midnight. He saw the light, but lost sight of it. "But when he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink, he cried, saying, Lord, save me." (Matt 14:30) He began to panic in the dark.

What can we do when this happens? The darkness surrounds us, and though we see the light we worry. Sometimes we should do what I did in that tunnel—nothing. God is carrying us on a straight course home. Why not let him carry us? You know the straight path (Isa 40:3-4); it is the path of the Lord. Just keep your path straight. Instead we want to turn the wheel or hit the brakes.

"You are going right toward the end of the tunnel, God, but maybe I'll turn just a little to the right." If I do, I hit the wall. If I turn left I'm going to meet some people going the other way; and meet them hard.

If I hit the brakes I won't make it through to the other side. Worse yet, I will prevent others from making it either. You see, there are people following me. Right or wrong, it's a fact. Instead of a "Don't follow me; I'm lost" bumper sticker, I'm wearing one that says "Follow me; I'm saved." ("Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ." 1 Cor 11:1) If I slam on the brakes, the ones following crash into my unbelief. Neither of us gets through safely.

If you are going the way God has us pointed, if you are riding in the car that is His son, when the darkness comes and the panic hits, don't do anything! If you drive, you will just mess things up. Let him carry you in the straight way. God will carry you through.

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