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GENERATIONS OF FAITH

Did the second generation of Israel after the Exodus have more faith than their parents? We generally think so, because they were willing to enter the Promised Land, while their parents had balked at the report of the spies. But maybe this emphasizes the faith of the first generation. It may also show that their faith was even greater than we normally think.

How can it show the faith of the first generation? Weren't they always complaining? Did they not fashion the golden calf? Did they not trust God to give them the Promised Land? Nobody said they were a perfect generation. They had their faults, and frequently showed a lack of faith. On the other hand, they had their moments of glory.

This was a generation that had an excuse, if there is excuse, for little faith. They had spent so much time in Egypt that it was no longer a foreign land, but their homeland. They had almost forgotten God. Moses had properly expected them, when he said God sent him to free them, to say, "What is his name?" (Ex 3:13) And yet, once Moses had taught them about God and told them to pack their bags, they were ready to follow him. Granted, they had seen a few miracles, and granted, they had been maltreated. But they had the faith to leave a place that had been their family home for about as long as some current members of the DAR. Beyond that, when they were told that God had a law for them, rather than asking what it was, they said, "we will hear it and do it." (Deut 5:27) They promised to obey even before they had heard the details.

But how does the next generation show the faith of that generation? By their own faith. How easy it is to fail to pass on what faith we have. It could have been easy for that generation to say that this was a new God, and they would instead teach about the old gods of Egypt. They did not do that. They taught about their re-found faith in the true God. It would have been easy for the next generation to see their actions and discount their faith. In spite of their doubts, they obviously taught the new generation the Law and the faith. It would be easy to have stopped teaching when they

doubted, but they taught through the doubt and into the faith. Do we have that much faith, ourselves?

How could the second generation's faith be greater than we think? Because they entered the Promised Land. Consider what they had. They didn't have to work for their food; they just had to gather it every morning off the ground. They didn't have to worry about water. Apparently the rock from which Moses first got water for them followed them throughout the desert, giving them water. (Paul attests to this in 1 Corinthians 10:4.) They had a cloud to give them air conditioning by day, and a pillar of fire to drive off the wild animals at night—the ultimate night light. They didn't need J. C. Penney because their clothes never wore out (Deut 29:5). They averaged over a year and a half at each stop (Num 33). If anyone had it good, it was the generation of Israel in the wilderness! If anyone had a reason *not* to enter the Promised Land it was that generation. How much they had to lose by crossing the Jordan. As soon as they ate of the produce of the land the manna stopped (Josh 5:12). And yet they entered the Promised Land.

Do we have the faith of that generation? In America we have it good. Some have even called it the Promised Land. When the time comes, as it will come, for us to leave this land of plenty and cross over into the true Promised Land, will we be ready? Or do we cling to this life? May we have the faith of both generations—the faith to teach our faith, and the faith to willingly leave a life of ease for the unknown of the Promised Land.

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CHECK THE CONTEXT

It has long been a point of pride with the churches of Christ that we are a people of “the Book;” that we give book, chapter, and verse for everything we believe. It is not unusual for preachers and teachers in the church to be quick to point out when someone else takes a verse out of context to prove a point. For instance, in discussing instrumental music we talk of the contexts of the Old Testament and New Testament. In discussing baptism we say that “calling on the name of the Lord” in Acts 22:16 can not be separated from “arise and be immersed.” In talking to Sabbatarians we point out that “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy” (Ex 20:8) was given specifically to the Jews, and was not required before the Law of Moses, nor by any who is not under the Law of Moses.

We are quick to point out the inconsistencies and misapplications of scripture in others. We are not so quick to do so among ourselves. While there are probably several possible examples, I will look at only four. I must also say that not everyone in the church, or even every preacher, uses these passages improperly. However, a significant portion of those I have heard do.

Colossians 2:16-17

“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.” As I was growing up this was one of the main texts used by those who say

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that we should not celebrate Christmas or Easter as religious holidays. The argument is based on the doctrine stated by David Lipscomb:

Since the old covenant was nailed to the cross of Christ, and was thus made invalid, its written decrees, he tells them, are not binding on the saints, and they were not to be judged for neglecting them. (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, J. W. Shepherd editor, Gospel Advocate Company, 1939, p. 282)

The argument goes further, though, to say that not only are those holy days not binding on Christians, but that any such holidays are forbidden. Thus, a Christian must not observe the Sabbath or Passover, or Christmas, or any other religious holiday.

That is not what the passage says. He is, as Brother Lipscomb said, telling them that as non-Jewish converts they are not bound by such holy days. Nobody should criticize them for not observing them. But his statement also says nobody should criticize them for observing them. Some Jewish Christians were still observing these days, just as Paul appears to have continued observing Passover (1 Cor 5:7-8; Acts 18:21). He is also telling the non-Jewish Christians not to look down on Jewish brothers for observing the holy days.

These holy days, Paul says, are shadows of the substance, which is Christ. Don't let mere shadows get in the way of your obeying Christ, whichever side of the issue you may be on.

I will agree there is probably no reason to celebrate Christmas, and that we celebrate Christ's death weekly. They don't even fall under Paul's characterization as shadows of Christ. But we can not use this passage to condemn those who would observe those holidays.

Hebrews 10:25

“Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.” How often I have heard people saying this means that you must not miss the assembly of the saints whenever the doors open, whether Sunday morning, Sunday night, Wednesday night, or any other time the elders set aside for the church to assemble. Some members would almost consider it a sin to miss an assembly for work, anything short of hospitalization, or even a Bible study with a non-Christian. They may even point out that the author's next phrase is “for if we sin willfully.”

The problem is that the context is not about assembling together. The preceding verses give the reason we are not to forsake assembling together. It is that we may “hold fast the profession of faith” and “provoke one another to love and good works.” That is what is being considered. The “sin willfully” phrase, then, is not about assembling, but about what we do outside the assembly.

That is not to say the assembly is unimportant. The author is saying it is very important. The assembly

is for encouragement and guidance. The writer here doesn't even include worship as one of the reasons for our assembling. It is in gathering together with others of like faith that we strengthen our own faith. As temptations and persecutions come then fellowship with other Christians will make it easier to keep the faith.

This was written at a time when some Christians gathered daily, following the Jewish example. The writer doesn't say they have to meet every day. He just says don't "forsake" assembling together. Don't consider it unimportant and quit altogether. Don't do as some today do, and think that you can just hold a family worship by yourselves. It would probably even count out some of the "churches on the internet," which leaves out some of the fellowship component. It doesn't say that missing some assemblies is a sin; just that it leaves us more vulnerable to sin.

1 John 1:7

"But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin." I don't know how many times I have heard people teach, based on this verse, that we have fellowship with other Christians if we are walking in the God's light. That can be inferred indirectly, but only indirectly. The verse only says that we have fellowship with God if we walk in the light.

The phrase in question is "one with another." Is this talking about one Christian with another? Not in the context of the passage or the book. The preceding verse says that we can not walk in darkness and have fellowship with God. So the "he" and "his" in this passage are the same person, God. If we walk in darkness we have no fellowship with God, but if we walk in the light God and we have fellowship one with another.

The purpose of the letter was "that you sin not." (1 Jn 2:1) What is under consideration is our relationship with God. If we sin, we are separated from God. If God doesn't hold sin against us, we are in fellowship with him.

Undoubtedly, if we are in fellowship with God then we are in fellowship with anyone else who is in fellowship with God. But that is incidental to John's discussion, whereas some would incorrectly make it the focus of the verse or the letter.

Romans 3:23

"For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." This may be among the most abused passages in all of scripture. Listen to almost any preacher, visit almost any Christian web site, and you

will find someone using this passage to prove that every individual has sinned. Yet the context shows that this verse is not talking about individuals.

If you want to prove that each individual person who is capable of being held liable for sin has sinned, go to 1 John 1:8-10:

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

But if you want to prove that the Jews have no advantage over the Gentiles, or *vice versa*, then you can

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go to Romans 3. In most of the first chapter of Romans, Paul is proving that Gentiles are guilty of sin, even without the Law of Moses. Romans 2:1-3:18 is Paul's argument that the Jews are guilty of sin because they could not keep the Law of Moses. The remainder of chapter 3, including verse 23, is Paul's conclusion. The topic sentence of this paragraph includes the verse in question, but even that phrase should start in verse 22 and end in verse 24, so that it reads:

For there is no difference [between Jew and Gentile]: For all [both Jew and Gentile] have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

It is certainly taught by the scriptures that each individual who is capable of knowing what sin is bears the guilt of sin. It is just not taught by Romans 3:23.

Some might say that I am being Jesuitical, that I am splitting hairs. Perhaps I am. On the whole, how we interpret these passages will not determine our eternal destination. However, Jesus said, "Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye." (Matt 7:5) We should not accuse others, when we do the same thing as they. Further, the care or lack of care with which we handle some scriptures may be reflective of the care with which we handle all. If we are sloppy in handling the "less important" scriptures, how can we be sure that we are not the same with the ones that directly affect our salvation?

PETER'S LAST LETTER

Roman executions were not common here, but they weren't unheard of. Every so often you would see by the side of the road one or a series of crosses with people tied, or occasionally nailed, to them. After all, our Roman conquerors—I mean benefactors—were firm believers in public punishment as a deterrent to crime. So it was nothing really exceptional that we passed a series of crosses on the road that day.

The Teacher seemed to see them with a strange, far-away look in his eyes. He sometimes got that look, and we knew that it usually meant he would teach us something special, or do something unusual. So it was this time.

We had gone a little way beyond the crosses when he found a rock and sat on it. This was his usual way of letting us know that he wanted to speak to us. So we gathered round him to hear what he had to say.

"You have been learning from me up until now," he said. "It is about time you used some of that knowledge to teach others. But don't go to the Samaritans, nor to the nations round about. Go only to the lost sheep of Israel. Tell them the kingdom of heaven is near."

You know Simon, the other Simon, perked up his ears at that. Anytime the Teacher spoke about the kingdom, he was all ears.

Then the Teacher touched each of us. "You have seen me heal. Now you are to go teach the message of the kingdom, and you will also heal the sick and the lepers, cast out demons, even raise the dead. But don't take anything with you as you go. Take no money, no luggage, not even a staff. You are going to earn your way by your healing and teaching.

"I warn you though, that not everybody will listen. There will be towns where you are not welcome. That is OK. Just shake the dust of that town off your feet and go on to the next one. They will even take you before the elders and have you beaten. Don't worry about what you will say in your defense. You will know what to say. You have seen the way they have treated me. Don't expect any better for yourself. It is enough that you are willing to be treated the same as your teacher. Remember, anyone who confesses me before men, even he will I confess before my father in heaven."

Then he said something sure to get the Zealot's attention. He said he was here to bring a sword. His description sounded a lot like civil war. He was talking a lot like Simon, even saying that it was more important to follow him than family.

Finally he looked back up the road. That look came in his eyes again as he held up his hand to indicate the crosses we had just passed. With a voice that sent chills down our spines he said, "he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me. He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it."

Now we all knew Simon was ready to die for "the cause," but the rest of us wondered if it would come to that. I know I wasn't too eager to join those criminals by the side of the road.

How many years ago that was! I didn't realize then that the Teacher was also the Son of God. I didn't realize then that I would be ready to do what I am about to do. He died upon a cross. Now I am about to do so, too. I wasn't sure I could do it then. I am now.

(Taken from Matthew 10)

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