



Minutes With Messiah

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E-Gossip

Next month Reader's Digest is going to print an article that, accuses the mainline churches of Christ of brainwashing, practicing closed communion, and cannibalism. Madalyn Murray O'Hair's followers have petitioned FCC or Congress to remove all religious programming from television and radio. Pepsi (or Doctor Pepper) is soon to print cans which have the Pledge of Allegiance, but without the phrase "under God." Somebody is taping infected needles to gas pump handles so unsuspecting people will catch AIDS/hepatitis/some other disease. Ernie from Sesame Street has Leukemia/AIDS. So we need to sign a petition, pass this information on to everyone we know, and worry about some sick person trying to kill us at random. After all, if an inanimate object like a puppet can die of AIDS, so can you.

What do all of these things have in common? They are all: a) false; b) ridiculously unbelievable; c) e-mails being passed around; d) all of the above. (The correct answer is "d.") Yet in spite of their ridiculousness and their falseness, people persist in passing them on to others. Whenever I get such an e-mail I usually go straight to one of the web sites that list e-mail frauds (urbanlegends.com, scambusters.org, etc.) to verify that it is on their lists. It usually is. The next thing I do is delete the e-mail (I almost never pass anything along). The important thing, though, would be to find out what the Bible says we should do.

The word "gossip", which is what these e-mails are, is not found in the Bible. However, the principle certainly is. The words used in the King James Version include lying, fraud, and idle words.

Some of these e-mails have no basis in fact; they are lies, pure and simple. Of course, the "Ernie has AIDS" one is obviously a lie. Others are so close to what we *want* to be the truth, or to what we want not to be the truth, that we automatically believe them. In this category would be the O'Hair petition to ban religious programming request for a petition or boycott. We so badly believe that somebody is out to take God out of everything in our lives that we accept these things without question. Because we expect the worst we believe the worst. That is no excuse, though, for passing on a lie. "Lie not to one another;

seeing that you have put off the old man with his doings." (Col 3:9)

Others of these gossipy e-mails have just enough truth in them to put them in a different category. One that has been going around for a few years warns that you should never dial area code 809 because you may be charged up to \$100 per minute. There is an area code 809; it is for the Dominican Republic (not the Bahamas as the e-mails claim). It can be dialed directly from the United States without an international prefix. There are no legal limits to per-minute charges. There are also, however, legitimate businesses and residences within that area code. Although this e-mail isn't an outright lie, perhaps Paul warned about it, saying of young widows, "And withal they learn also to be idle, going about from house to house; and not only idle, but tattlers also and busybodies, speaking things which they ought not." (1 Tim 5:13)

Perhaps one of the big problems with many of these lies is that some ask us to actually do harm to others on the basis of their falsehood. We are supposed to boycott J. C. Penney because they are planning a line of Britney Spear signature midriff revealing girl's clothes, or Pepsi because of an altered pledge. We are supposed to hurt somebody's business based on another somebody's gossip. And yet we claim to act in love?!? When Paul said love "believes all things" (1 Cor 13:7), I don't think he had this in mind.

There may be valid e-mails passing on valuable, factual information. Before we pass them on, as Christians we have an obligation to check their validity. "Every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment." (Matt 12:36)

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The New Jerusalem

Are you premillennialist or post-millennialist? (How about amillennialist?) Are you ready for the rapture? Do you put an item back if your total in the checkout line at the store comes up \$6.66? These days much of the Christian world seems to be obsessed with theories about the end times or, more precisely, about the interpretation of the book of the Revelation to John. Most center on various theories of a reign of Christ on earth.

Most preachers in the churches of Christ have maintained an amillennialist view; that Jesus will not again reign on earth, but rather the final judgement will coincide with his “second coming.” The general view of the book of the Revelation is what scholars call the “preterist” view; that most or all of the book of the Revelation has already been fulfilled, primarily in the first century AD. I don’t know whether that is the view of most members, but those who have studied in our colleges or schools of preaching have been taught that view. The common interpretation is that everything before chapter 20 came to pass long ago. Everything in chapters 21 and

pass.” They were to occur during or shortly after the first century. Most of our interpretations, however, said this was true except for the final two or three chapters of the book. Everything in the book was a symbol, and the symbols clearly related to the church and the Roman Empire. At some point the book becomes less symbolic and deals with the church in some undetermined future (to us) time. This has been the great failing of most church of Christ textbook interpretations of the Revelation.

Perhaps we need to adopt the view of some that the entire book, excluding nothing, falls under the category of “shortly to come to pass.” Chapters 20-22 are as symbolic and as eminent to the original readers as chapters 1-19. This presents the prophecy as a whole, and not as two distinct prophecies. If we take the book to be one revelation, as it calls itself (although many people mistakenly name the book “Revelations”), then we must either believe that it all was fulfilled soon after written or that, as many of our neighbors believe, it is all yet to be fulfilled.

In the view here presented the entire book has one meaning: “we *have* overcome.” This is in contrast to our usual statement that the book is telling the Christians during Roman persecution, “we *will* overcome.” The message that we have overcome would simply be an extension of what John had already written.

I write unto you, young men, because ye have overcome the evil one. ... Ye are of God, my little children, and have overcome them; because greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world. ... For whatsoever is begotten of God overcome the world; and this is the victory that hath overcome the world, even our faith. (1 John 1:13-14; 4:4; 5:4)

The message of the Revelation: We have overcome!

22 are a picture of heaven. The problem is to figure out how much of chapter 20 is past and how much is future.

I have read a couple of authors’ interpretations that present a variation that avoids some of the pitfalls of this view. I present it here not as the only possible interpretation, but to show what some in the church believe about the Revelation. This view answers one puzzling question and one of the most common objections to our tradition interpretation. The puzzling question is, “If chapters 21 and 22 are a picture of heaven, then how come it says the New Jerusalem came *down out of heaven*?” The common objection, as mentioned earlier, is, “if most of the book is past, where do you draw the line between what is past and what is future?”

Shortly Come to Pass

For years we have argued from Revelation 1:1 that the events of the book “must shortly come to

A Book of Symbols

The book of the Revelation is symbolic. Because of this it is hard to understand exactly what is meant in every case. We of the twenty-first century may not always know exactly what was meant by symbols that were easily interpreted in the first century. We may know what was not meant. For instance, a lion in the Revelation does not represent England; a bear does not represent Russia; and eagle does not represent the United States; and a leopard does not represent the third world countries of Africa as we know them today. To apply modern symbols to the first century is clearly ridiculous, although some try to do so. There is a danger in overinterpreting any symbol, as well as misinterpreting it after twenty centuries. On the other hand, some are obvious. A beast with seven heads

fits nicely with Rome, the city of seven hills. This fits even more closely when the book says, “the seven heads are seven mountains.” (Rev 17:9) History alone, then, makes some symbols easy to understand. Whether the symbols that Brother Lonnie Woodruff equates with aspects of the church truly apply or not, he makes a compelling case for his interpretation. Particularly, he interprets symbols in the Revelation by comparing them to symbols throughout the Bible, particularly in the Exodus from Egypt and the giving of Torah.

The interpretation presented by Brother Woodruff (www.christianhomesite.com/revelation/) is that the New Jerusalem of chapters 21 and 22 is a symbolic picture of the church, which has existed since the first century. It is not a picture of heaven, as is commonly believed, because it came down from heaven. As Jim Blevins put it in another study, “One thing that we must recognize is that these two chapters do not deal with the saints in heaven, but heaven in the saints. It is a description not of what the church will one day be, but what she is already.”

Symbols of the Church

Brother Woodruff shows how most of the symbols of Revelation 21 and 22 relate to the church on earth. I won't repeat all of his material here; I will summarize some of the more significant comparisons he makes.

One of the first things he points out is that the New Jerusalem is described as being “the bride, the lamb's wife” (Rev 21:9). I have heard preachers who insist that this is a picture of heaven call the church the bride of Christ without realizing that it is the holy city to which the term refers. In Romans 7:4 Paul says that we are dead to the law that we might be married to Christ. We are truly the bride of Christ, but that would mean that the New Jerusalem is us, the church.

The water of life flows in the city (Rev 22:1-2). Jesus told the woman at the well, “The water I give shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.” (Jn 4:14) In Revelation 1:15, the voice of Jesus is “as the sound of many waters.” Jesus said, “The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life.” The water of life is the words of Jesus. We have those words now. They flow through the church, as they flow through the midst of the holy city.

“The street of the city was pure gold.” (Rev 21:21) This is a special street. Only the pure can walk there, as indicated by the reference to pure gold. Isaiah spoke of such a highway. “And an highway shall be there, and a way, and it shall be called The way of holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it; but it shall be for those: the wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein.” (Isa 35:8) He goes on in the next verse to say, “The redeemed

shall walk there.” It could be argued that the street of gold could only be in heaven. On the other hand, the church is the redeemed, made clean by the blood of Christ. We walk in a path of purity, called “the way of righteousness” by Peter (2 Pet 2:21). Only those who are in the church can be walking on the street of gold.

And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb *is* the light thereof. And the nations of them which are saved shall walk in the light of it: and the kings of the earth do bring their glory and honour into it. And the gates of it shall not be shut at all by day: for there shall be no night there. (Rev 21:23-25)

“And there shall be no night there; and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light: and they shall reign for ever and ever.” (Rev 22:5) These verses show another aspect of the New Jerusalem, which may be the church. It is full of the light of God. “For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus

Interpret symbols in the Revelation by comparing them to symbols throughout the Bible.

Christ.” (2 Cor 4:6) “But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.” (1 Peter 2:9) While we will certainly be in the light of God in heaven, these and other scriptures show that we don't need to wait, in fact must not wait, until we are in heaven to be in the light.

There are many who, because of tradition or for other reasons, will not accept what Brothers Woodruff and Blevins and others teach about the New Jerusalem. Many, particularly those who hold one of the millennialist views, will not agree with the views that the entire book of the Revelation took place two thousand years ago. Whether you agree with these views or not, they are presented here as a possible interpretation, not necessarily the acceptable view. It can never hurt to see what others are saying, whether you accept it or not.

A Birthday for Creation

Why do we begin a new year when we do? It seems that it would be logical to start the new year in the spring when life begins to renew itself, when “a young man’s fancy turns to thoughts of baseball.” Few, if any, cultures count their new year from the first day of spring. The Western world and the Chinese begin their new years after the beginning of winter, between December and February. Perhaps the logic of this is that the dead of winter is when we most need hope, and that is what a new year symbolizes.

The most important of the four new years days of the Jewish calendar, Rosh HaShanah, falls not in the spring or early winter, but around the beginning of autumn. Why does the “head of the year,” the literal translation of Rosh HaShanah, come then? For an agricultural society, perhaps it is logical to end the year at the end of the harvest. (That assumes that God needs logic for anything he does.) There is another reason, however. Traditionally, this holiday commemorates the beginning of the creation. If you know what day God started creating the world, then it makes sense to start a new year on that day. It’s a sort of birthday celebration for creation.

If Rosh HaShanah celebrates creation, then some other things begin to make sense. Ten days later comes Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. This is when God closed the books on the sins of the past year, and supposedly sealed people’s fate for the following year. Sounds like a good New Year practice. Leading up to this final sealing of one’s fate are days when one has the opportunity to seek forgiveness from other

people for sins they have committed against them. These are days of reflection, repentance, and resolve. In other words, days of re-creation, of renewing the creation, at least the creation which is mankind.

An interesting tradition has developed in some parts to go along with this latter idea. On Rosh HaShanah many people will go out to a riverside and throw bread crumbs or pebbles into the stream. The idea of this practice, called *taslich*, is that one is symbolically casting away the sins of the past year. Have you lied? Throw it in the river. Did you think evil of another? Cast it away. Some use rocks, figuring their sins are hard. Others use bread crumbs, allowing the fish (the silvery minnow in Albuquerque?) to eat their sins. The idea is not that of Ecclesiastes 11:1, “Cast your bread upon the waters; for thou shalt find it after many days.” Instead it is with the hope and knowledge that those sins will not come back.

Many people who have had their sins forgiven by God refuse to let go of those sins themselves. God says, “I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin will I remember no more.” (Jer 31:34) These people have a better, or worse, memory than God. Perhaps it is just such people, and we all are among them at times, that *taslich* would benefit the most. God has forgiven the sins; now we have to cast them away from us as well. As we approach the birthday of creation, we also need to say, with the psalmist, “create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.” (Ps 51:10)

Rosh HaShanah 5764 is September 27, 2003.

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