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WHY SEEK THE LEAST?

“This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work.” (1 Tim 3:1) While it is true that the proud shall be abased, and the humble exalted, there is no sin in aspiring to the best. Moses was a great leader, one of the best that ever lived. He was also called the most humble (Num 12:3). Every Christian man should aspire to be an elder. There may be reasons he could not be one, but until then it is not wrong to aspire to such a position. On the other hand, what would we think of a man whose whole aspiration in the church was to sit in the pew and do nothing? If he doesn’t aspire to the eldership, he should at least aspire to growth, to teaching. “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again.” (Heb 5:12)

If we ought to aspire to more than the least, why is it that many in the religious world seem to do just that? To many the apex of spirituality is the ability to “speak in tongues.” Some even go so far as to say that anyone who doesn’t speak in tongues, as they understand the phenomenon, is not spiritual. They aspire to the least, rather than the better.

Without arguing the question of whether such gifts still exist today, it can be argued that tongues is/was the least of the spiritual gifts. The first argument is that it is one gift, if the modern rather than biblical definition is used, that can be performed by those who are not Christians. (The distinction here being that biblical tongues were human languages not learned in the normal way by the speaker and modern tongues are rarely a recognizable human language.) Muslim *sufis* speak in tongues, as do Hindu mystics, some African animists, and as did the Greek Oracle at Delphi. In schizophrenics, speaking in tongues is considered gibberish; among some Christians it is considered the height of spirituality. Of course, the fact that other religions or the mentally ill can duplicate the phenomenon does not, in itself, show the practice to be false or unspiritual. But just as the Egyptian magicians could duplicate Moses’ turning a staff into a snake and the first of the plagues, it does indicate that speaking in tongues may be the least of the spiritual gifts, rather than the greatest.

Paul, who said the most about the biblical gift of speaking in human languages (1 Corinthians 12-14),

places it at the bottom of his list of the gifts. He says there are things that are “more excellent” than even the greatest of the gifts. “And yet I show you a more excellent way. ... And now abideth faith, hope, and love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.” (1 Cor 12:31, 13:13) Even greater than the greatest of the spiritual gifts, whether tongues or any other, is the simple faith of a Christian. The person who sacrifices his own interests for another, even if he doesn’t have a spiritual gift, is greater than the one who can raise someone from the dead or speak in unlearned human languages. This seems to be a fact forgotten by many who pride themselves in their speaking in tongues. Some who claim the gift do so in such a way as to make one who doesn’t have the ability feel inferior. Some condemn others as unsaved simply because they lack the gift. These people lack the greater gift of love. That is what Paul was telling the Corinthians.

It seems that the Corinthian church had the problem that they were aspiring to the least, at least where spiritual gifts were concerned. The whole fourteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians is telling them that they could do better than speaking in tongues. “Desire spiritual gifts, but rather that ye may prophesy.” (1 Cor 14:1) “I would rather speak five words with my understanding than ten thousand words in a tongue.” (1 Cor 14:19) Paul is saying that it is not good enough to seek the least. Seek the best. If you never attain it, at least you will attain what you can. If you never try for more than the minimum, you can’t be giving God your maximum.

Paul wanted the Corinthians to seek the best, rather than the least. Why, then, do some today reverse that? Shouldn’t we rather seek the greater? Shouldn’t we seek love?

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A CELEBRATION OF LIGHT

After Alexander the Great died his empire was divided among his four generals. General Seleucis got control of Palestine, and his successors became the Seleucid Dynasty. Several of the members of that dynasty, most notably Antiochus IV Epiphanes, attempted to eradicate the Jewish religion and make all Jews into good Greeks. They were partially successful, particularly among the upper class that would later form the sect of the Sadducees. Antiochus even slaughtered a pig on the altar of the Temple, thus making it unclean for its normal use. This effectively eliminated the offering of sacrifices for several years. However, there was some resistance to the Hellenization of the Jews. At one point this was led by a priestly family who became known as the Maccabees. This family and their followers successfully revolted against the Seleucid rulers and reestablished control of Jerusalem. They cleaned out and rededicated the Temple. A holiday was set up to commemorate this dedication. Appropriately it was called Chanukah, the Feast of Dedication. (Chanukah begins December 20 in 2003)

It seems God demands a distinction between light and darkness.

For about two centuries, this was the principal name and focus of the holiday. The Feast of Dedication even appears in the gospel of John (John 10:22). After two hundred years an account of the rededication of the Temple was published, which included the telling of a miracle that had occurred. The story was told that when the Temple was made ready, only a day's supply of the pure oil for the candelabrum of the Temple could be found. Miraculously, this one-day supply lasted a full week until more oil could be properly produced. Although the holiday continues to bear the name of Chanukah, it is also now called the Festival of Lights because of the menorah lighting ceremony that commemorates this miracle.

Whether in the weeklong ceremony of lighting the menorah or in other ways, light has always been an important part of religion. One of the Zoroastrian god-pair was a god of light; the other was a god of

darkness. The distinction between light (good, enlightenment) and dark (evil, ignorance) carries through more than just Judaism and Christianity. It is an important distinction. This can be seen in three designations of who is associated with light.

God is light

The beginning chapter of the Bible associates God with light. The first word of the creation was "Let there be light." (Gen 1:3) God, it seems, by nature demands a distinction between light and dark. In that distinction, the light is greater. When he created the sun and moon (Gen 1:15-18) those lights were set in place to "rule over" the day and night. Even the darkness of night had a light to rule over it and control it.

The psalmists associated light with God, as did the prophets. "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear." (Ps 27:1) "For thou wilt light my candle: the Lord my God will enlighten my darkness." (Ps 18:28) We fear the dark, but have no fear when with God because he banishes darkness.

And I saw as the colour of amber, as the appearance of fire round about within it, from the appearance of his loins even upward, and from the appearance of his loins even downward, I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and it had brightness round about. As the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud in the day or rain, so was the appearance of the brightness round about. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord." (Ezek 1:26-28)

"O Lord my God, thou art very great; thou art clothed with honor and majesty, Who coverest thyself with light as with a garment." (Ps 104:1-2) "His glory covered the heavens, and the earth was full of his praise. And his brightness was as the light." (Hab 3:3-4) God is seen as being covered with light. It was so great that when Moses spent time in God's presence, his face even took on some of the brightness (Ex 34:29-30).

The New Testament writers continued the association of light with God. "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all." (1 Jn 1:5) James called God, "the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning." (Jas 1:17) John said that the New Jerusalem needed neither candle nor sun, "for the Lord God given them light." (Rev 22:5)

If the New Jerusalem is a picture of the church (see the article in the September 2003 issue of Minutes With Messiah), that light that God gives his people is probably the light of his word. This idea is borne out by

the Writings of the Old Testament. “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.” (Ps 119:105) “For the commandment is a lamp; and the law is light; and reproofs of instruction are the way of life.” (Prov 6:23) God is so much light that even his words are light. The Jewish Sages even say that Moses’ face shone because God allowed a drop of the ink with which He wrote the Law to fall on Moses’ forehead. So great is the word of God that even contact with it causes us to shine.

The captive people of Israel had an amazing demonstration that God is light. During the plague of darkness on Egypt the scripture says, “but all the children of Israel had light in their dwellings.” There was a clear, razor-sharp distinction between Egypt and Israel. What was the difference? Israel had light. That is because Israel had God. Not only was God on their side, they had God among them. Unlike the Egyptians, they acknowledge his presence. Therefore, they could not help but have light.

Jesus is Light

It stands to reason that if God is light, the only begotten Son of God would also be light. We find this to be true.

Even David prophesied of the Messiah that he would be associated with light. “And he shall be as the light of the morning, when the sun riseth, even a morning without clouds; as the tender grass springing out of the earth by clear shining after rain. (2 Sam 23:4)

John said that, like God, the Lamb (Jesus the Christ) would be the light of the New Jerusalem.

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. (Rev 21:23-24)

Lest there be any doubt that Jesus is the anticipated Messiah, the gospel writers identified him with light. Two of them claim that he fulfilled a messianic passage in Isaiah 9.

And leaving Nazareth, he came and dwelt in Capernaum, which is upon the sea coast, in the borders of Zabulon and Nephthalim: That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Esaias the prophet, saying, The land of Zabulon, and the land of Nephthalim, by the way of the sea, beyond Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles; The people which sat in darkness saw great light; and to them which sat in the region and shadow of death light is sprung up. (Mtt 4:13-16, quoting Isa 9:2)

To give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace. And the child grew, and waxed strong in

spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his showing unto Israel. (Lk 1:79-80, also quoting Isa 9:2)

John uses the picture of Jesus as light more than any other writer. “In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.” (Jn 1:4-5, see also the verses following) Besides his description of him as light, John is the one that quotes Jesus describing himself as light. “I am come a light into the world, that whosoever believeth on me should not abide in darkness.” (Jn 12:46) “Then spake Jesus again unto them, saying, I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.” (Jn 8:12)

By claiming to be light Jesus equated himself with God. By claiming to be light, he equated himself with the Messiah. But Jesus also used the same phrase of others.

Christians are Light

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus made all of his disciples his equal. He had said, “I am the light of the

During the plague of darkness, Israel had light because they had God.

world.” During that discourse he also said, “Ye are the light of the world.” (Matt 5:14) In this respect we are equal to God and Jesus because we show the light to the world. The light is the word of God, which took bodily form in Jesus. We have no light of ourselves, except as we are children of God, proclaiming the light. Thus Paul recounts in Acts 13:47 that he was to be a light to the Gentiles.

Paul tells the church that they, too, are light. “For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as children of light.” (Eph 5:8) “Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober.” (1 Thes 5:5) As light, we must shine in darkness. We must show the light of God and of His son to the world.

At a time when some celebrate a festival of lights for the Temple, Christians may also celebrate. The festival of lights we celebrate are the lights of God, the Son of God, and even we ourselves. Now that is something to celebrate.

UNCLEAN PIGS

“And the swine, though he divide the hoof, and be clovenfooted, yet he cheweth not the cud; he is unclean to you.” (Lev 11:7)

Are you an unclean pig? I’m not asking if you live like a pig, nor even if you eat like one. When it comes to giving, are you a pig? Let me explain.

You may have heard of someone “hogging the spotlight.” He wants all the glory for himself. Likewise if one is hogging anything, he is being a pig. He may or may not have a right to it; he is still being a pig about it. Yet there is an interpretation of being a pig about giving that comes from the verse above.

The pig is singled out as the only animal that has a split hoof but does not chew the cud. (This would be the general group of all pigs, including the common swine, the peccary, and the hippopotamus.) In Hebrew, the word *parsah* is translated “hoof” in this verse. It is also a unit of distance. The word *gerah*, here translated “cud,” is also an extremely small unit of currency. So a pig may be considered one who divides the distance but does not re-chew the smallest bit of money. What does that mean?

Here in the American Southwest we don’t have a lot of people who ride taxicabs, and those that do often have to call the dispatcher to have them sent to a specific location. In places where they are more common, however, or at the airport where they line up for business, some people may hail a taxi at the same time. If they are going the same direction they may decide to share the ride. Often the first one out will offer to pay a portion of his part of the ride. Most people would take a reasonable amount and figure they came out ahead because they didn’t have to pay the

whole amount. An unclean pig, on the other hand, is so greedy that he insists on the other person paying the full amount of that part of the ride, even if he is only going a few blocks further. He splits the distance, to his own advantage. This is the person who takes the whole restaurant tab and divides it evenly among all at the table, and insists everyone pay his share to the penny. We have words for such a person. The kinder word is penny-pincher; the truer word is miser.

What is chewing the cud except getting the most use out of the food an animal eats? As revolting as it sounds to humans, what goes into the stomach goes back out and is put into circulation again. That is the plan for money, as well. The way to get the most out of money is to put it into circulation. Keeping it out of circulation hurts the economy, and does little good for the individual who hoards it. Even putting it in the bank for interest is getting it into circulation. The human pig, though, does not chew the cud; he does not keep his money in circulation. He is like the wicked servant who said, “I was afraid, and went and hid thy talent in the earth: lo, there thou hast that is thine.” (Matt 25:25) Not only did he not make money, he lost what he had. This kind of pig loses more than money. He stands to lose his soul as well.

God loves a cheerful giver. (2 Cor 9:7) He loves such a one so much that he gives us all multiple opportunities to be cheerful givers. To see those opportunities we have to have our heads out of the mud and look more toward the stars. We can choose to be clean, to give what we can, or we can be unclean pigs. “Would you like to swing on a star? Or would you rather be a pig?”

Timothy J. O’Hearn
737 Monell Dr NE
Albuquerque NM 87123