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DANGEROUS FREEDOM

One of the foundations of the United States of America is freedom of religion. Granted, lately it seems the courts think that should be freedom *from* religion; but the original idea was that everyone was free to choose whatever religion they wanted. I will even grant that some of those founding fathers may have considered that to be freedom of Christian religion, but other religions have practiced in America for as long as anybody. I am glad my country grants freedom of religion. Nevertheless, there are certain dangers in granting such freedom.

One of those dangers is the aforementioned freedom from religion. When this country decided that it would not force one religion on its citizens, it opened the way for those “whose God is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame.” (Phil 3:19) While the original intent of the constitution did not include discrimination against those who do not believe in any God, it also did not intend for those who refuse to believe in God to be able to discriminate against those who do. And yet that is what seems to have come about. The courts have seemed to make atheism the state religion, in violation of the supreme law of the land. I have no objection to removing the Ten Commandments from public land. Nor do I have any objection to letting them stay in a public building, as long as other scriptures, including Christian scriptures, are allowed to be displayed as well. Freedom of religion makes it easy to ignore God. “And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind.” (Rom 1:28)

A similar danger of freedom of religion is that it allows people to think that they can change God’s word to fit whatever their choice of doctrine might be. Because the American government says you can believe anything you want, you don’t have to follow God’s word, even if you claim to be a Christian or a Jew. If a woman wants to preach in her own congregation, that is allowed, because freedom of religion trumps Paul’s clear prohibition. A person can commit adultery openly, and not suffer the biblical consequences of a congregation choosing to publicly limit fellowship with that person. After all, freedom of religion allows me to follow a religion only when it is convenient for me. The problem is that most of us think that freedom of religion means freedom to make everyone else follow our religion. And if we want to claim

association with a group that doesn’t believe as we do, rather than find someone who does agree with us, we try to force others to accept us.

Perhaps the most hazardous aspect of the cult of freedom of religion is that people begin to believe that since it doesn’t matter to the government what you believe, it must not matter to God either. This is different from the idea of freedom from religion. There someone is trying to force religious people not to be religious. This is more the idea that you can have your religion and I can have mine and even if I claim to believe in God he has to grant me my freedom. With most people, hearing the gospel leads to a choice between obeying and not obeying. If they don’t obey, they are choosing that option. To others, though, freedom of religion says they don’t have to make a choice. God has to accept them as they are, because that is their constitutional right. The concept is that God is bound by the American constitutional provision of freedom of religion.

Throughout this article I have used the phrase “freedom of religion.” Actually, the American constitution does not guarantee freedom of religion. It only guarantees freedom from government interference in religion. There is a difference. Everyone is always free to choose their religion. They are free to choose to accept God, or reject him. The problem is that some people begin to believe that since the government cannot tell them what to believe, neither can God. That is the real danger; that someone will try to tell God he has no right to punish their disobedience, because that is a violation of their freedom of religion. God grants people the right to choose. But he reserves the right to punish or reward that choice. And no government can take that away from Him.

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OH, WHAT A NIGHT

A while back on Yom Kippur (see “A New Day” in the 10/05 issue) I said some other time I would tell of the events of the night before the Teacher was taken prisoner. Since it is Passover (April 3, 2007), perhaps now would be a good time.

Passover was always a good time. We had spent several with the Teacher and some of us looked forward to this one. Sure, he had been talking about the Jews, meaning the Jewish leaders, killing him when we got to Jerusalem; but then there was that entry into the city with the people singing psalms and praising him. Surely he was wrong about that “killing me” thing.

The Preparation

Since we had gotten here almost a week early we were spending our nights in Bethany. Hey, it was Passover week. Do you have any idea how hard it is to find a room in Jerusalem during Passover week? The Teacher didn’t want any uncertainty about finding lodging. Maybe he got

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that from his parents. After all, his mother has told us many times about when he was born, and the trouble they had finding a room then. He kids her that he didn’t have a bed then, and had no place to lay his head now. It is a lot easier to find a place outside the city this time of year—especially if you have friends to stay with.

It was a bit of a surprise, then, when he decided to eat the Passover in Jerusalem. Everybody wanted to eat in the city. Rooms were sure to be scarce. But he sent Peter and John to find a room. I overheard his strange instructions to them.

“When you get into the city you will see a man carrying a water jug. Follow him. When goes into a house, ask the owner where the room is where your teacher will hold his seder.”

Now what were the odds? No man carries water; that’s woman’s work. And even if they were to find such a man, why would his master just give a prepared room to a couple of fishermen who asked? Yet, apparently all went as the Teacher had said, for when we got to the gate of the city, there were Peter and John waiting to show us to a house with an upper room all ready for us, just as if the

owner had been expecting us. I know, a lot of people prepare rooms for guests at Passover, but this room was a perfect size and prepared for a large group. This man was not expecting some small family.

We went into the room and everybody found a place around the table. I know some people picture us all on one side, but who does that? No, we sat, or rather reclined, around the table. Why waste space? Besides, it was easier to hear the Teacher if we were closer to him. (Not that anybody ever had trouble hearing him anyway; remember that “sermon on the hill?”)

The first half

A seder can be fun, but it is pretty somber, too. This one was even more of a downer after the Teacher started it by saying this would be the last one he would eat with us. He was back to that “they’re going to kill me” routine. But then everything went normally for a while. We got through the story of the exodus. We had the first cup and went on.

The first dipping was a little awkward. The Teacher said something about being betrayed by one who dipped with him. It almost made us change the routine. Nobody, it seemed, wanted to dip with him. One of the Judas’s had apparently not heard him, or was already in the process. He finished dipping at the same time as the Teacher. Then the rest of us did our dip.

Then came the second cup—the one before the meal. There the Teacher repeated that he would not again drink the seder cups until in the kingdom. That sure made Simon (not Peter) perk up his ears. Any mention of kingdom was of special interest to him. I wish the subject never had come up. The meal started and you couldn’t shut Simon up about the kingdom. He was either discussing it with the Teacher, or bragging about what he and his friends planned to do to the Roman garrison. I was glad when the meal ended and the Teacher said the grace after meals.

After supper

The Teacher often followed Rabbi Hillel in matters such as the Passover. Earlier, following Hillel’s instructions, we had eaten the bitter herbs between a couple of pieces of matza. Now came the time for just plain matza. We were expecting the usual comments about how the fathers had to leave Egypt so quickly that they did not have time to let the bread rise. Instead, the Teacher referred us back to something he had said on a previous Passover, when he had fed thousands of people with a little bread and a few fish. On that Passover he had

offended a few people by saying he was the bread from heaven, and that they would have to eat him in order to live. A lot of people left us after that holiday. This time he was repeating the same idea. He said the blessing over the bread. "Baruch ata adonai, Elohenu melech ha-olam, hamotzi lechem min ha-aretz." (Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe who brings bread from the earth.) Then he told us all to eat it because it was his body given for us. Of course, this was before the events of the next day, so we were a little (OK, a lot) confused about what he meant. We had heard the bit about eating his flesh before, but what did he mean about giving his body for us? This evening was getting stranger as it proceeded.

If we had a problem with the matza, the third cup was even more a problem. He said the blessing for the grape. "Baruch ata adonai, Elohenu melech ha-olam, boray peri ha-gafen." (Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe who created the fruit of the vine.) Then he told us all to drink the fruit of the vine (he always used that phrase instead of specifying wine) because it was his blood of the new covenant. Eating his flesh and drinking his blood; that we could handle, barely. But this reference to a new covenant was something else. Sure he had quoted Isaiah many times in our hearing. We knew the scriptures about a new covenant, but we didn't expect it quite yet. Was he to be a new Moses, bringing down a new set of commandments? Actually, he said, he was. He talked about a new command, which was really not new. This was a command to love. He said this new covenant would be recognizable by the love its participants showed to one another, and even outside the covenant. We had heard him quote Hillel many times, saying that the greatest command was to love God and the second was to love people. Now he was making it the cornerstone of a new covenant. We didn't understand it all then. We didn't understand much of it then. But within days we saw him show that love by shedding his blood. We saw him after his resurrection, living that love. What we had difficulty with that night seems almost routine now.

Washing

After supper, and after the matza and the third cup, a heated discussion began. As usual, it started with the teacher's cousins and then Peter jumped in. It was the same old argument about who would be first in the kingdom. So of course the other Simon had to chime in too. Fortunately this was about the traditional time for washing our hands. I understand that some people now do it earlier in the evening, but for us it came after the third cup. Thus it was no real surprise to see the Teacher grab a towel and a basin of water. Again, though, he seemed to change things around, and make them significant in a different way. Rather than bringing the water to each of us

so we could wash our hands, the Teacher began washing our feet. He started with John, who was too surprised to say anything. Then he turned to Peter.

You know Peter. You can probably imagine how he reacted. Washing his hands was one thing; washing his feet was something totally different and unheard of. That was a servant's job. The Teacher was the master; he had no business washing feet, and especially not Peter's feet! Never Peter's feet! But the Teacher calmly said something to him that changed Peter. The next thing we knew he was ready to pour the basin over himself, saying to wash his head and hands also. The teacher told us, as he often did, to follow his example. If we were to be masters, we had to be servants. After the argument of a few minutes before, the room was amazingly silent.

It was about this time that we had to dip again. And again Judas, Simon's son, managed to dip at the same time as the Teacher. I was close enough to hear the

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Teacher tell him to hurry up and do what he was going to do. Judas rushed out, to everyone's surprise. The meal was over. Surely he couldn't have to go buy something that we forgot. And where would he buy it? The holiday had started. There was nowhere to go. This just added more mystery to an already strange evening.

The Teacher now lived up to his designation. He taught us many things. We talked about following where he was going. He talked about the Father, and about leaving us. He promised to send us someone to help us after he had left. Then he prayed that we might all be united. He talked; we listened; we failed to understand most of what he talked about.

Even after all that Judas was not back in time for the final cup. So we decided to proceed without him. He would know where to find us. So we sung a hymn and went to the garden in the olive grove. And the rest is history.

(Based on Matthew 26; Mark 14; Luke 22; John 13-17)

SEASONED WITH SALT

And every oblation of thy meat offering shalt thou season with salt; neither shalt thou suffer the salt of the covenant of thy God to be lacking from thy meat offering: with all thine offerings thou shalt offer salt. (Lev 2:13)

Every grain offering had to be accompanied by salt. This was the rule under the Law of Moses for every sacrifice that did not involve blood. Some people get confused by the King James Version's use of the word "meat" in this passage. We now think of meat as flesh, but in Jacobean times it was any food, and particularly any food that was not flesh. The *minchah* offering (to use the Hebrew word in the passage) was any offering not accompanied by blood. This makes sense. Salt is used to kosher meat. It draws out the blood, so that as much as can be removed from the flesh is removed. This would not be appropriate when making a blood sacrifice. It would negate the whole point of the sacrifice.

God calls the salt that accompanies the grain offering "the salt of the covenant." Why is the covenant accompanied by salt? To understand that, we have to change our cultural point of view. Today salt is so common as to be of little value. In fact, in America we have a near epidemic of over-salting. Don't eat frozen dinners because they are so full of salt. Check your labels for sodium content. My father used to bring home potassium salt from the potash refinery where he worked, and mom would cut the salt from the store with that to reduce our sodium intake. To a salt-saturated society, a covenant of salt is virtually meaningless.

Today we think of the Dead Sea. To the ancients it was the Salt Sea. It was a source of a valuable

commodity. Salt was so rare, and so valued, that Roman soldiers were paid in salt—literally a salary. Salt's preservative, flavoring, and healing properties made it valuable. Therefore, a covenant of salt would be an agreement paid for with real value. It is not a throw-away contract. When God told David that the throne of Israel would belong to him and his descendants forever, he verified it as a "covenant of salt." (2 Chron 13:5)

God does not take salt lightly. The sacrifices, and his promise to David, were valuable. One was an offering to God because of his covenant; the other was an offering to David because of his faith. Both were held in high esteem by God.

Although offerings are no longer brought to the Temple, there is still an offering that God wants from us as a salt-verified offering. "Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man." (Col 4:6) Our words and our dealings with our fellow men are our offering with salt today.

We have to be careful, though, how we speak. When I was in the Navy, I knew people who seasoned their language with "salty" language. Most of the time they didn't even realize what words were coming out of their mouths. This isn't the salt that Paul meant. Such salty language is worthless, and sometimes graceless. Instead our language to others should be of a pleasant flavor and a preserving influence. It is with language that we converse. It is with language that we forge positive relationships. That is why our words are an offering with salt to the Lord. We want to be able to answer in a positive way, in God's way. Our speech should be worth something, for then we can answer in God's way.

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