



# MINUTES WITH MESSIAH

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## A THROW-AWAY SOCIETY

America has become a throw-away society. Perhaps as a result of the Industrial Revolution, so many things have become relatively inexpensive. There was a time that socks were hand woven, and holes in them were repaired. When was the last time you knew of anyone in America actually darning a sock? The time and cost involved is greater than the cost of a new pair. A number of years ago I was having problems with a videocassette recorder. I asked an expert about repairing it and was told that it would be cheaper to buy a new one than to fix the old one. Don't upgrade your old computer; buy a newer one. It may even be that the throw-away mentality is responsible for the high rates of divorce and abortion in America. If you get tired of your spouse, trade him/her in on a newer model. Don't want to face the consequences of sex outside of marriage? Just throw away the potential kid.

Unfortunately, this throw-away attitude has even affected the church. There are spiritual things that we feel we can throw away easily, rather than face the time and expense of fixing them.

The church has become a throw-away item. Changing congregations is now easy in many places because some cities have many to choose from. If a person doesn't like one congregation he can just move to the next until he is satisfied that his wishes are met. Somebody creates problems in one congregation, and is being shunned by the members. Don't try to change your ways; just change your congregation.

It appears from the New Testament that in the first century each city—even those as large as Rome, Ephesus, or Antioch—had only a single congregation. If there were problems among people in the congregation, they had to work things out. We should be glad of this. If there had been several congregations in Corinth we would not have the practical correction of Paul's letters to the church in that city. The incestuous man would simply have gone elsewhere. The ones whose gifts were being shouted down could simply have formed their own congregation. Thank God that this did not happen, or we wouldn't have instruction about how to get along in the church.

On an even grander scale we see the results of throw-away churches. We now have a smorgasbord of churches. There are churches to meet any choice of correct or incorrect doctrine. If somebody doesn't like that one

church preaches about the sinfulness of homosexual or adulterous acts, they can find a church that accepts people in those sins without requiring repentance or renunciation. Do you want to watch church on television? Throw away fellowship and stay at home. Baptism in rose petals? It's out there. Any time somebody finds that Bible preaching is becoming uncomfortable, they can find a church that preaches to their itching ears (2 Tim 4:3) rather than against their sin.

Related to the throw-away church is the throw-away Bible. One of the doctrines gaining prominence today is the idea that Jesus intended one thing for his church, but Paul came along and distorted it beyond recognition. (This in spite of the approval of Paul's teaching by the other apostles—Gal 2:9.) This theory is a convenient way to ignore all of Paul's letters (and therefore the New Testament teaching against homosexual acts, among other things). The logical extension of this theory is to reject everything except the specific words of Jesus. Let us go back to the "Red-Letter" Bibles. But then we have to figure out if John 3:16 is the words of Jesus or merely John's commentary. After all, who wants to throw away the best known verse in the New Testament?

Most of us, however, are as guilty as anyone about following a throw-away Bible. Oh, we may not condense it literally, as did the Reader's Digest. We may even say we believe the whole thing. But wherein we choose to continue to disregard the teachings of the Bible in favor of our own sin, we throw away that part of the Bible.

America has become a throw-away society. Let's not carry that over to the church. Let's keep the church, and the word that establishes it.

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# WHICH ONE DOCTRINE?

My son tends to think in one-word descriptions, especially when talking about songs we sing. His favorite song is the “ready” song. (“There’s a Great Day Coming,” with the chorus that asks “Are you ready?”) Then there is the “morning” song (“I’ll Fly Away”), and the “Jesus” song (“Jesus Loves Me”). His mind seems just incapable, or unwilling, to think in longer phrases. Sometimes all of us are that way about certain doctrines, or in our descriptions of various religious groups.

Ask the average non-Baptist what the Baptist Church believes, they will probably say, “Once saved, always saved.” Many people reduce the Roman Catholics to “pray to Mary and the saints.” The churches of Christ in America are usually thought of as either “those people who don’t use music in their worship,” or “those people who only preach baptism.” In many ways, all of these characterizations are true. In most ways they are also

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simplistic. There is much more to Baptist doctrine than the security of the believer. Catholic doctrine is very complex and spiritual. Christians believe in grace and faith, as well as baptism.

The problem is, many people get saddled with a label because they tend to agree with others, more than disagree. It is those few areas of disagreement that become sticking points. It is because so many people teach the truth to a point that these others feel they don’t need to go over the same material; they just need to cover what others do not. The labels come from others, and, as is often true of labels, they emphasize difference rather than unity.

## Only baptism?

Perhaps the example known best to me is the issue of what is required or desired by God for salvation. Why do some of us teach baptism so strongly? Do we not believe in the importance of faith, or the grace of God? Yes, we believe very strongly in faith and grace. The reason we teach baptism so much

is that almost everyone else who tries to follow Christian principles believes in grace and faith, so we don’t have to rebuild that foundation. If a contractor comes upon a slab of concrete that is properly prepared and poured, with the dimensions his building requires and the utilities in all the right places, he does not need to tear apart the slab just to erect the rest of the building. He sees that the building is constructed to specifications, as far as it has been completed. But he sees from the blueprints that there is more to this building than just the slab. There are walls and doors and a roof.

Can we be saved without the grace of God? Absolutely not. Can we do anything to save ourselves? Certainly not. Does God require that we believe in God and that he is the one who saves? “But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.” (Heb 11:6) These are foundational doctrines. Most people who want to be Christians believe in these doctrines. Unfortunately for some, these are just the foundation. The blueprint, the Bible, says there is much more to the building, or even to the foundation of the building, than this. What more is there? The Bible talks about being born again. It talks about forgiveness of sins. It talks about newness of life. All these things complete the foundation.

Where some differ is in the knowledge that the Bible links immersion in water to all of those things. “Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.” (Jn 3:5) There is being born again. “Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.” (Acts 2:38) There we find forgiveness of sin. “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.” (Rom 6:4) Thus Paul describes how to receive newness of life. All are inextricably linked to water immersion. Why do some teach immersion (baptism) almost to the exclusion of faith? Because some teach faith, almost to the exclusion of immersion. To do either is wrong, because the Bible teaches both.

Does a belief in the necessity of immersion negate the grace of God? Not at all! Does a belief in the necessity of faith negate the grace of God? No less than that belief in baptism. Both are conscious acts (some use the word “works”) in obedience to God. Both are required by God. Does a person believe in order to be saved? Yes, but not

as a legalistic checking off of a list so that God owes that salvation. Is a person baptized in order to be saved? Yes, but again not to tell God he must now save that person. It is because a person is not dead and buried until he is dead and buried. Without immersion in water “for the remission of sins” one still lives the old life. Without the burial and resurrection of Jesus, we might as well keep sinning. Without the burial and resurrection of the Christian, we still live in sin. Jesus says so. Paul says so. God says so.

Immersion is no more a legalistic work than faith is. We sometimes get so focused on the one word of the song, though, that people think all we know is that one word.

## **They don't believe in music**

The other area in which the churches of Christ are labeled most often is that of music in the assembly. Just as the Roman Catholics, Seventh Day Adventists, and most Congregationalists also believe in the necessity of immersion, so also there are several groups that could equally be accused of not believing in music in the corporate worship of the church. Yet it is the churches of Christ that most often get saddled with this (incorrect) label.

Why is the label incorrect? Attend any assembly of the churches of Christ (or the denomination known as the Church of Christ) and the things that stand out as taking up most of the time in the worship are the preaching and the singing. Music is a vital part of the worship in the church. It is inaccurate to say that any congregation does not believe in music in the church, because I have yet to hear of one anywhere that does not include singing as part of the worship. In fact, music is commanded. “Be filled with the Spirit; Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord.” (Eph 5:18-19) I have never been in a Christian assembly, anywhere in the world, regardless of what the worshippers called themselves, where music was not (rightfully) a major part of the worship.

Usually when people say the churches of Christ don't believe in music they mean that they do not use musical instruments other than the human voice or human body. The accurate phrasing, then, would be that they do not believe in the use of musical instruments in the corporate worship. Some will use instruments in their personal devotions. All believe in musical instruments; that is, that they exist.

Nor is it correct to say that the churches of Christ are unique in not believing in the use of instrumental music in the worship. Although most Methodists now use instruments, John Wesley did not believe in their use. Eastern Orthodox (Greek or Russian) generally eschew the use of instruments, as do some Baptists. It is not a

unique doctrine. The churches that trace their roots the farthest back towards the first century generally do not use mechanical instruments, because the earliest churches refused to use them. I have written recently about the scriptural reasons these churches decline to augment the human voice in worship to God. I need not repeat those arguments here.

So why do so many members of the churches of Christ seem to teach against instrumental music in the assembly, almost to the exclusion of any other doctrine than baptism? Maybe we do have blinders on. Maybe we can only see the differences and not the similarities. On the other hand, maybe it is because our mantra for generations has been “back to the Bible.” Islam speaks of Christians and Jews as “people of the book.” Unfortunately, many in the Christian world no longer look to the book for guidance. Some see the failure to listen to the Bible and history in the matter of instrumental music as symptomatic of the failure to follow the Bible completely in other areas. A man walks into a doctor's office. The doctor sees that his labs are normal for liver and kidney function, cholesterol, and blood sugar. His

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ears, eyes, and extremities are all normal. In fact, he is perfectly healthy except for a significant weight loss. Is the doctor going to send him on his way, noting that he doesn't have diabetes? No, he is going to investigate the symptoms of possible malnutrition. In the same way, Christians see no need to treat correct doctrine. It is the evidence of a failure to nourish oneself with the word of God that requires treatment. When one sees the symptoms of “a show of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body” (Col 2:23), to the neglect of the will of God, then one is obligated to act, to teach the truth. If it be that someone sees that as all this person teaches, maybe that is true. Maybe it is all that the one in need hears, because it is what he needs to hear.

It is not wrong to concentrate on one word in a song, unless he ignores the rest of the song altogether. It is not wrong to be known for a single (scriptural) doctrine, as long as that is not the only doctrine you hold. If it is, then you are no better off than those who oppose that doctrine. On the other hand, may we all be known for holding only one doctrine, if that doctrine is the Word of God.

# ***IT'S ONLY A SPARROW***

Many people love to watch birds. They plant gardens with birds in mind. They erect birdbaths and bird feeders to attract birds. Some even keep a daily record of the numbers and types of birds seen. The true birdwatcher might not make the following entry, but the average person might: "Today only sparrows." After all, there are the pretty, exotic or rare Birds, and then there is the common house sparrow. And yet it may be the commonness and plainness of the sparrow that merits mention in the scriptures. Granted, only four passages talk about sparrows, and two of those may be parallel. Nevertheless, the sparrow gets mentioned, and the chicken does not.

"By reason of the voice of my groaning my bones cleave to my skin. I am like a pelican of the wilderness: I am like an owl of the desert. I watch, and am as a sparrow alone upon the house top. Mine enemies reproach me all the day; and they that are mad against me are sworn against me." (Ps 102:5-8) This psalmist is in a poor state indeed. Nobody wants to be with him. He is, as his nation was at the time, an outcast and a byword. He describes himself as a solitary pelican or owl. Then he shows how forlorn he truly is. He says he watches "as a sparrow alone on the house top." Now *that* is desolate indeed. When was the last time you saw a sparrow alone anywhere? One of the things that make people hate sparrows is that they congregate. They are supremely social birds, and that is why they can abide human habitation. A lone sparrow on the housetop is about as desperate a strait that can be imagined.

Most people are not fond of sparrows. They are plain; they are common; and they are nuisances. It is just that dislike that makes the other references to sparrows significant.

"Yea, the sparrow hath found an house, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, even thine altars, O LORD of hosts, my King, and my God." (Ps 84:3) Some say sparrows will build their nests anywhere, and that may be true. One of the places they built nests was the Temple. This psalmist, possibly someone taken to Babylon in the first deportation, longs to be able to go to God's house. Why, even the sparrows can lodge there, but he cannot see it. "A day in thy courts is better than a thousand" elsewhere. (v. 10) Even the lowly sparrow is allowed many days in those courts. If a sparrow, why not me? If God allows a sparrow to dwell in his presence, how much more should I want to dwell there! I am better than a sparrow.

It is that last statement that is the point of the remaining two passages about sparrows: Matt 10:29-31 and Lk 12:6-7. On possibly two different occasions Jesus talks about how little we need to fear. His point is that if God takes care of sparrows, how much more he takes care of us, because we are more valuable than the sparrows. In Matthew he says two sparrows sold for a small amount. Luke records that five sparrows sold for twice that amount. That means that one sparrow gets tossed in for nothing. If God takes notice of even that sparrow that is thrown in for free, why should we worry? Why should we fear? Sparrows are virtually valueless. The value placed on a person, though, is the blood of the Son of God.

In the "Pirates of the Caribbean" movies, the ne'er-do-well pirate captain is named Jack Sparrow. If Cap'n Jack Sparrow were a real person, God would take care of even him, because God values even a Sparrow.

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