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'ROUND MIDNIGHT

And Moses said, Thus saith the LORD, About midnight will I go out into the midst of Egypt: And all the firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh that sitteth upon his throne, even unto the firstborn of the maidservant that is behind the mill; and all the firstborn of beasts. (Ex 11:4-5)

And it came to pass, that at midnight the LORD smote all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh that sat on his throne unto the firstborn of the captive that was in the dungeon; and all the firstborn of cattle. (Ex 12:29)

The rabbis ask why Moses told Pharaoh that the plague of the death of the firstborn would begin "about midnight." (Had it been Thelonious Monk, he would have said 'Round Midnight.) The passage (above) that tells of the event says that God did it *at* midnight. God knew when he was going to perform the miracle. God invented time, so he has no problem knowing what time it is. Most conclude that God told Moses to say "at midnight" and Moses changed it to "about midnight." But why would he do that?

Moses had witnessed nine plagues to date, and other miracles besides. In some of those plagues God had even given him time references, either about the beginning or end of the plague. Everything God had told Moses to this point had come true. Did Moses doubt God would perform the miracle when he said he would? Or did Moses trust God, but distrust Pharaoh?

In the late 1980's a preacher I was listening to made a comment in a sermon about the popularity of the musical, *The Phantom of the Opera*, which was the most popular Broadway musical of the day. His comment related to something about ghosts, and he emphasized it by mentioning the ghost in that musical. The problem is, as anyone who has read Gaston Leroux's book or even heard the cast recording of the musical can tell you, there is no ghost in *The Phantom of the Opera*. The so-called phantom is a real person. The fact that this preacher was making a judgement about a play that he had apparently never seen or heard so colored my thinking that I forgot what the bulk of the sermon was about. The only thing I could have told anybody afterward is that the preacher

didn't know what he was talking about. If he commented on a play without proper research, how could anyone trust anything else he said?

Perhaps Moses knew that this was human nature. Pharaoh would have been looking for anything to discredit Moses and his God at this point. It is one thing to say that a plague will begin or end "about this time tomorrow." It is a completely different thing to put a specific time on a future event. A day is pretty general, but a specific minute, which would make the miracle even greater, is easier to discredit.

In most houses there are several clocks. Clocks on your computers, clocks on your television or VCR/DVR/Tivo, clocks by your bedside. There may be as many as three clocks in a room, and chances are none of them agree. If something is supposed to happen at midnight, the clocks may read anywhere from five minutes till to five minutes after. Moses could have been afraid that Pharaoh's clock was off. It was certain that God's clock would not be. But if God struck the firstborn dead at midnight, and Pharaoh's clock said it was one minute after, then human nature says Pharaoh would claim that the miracle was late so God must not be as powerful as he claimed. If he had to wait a couple of minutes after his appointed time, by Pharaoh's clock which must be right, then the slaves would be fools to worship such a God. So Moses qualified God's timetable by saying "about midnight."

As we teach God's word to people we need to keep in mind what Moses knew. When they can't dispute the word, people will use our actions or our words to discredit the scriptures. They can't argue with God, so they are likely to shoot the messenger.

CONTENTS

'Round Midnight	1
Legalism in Eldership	2
Always the Poor	4

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LEGALISM IN ELDERSHIP

Sometimes people accuse others of legalism as a way of excusing their unwillingness to follow the teachings of God. At other times people throw out the word “legalism” in condemnation of those who are trying to save themselves without relying on God’s grace. Still other times the accusation of legalism (and it is usually made as an accusation) is for those who would make requirements where none exist in order to keep people as far away from wrong as possible, what is known as “putting a fence around God’s word.” It is in this latter sense that some people interpret the passages about the “requirements” for elders, rather than just reading what the passages say.

Whether you call them qualities or qualifications, most of the things listed in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:7-9 are pretty straightforward. Most people have no problem understanding what it means that a man not be greedy or a brawler. Most people even have no problem understanding that no man will meet all of these qualities all of the time. That is, if a man gets into one fistfight, that doesn’t necessarily disqualify him from being an elder, depending

One wonders if “believing children” is more interpretation than translation.

on the reasons for the fight. There are only a few of these qualities that are unclear to some people, and so they require their interpretations to be correct.

Given to Hospitality

Perhaps the easiest misconception to clear up relates to the phrase “given to hospitality” (1 Tim 3:2) in the King James Version. I have known of Christians who would complain because the elders, as a whole or one individual, never invite anyone over for dinner. While it would be nice, and while that would be one way for the shepherds to get to know their flock, that is not what this quality is talking about. The Greek word used here literally means “a lover of strangers.” Before a man becomes an elder he should have shown hospitality or love to those outside of his own congregation. Furthermore, love extends far beyond just feeding a person. It can be shown in many quiet ways that don’t involve bringing someone into the house.

The point of this requirement is not to hold a man’s kitchen hostage. Instead, it means that a man who loves those outside of his circle of friends is one who will be an example of Christianity to his congregation and the world. Of course, if he shows hospitality to those outside the church, how much more is he likely to do so to those he knows in his congregation.

Having Faithful Children

Another qualification that has gotten a significant workout is “having faithful children not accused of riot or unruly.” (Tit 1:6) That last phrase is not the problem, although it is the point of the qualification. People have no problem with the quality of the children. Instead they focus on the first phrase, “having faithful children”. (And how does the Roman Catholic Church get around this requirement when they forbid their bishops to marry? But that would be another article.) Even each part of that phrase comes under legalistic scrutiny.

What does it mean to have faithful children? Several other translations complicate the issue. They read “having children who believe.” While this is one possible translation of the Greek word, one wonders if it is more of an interpretation, albeit a common one. The legalists among us will say that all the children of a man who is an elder must be “members in good standing” of a congregation somewhere. If an elder and his wife have a late child, some would say the elder must resign, at least until that child is old enough to become a faithful child of God. It doesn’t matter that all the elder’s older children have been lifelong believers. Because one child is too young to be a believer, he must step down. Others would say that a man who has a retarded child who is incapable of becoming a believer is automatically disqualified from the eldership, even though he may show himself to be more qualified in other ways because of raising a disabled child. Some children who are too young or mentally incapable of belief show themselves more faithful than one who professes belief but rarely darkens the door of a church building.

Other legalists focus on the word “children.” Because it is a plural word, they argue, an elder must have more than one child. There have been congregations that have gone without appointing men to be elders because they could not find otherwise qualified men who had more than one child. Never mind that language often uses plural words in singular ways. Ask a number of men on the street the question, “do you have children?” For everyone that says yes, then ask, “how many?” You will probably never find one that answers the first question, “No, but I have

one child.” You will find several that will say they have children, but when asked the second question will answer that they have only one. We understand children to be a generic term that includes one or more when asked that way. And yet some people who understand that cannot understand that it could be used in the same way in this passage. Should a congregation have a man as an elder who has only one child? That is up to the congregation and its situation. Can a congregation that maintains that in their congregation elders must have two or more faithful/believing children disassociate themselves from congregations that have elders with only one child? That would be legalistically binding on someone else that which is their own interpretation of a scripture that could go either way.

Elders in Every City

Closely related to that point is the argument over how many elders a congregation should have. Titus was told to appoint “elders in every city.” (Tit 1:5) Churches of Christ, especially, have for many years stated that this means that every congregation that has elders must have more than one. Even those that allow elders to have one child will insist that there be a multiplicity of elders. (One preacher has said outright that children can mean only one but elders must mean more than one.) This is a good idea. It is sound policy. It prevents one man from taking down a whole congregation by himself. But it is not what this passage says.

If the Bible were to have said that Paul went throughout Asia Minor establishing churches in every city, would people interpret this to mean that a city of four hundred, in which forty people became Christians, must split those people into two congregations of approximately twenty each? No, people would understand that some cities might have multiple congregations and others have only one. It would even be possible to say that each city had one congregation and still make the statement true.

Take an actual scripture instead. “Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing.” (Eph 5:24) The format of the final phrase is identical; plural noun “in every” noun. If the passage in Titus 1 requires every congregation with elders to have more than one, then why do they not also require all the married women to have more than one husband? The grammar is the same.

Again, it must be pointed out that it is smartest to have multiple elders. It may even be smarter to have an odd number of elders. But while it may be smart, neither of those things is absolutely and unquestionably required by scripture.

Interestingly, while congregations will say this passage requires more than one elder, few congregations interpret “every city” to mean that a young congregation

that does not have qualified men must name elders anyway. Elders must be plural, but “every” can mean some. Ain’t legalism a funny thing?

Husband of One Wife

Perhaps the biggest barrier to some otherwise qualified men being chosen as elders is the phrase, “husband of one wife” (1 Tim 3:2) or, as some “translations” put it “husband of *only* one wife.” This takes several forms. A divorced man (regardless of the reason for the divorce) cannot be an elder. A widower who marries again cannot be an elder. A bishop whose wife dies must give up his eldership. How much of this is legalism and how much is God’s doctrine?

There are congregations where one would almost believe that the only qualification to be a bishop is that the man has only once been married. Some people concentrate so much on this one qualification that they seem to ignore all the others, except, perhaps, having children. He can be a secret drinker, no problem, but having been married twice is all that matters.

Perhaps all of this argument has come about because the committee that translated the King James

It may be smart to have more than one elder, but it is not unquestionably required by scripture.

Version interpreted what they saw. Literally, the Greek translates to “a one-woman man.” Every other quality listed in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 is based on actions over time. Why would this one qualification be based on a one-time event? The quality Paul is emphasizing is that the man is faithful to his wife. If he has shown that he is a one-woman man, how much more will he be a one-God man as well. This may disqualify some, or even most, men who are divorced. This may not disqualify a man who has just lost his wife to cancer.

When Paul told Timothy and Titus what to look for in an elder he was looking for leadership qualities. Should an elder exhibit all of the qualities listed? Probably. Should these passages be used as a checklist to determine a “legal” elder? Possibly not. Should they be used, as many congregations have, to begin a “witch hunt” to make sure a man has never violated any of these qualities? Certainly not. Be careful how you judge potential elders, because with that same judgement you may also be judged.

ALWAYS THE POOR

It is a familiar story, told by three of the gospel writers. Jesus is sitting in the house of one Simon the Leper. Martha, sister to Lazarus, was serving the meal. (Was Simon her husband? Or were Simon and Lazarus the same person?) While he is reclining at the meal, a woman (John identifies her as Mary, sister to Martha and Lazarus) comes in, breaks open an alabaster container of spikenard ointment, and pours it on the head and feet of Jesus. The disciples (John identifies specifically Judas benShimon of Kerioth) question why the ointment had not been sold for 300 denarii (almost a year's wages) and given to the poor. Jesus answers that the woman did this for his impending burial, and says "the poor you have with you always." (Matthew 26; Mark 14; John 12)

On the face of it Jesus is reminding the apostles that he is about to die. There is always a chance to help the poor, but he would only be there a short while. That may even be the way most of the disciples understood what he said. But there is a possibility that he was expressing another message as well. Maybe he was addressing it directly to Judas.

John records that Judas was taking money from the funds entrusted to him. Some have speculated that when he dealt with the priests for thirty pieces of silver he did not expect them to kill Jesus. This theory says that he would turn Jesus over to them, and expected him to go through some sort of trial and be acquitted. That is why, they say, he hung himself when Jesus was crucified. If this is true, then we can speculate even further that he thought that his embezzlement was suspected. The thirty pieces of silver may have been his way of replenishing the bag of what he had stolen. Why would he suspect that his crime was known? Maybe it was what Jesus said about the poor.

Deuteronomy 15 gives the law for the year of release (Sh'mita). Every seventh year was a time to cancel all debts owed by Jews to Jews. Moses states one exception to the Sh'mita year.

Save when there shall be no poor among you; for the LORD shall greatly bless thee in the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee for an inheritance to possess it: Only if thou carefully hearken unto the voice of the LORD thy God, to observe to do all these commandments which I command thee this day. (Deut 15:4-5)

Moses says there will be a time when there are no poor in Israel. But that time can only come if the people "carefully hearken unto the voice of the Lord." The only time there can be no poor in Israel is when the Jews would observe all the commandments in the Book of the Law.

When Jesus says "the poor you will have with you always," he is saying that the Jews, and particularly those present at the dinner, are not carefully observing all the commands. While there may have been many commands violated by his disciples, a guilty conscience might tell Judas that his main sin, embezzlement, was the one sin that Jesus was saying kept Israel from being without the poor. He might have heard, "because one of you is stealing money from the common purse, you will always have to deal with the poor."

Even if this speculative scenario is wrong, the conclusion still appears to be valid. If we would all show the love required in following Jesus, we might not eliminate the poor. We could make a serious dent in the problem. But with faith, the poor might not always be with us.

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