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MAD COW DISEASE

The news in recent years has brought awareness of a condition known as Mad Cow Disease. This is not a new condition, although it may be new among domestic cattle. In this disease, the brains of cattle become, as some researchers describe it, like “Swiss cheese.” The brain tissue degenerates. It will develop an unsteady gait and unpredictable jerking movements. Eventually the animal becomes unable to move and dies. The specific cause of this disease is a “folded” protein which, when consumed by a susceptible animal, causes similar proteins to fold on themselves. The specific agent by which the disease is spread is, to put it simply, cannibalism. Cows are normally herbivores. They eat only plant material. In Europe the feed of cattle was, for a time, supplemented with protein in the form of bone and meat from other cows. While there is no cure for a diseased animal, the protocol for the prevention of spread of the disease is simply to remove animal protein from the feed given to the cattle. A similar disease in humans, known in Papua New Guinea as Kuru, is also spread by cannibalism. In both cases, it is primarily spread by eating brain and neural matter.

Congregations may develop a spiritual form of mad cow disease. They come to find that some parts of the body do not work together, thus producing an uneven walk. As the disease progresses in a congregation there may be uncontrolled emotional outbreaks. The personality of the congregation may change. Eventually a form of paralysis sets in, in which the congregation can accomplish nothing. Even effective worship is shut down. Holes in the congregation become unpleasantly evident. Finally, the congregation dies. The strange thing about mad congregation disease is that a small part of the body may appear to continue to live for many years, even though they are really dead.

Unto the messenger of the church in Sardis write: These things say he that has the seven spirits of God, and the seven stars: I know your works, that you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. (Rev 3:1)

Those are the symptoms of Mad Congregation Disease (MCD). But how is it spread? The answer is simple. “But if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another.” (Gal 5:15) Paul predicted that the onset of MCD, like its more mundane

counterpart, was because of cannibalism, or more precisely autocannibalism (eating oneself).

How does a congregation devour one another? A common form of cannibalism is gossip. One person says something negative, and someone else spreads the tale. Someone else takes offense, and takes sides. As accusations fly, anger changes the personality of the congregation. People having the same goal refuse to work with each other, resulting in paralysis. Then some people move to other congregations; others simply stop attending any assembly. Holes appear, resulting in eventual death.

As in the case of Kuru, usually the disease spreads by eating the brain and spinal column. Paul was afraid of just such cannibalism. “For I fear, lest when I come, I shall not find you such as I would, and that I shall be found unto you such as ye would not: lest there be debates, envyings, wraths, strifes, backbitings, whisperings, swellings, tumults.” (2 Cor 12:20) It is in there: backbitings. Eating the spinal column.

A similar disease to mad cow can be found in a lizard that is known to bite the tails of others of its species. That can also be a problem in congregations, although it is usually the eating of a tail of a different spelling. “Where no wood is, there the fire goeth out: so where there is no *talebearer*, the strife ceaseth.” (Prov 26:20) Some people in a congregation may not eat another’s tail, but they certainly eat up any tale they can get. And MCD spreads thereby.

When the backbiting and the talebearing continue, the disease progresses to a state where it is virtually impossible to cure. Like cancer, though, early detection can halt the spread of the disease. All it takes are members who will say, “No, thank you. I am no congregational cannibal.”

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A FAITHFUL SAYING

“Trust me. Would I steer you wrong?” Sounds like a used car salesman, right? Or at least the stereotype of one. We have been conditioned in some places to exercise caution whenever someone emphasizes the truth of a statement. If they have to tell us they are telling the truth, then they must not be. On the other hand, Paul says essentially the same thing in his letters to Timothy and Titus. In his case, it is true emphasis and not an attempt to sell something for more than it is worth. After all, they knew him. If he says something is of special note, it must be worth listening to. Four times in these three letters Paul calls something a faithful saying.

To Save Sinners

This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners: of whom I am chief. (1 Tim 1:15)

The main burden of Paul’s message wherever he went is expressed in this “faithful saying.” He told the Corinthians that the gospel consists of the death, burial, resurrection, and post-resurrection appearances of Jesus.

If the fundamental point of doctrine is the salvational work of Jesus, the immediate result is our relationship to the Messiah.

(1 Cor 15) Why is that good news (gospel)? It is because Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

Today many people have accepted a different view of Jesus. It can be seen in several ways. “What would Jesus do? (WWJD)” “What did Jesus say?” “Paul changed the emphasis from what Jesus wanted to his own brand of Christianity.” All of these movements ignore the central importance of Jesus Christ. It is important to know what Jesus might do in a situation. It is important to know what he said, in its context. But what Jesus would do or say in certain situations is not why he came into this world. Jesus did not come to be a teacher but a savior. Jesus did not come to be an example but a sin offering. Jesus did not come to heal physical diseases but to save sinners.

“The hour is come that the son of man should be glorified. ... Now is my soul troubled: and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour: but for this cause came I unto this hour.” (Jn 12:22, 27) Jesus knew why he came to the hour of his death. It was not so that he could proclaim some great truth from the cross. It was so that he could die, that others might have salvation.

God sent many prophets to teach his word. The Bible records some of their words. It records the letters of Paul and others. It even records some of the words of Jesus. But the Bible does not save anyone. The prophets and apostles cannot save anyone. The words of Jesus, by themselves, do not save anyone. “Without the shedding of blood is no remission.” (Heb 9:22)

This point was important to Paul. It was important enough that he not only called it a worthy saying; he emphasized it by adding that it was “worthy of all acceptance.” It is the fundamental item of faith upon which all others are built.

A Relationship

It is a faithful saying: For if we be dead with him, we shall also live with him; If we suffer, we shall also reign with him: if we deny him, he also will deny us: If we believe not, yet he abideth faithful: he cannot deny himself. (2 Tim 2:11)

If the fundamental point of doctrine is the salvational work of Jesus, the immediate result is our relationship to the Messiah. He expresses that relationship in four propositions.

Proposition 1: If we be dead with him we will also live with him. The ideal relationship with Jesus is that we share in his death that we might share in his resurrection. This, after all, is one of the functions of immersion in water (baptism).

Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? 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. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection. (Rom 6:3-5)

Proposition 2: If we suffer, we shall also reign with him. While this is also an ideal relationship, it might not seem so for us. We like the reigning with him part; it is the suffering part that we tend to have problems with. With greater reward, however, comes greater

responsibility. If Jesus had to suffer in order to reign, can we expect no less? “Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.” (2 Tim 3:17)

But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honor: that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man. (Heb 2:9)

Proposition 3: If we deny him, he also will deny us. Now he introduces the less-than-favorable possibilities. If we do not die with him, and if we do not suffer with him, then we may deny him. But it can be trusted that if we deny him, he will reciprocate. How dreadful it would be to hear, “Depart from me. I never knew you.” Is this any different than we are? How often has a young lady who has been dumped by her boyfriend refused to acknowledge his existence when they pass each other? The only difference is that being denied by an ex-girlfriend has few lasting consequences. Being denied by Jesus has eternal ramifications.

Proposition 4: If we believe not, yet he abideth faithful: he cannot deny himself. If we deny Christ we may at least acknowledge some existence on his part. A worse relationship is to fail to believe. Peter denied him, but he had hope of reconciliation. One who does not believe has no hope. Today many people take the attitude that if I don’t believe in God he must be dead; if I don’t believe in the Messiah, I don’t have to worry about such things as sin. Paul here denies that way of thinking. Jesus does not depend on any relationship with us. He is the savior, even if everyone were to deny the fact. If we choose not to follow him, that does not diminish him, although it does diminish us. He continues to exist even when we fail to believe in him.

For what if some did not believe? Shall their unbelief make the faith of God without effect? God forbid: yea let God be true, but every man a liar; as it is written, That thou mightest be justified in thy sayings, and mightest overcome when thou art judged. (Rom 3:3-5)

It is profitable

For bodily exercise profiteth little: but godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come. This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptation. For therefore we both labour and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, specially of those that believe. (1 Tim 4:8-10)

This is a faithful saying, and these things I will that thou affirm constantly, that they which have believed in God might be careful to maintain good works. These things are good and profitable unto men. (Tit 3:8)

Paul twice affirms there is profit in believing and acting on that belief. Some might question, in the first passage above, whether the faithful saying is what precedes the statement or what follows. That is, is it a worthy statement that goodness is profitable, or that we work and suffer because we trust? Of course, it could apply to both, but grammatically it appears to apply to the statement that comes before it.

Paul was an athlete, or at least a fan of athletics. This is obvious from his writings about running races and shadow boxing. He knows that there is value in bodily exercise. He knows, though, that bodily exercise has value only in this life. We will receive a new body. Godliness, on the other hand, has profit now and in the world to come. It has value now because good works profit men in general. Godliness profits others who are the recipients of our good works. They may receive physical advantage; they may also be led to salvation by our good works. Even if another does not appear to benefit from our good works, however, we do so. “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” (Acts 20:35) We receive a blessing, regardless of

Many people take the attitude that if I don’t believe in the Messiah, I don’t have to worry about sin.

the benefit to the one for whom we do the good works. We also receive a blessing in the world to come.

Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. (Matthew 6:19-21)

Four times Paul declares something to be a faithful (trustworthy) statement. In those four instances he gives us four glimpses at the gospel. Jesus came to save man. How we react to him affects whether we are saved or not. Doing godly works is to our advantage, now and for eternity. Paul probably did not have to emphasize the trustworthiness of these doctrines. They are core to the gospel he preached. Nevertheless, because they are so important he apparently felt the need to emphasize that.

THE CHECK'S IN THE MAIL

How do I know you are who you say you are? Can I see some identification? Why should I listen to you? People have a strange way of not trusting. We insist on getting verification of authority. We want proof for every promise. It has ever been thus. God sent Moses on a mission. What was his second question? "Who are you?" His first question was, "Why me?" God's response is as unusual as Moses' acceptance of it.

"And he said, Certainly I will be with thee; and this shall be a token unto thee, that I have sent thee: When thou hast brought forth the people out of Egypt, ye shall serve God upon this mountain." (Ex 3:12)

The sign that I sent you will come after you do what I ask. That is like a car salesman saying, "Pay me this amount for thirty-six months, and then I will give you the car." To be more current, that is like one of the Nigerian e-mail scammers saying, "I will tell you who I am after you give me your bank account number and PIN." The proper response is to hit the delete button. Instead Moses opens his bank vault.

The difference, perhaps, is that Moses knew the one to whom he was talking. In response to his "why me?", God said, "I will be with you." God asks Moses to trust him because of who he is. If he trusts God, he will see the proof later. Maybe that is what prompted the second question. God says, "Trust me." Moses says, "Who are you?" Even so, he knew the answer. As he approached the burning bush, he reacted in such a way as to show that he knew who God was; he fell on his face.

In some ways we are like Moses. God has told us who he is, and as proof of who he is he has promised us an eternity with him. All we have to do is trust him. He has promised us that he will take care of

us. "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose." (Rom 8:28) We don't know the future. All we have to do is trust God.

At least we are not the first. Moses trusted God, and he did worship at the mountain. David trusted God, and earned the designation of a friend of God.

"But let all those that put their trust in thee rejoice: let them ever shout for joy because thou defendest them: let them also that love thy name be joyful in thee." (Ps 5:11)

"Unto thee, O Lord, do I lift up my soul. O my God, I trust in thee: let me not be ashamed, let not mine enemies triumph over me." (Ps 25:1-2)

God gave Solomon wisdom to rule. What did that wisdom teach him? "Trust in the Lord with all thine heart, and lean not unto thine own understanding." (Prov 3:5)

We don't know the details of our future. We have no understanding to trust, so we must trust the Lord. Paul was afforded a rare opportunity. He knew the future. He had been told that he would be imprisoned in Jerusalem. When those accompanying him bemoaned this fact, he answered, "What mean ye to weep and to break mine heart? For I am ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." (Acts 22:13) He trusted the Lord, and did not die in Jerusalem but proclaimed the gospel even in the household of the Caesar of the Roman Empire.

God asks us to do what he says. What proof have we that he is who he is? What proof have we that we should obey him? "In God have I put my trust: I will not be afraid what man can do unto me." (Ps 56:11)

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