



MINUTES WITH MESSIAH

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A PERFECT TEN

Ten fingers; ten toes. We think, naturally, in tens. The decimal system. Outside the United States, the metric system. Decades, centuries, millennia. All are based on the number ten. When you get to be my age, you dread years ending in a zero, that is, multiples of ten. Ten is a significant number.

This issue marks the end of ten years of publication of "Minutes With Messiah." Lord willing, there will be another ten issues, or ten years. Some of the subscribers and regular readers have been faithful for most of that ten years, for which I thank you. Others have joined within that ten years, and I also thank you.

Ten years. Counting this issue, that is 359 articles (one of which is available only online—the article about what the Bible really says about divorce). Four of the articles have been by other writers; most are mine. In addition, there have been four songs published to date.

For seven of those ten years "Minutes With Messiah" has been available on the web. In addition to all the articles and songs, I have posted the answers to 809 Bible-related questions on the web site, and answered countless others that did not make it to the site or were duplicative. "Minutes With Messiah" has also presented four "Promising Songleader" awards.

Where does "Minutes With Messiah" go from here? If the Lord gives us another ten years, what can you expect? I can promise more of the same: articles for each of the major Jewish holidays; stories about "The Teacher" from the gospels; some more songs; certainly some more humor along the way. Beyond that, only God knows. Ten years ago I had no thought of a web site, or of becoming an answer man. I had no way to know I would have subscribers and readers from all over the world. The future may include YouTube, or something brand new. Or nothing, if God so wills it. You have been with me for all or part of ten years. I welcome you to the ride into the future. And I would welcome your input as we finish ten years of publication.

By the way, since we are creatures of the number ten, perhaps it is natural that the number ten occurs about 142 times in scripture. Most of the time it is a count of things (years, bulls, shekels, lepers, etc.). Occasionally it has some prophetic or other significance. That is not to

say that it has a special meaning. Some people claim three is the number of God and seven is completeness. Ten has no obvious meaning like that. If anything, it means a number man can comprehend.

Perhaps the most significant occurrence of the number is in the Ten Commandments to the Jewish people. (That is, there are ten commandments, not that the number appears in those commandments.) Why only ten commandments? If there are 613 *mitzvot* (commands; 248 positive ones and 365 negative ones), why single out these ten? Why not eleven, or fifteen, or twenty? Why not include circumcision as one of the ten, or not to afflict widows and orphans? Obviously God does not tell us. Maybe he only got this far in his oral recitation of the list before the people yelled to stop. (Ex 20:18-19) Maybe he figured that even a child could count to ten so this was a good number. Certainly he did not mean to imply that these were the only ten really important commandments, and the rest were of less importance. The rabbis say he gave seven laws to Noah (which are, therefore, binding on all non-Jews). Perhaps he felt an additional three would indicate that the Jewish people belonged to God (if three is the number of God).

The significant prophetic use of ten is found in Daniel and in the Revelation. (Dan 7; Rev 17) In both cases the ten horns represent ten emperors of Rome. So even though it is a prophetic use of the number, it is actually a count rather than a special number.

We are people controlled by the number ten. Here is thanks to you for one ten, and a hope that we can begin another one next month.

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THE TIME MACHINE

Come with me on an imaginary trip back in time. I want to show you some wonderful things. Some may surprise you; some may annoy you. I hope none of this will bore you.

Where are we going? To when are we going? We are going to an assembly of the church in the first century. Knowing what you know now, how will it compare to the way they did things then? The specific location is irrelevant. It's not a secret, although a time would come when the church limited the number of those who knew where they would assemble. That time has not yet come, when we will be.

We are standing outside a largish building in a typical-looking town. There is nothing spectacular about this building, although it is clear that it sees frequent use. You know some buildings spend more time empty than occupied, just by the atmosphere around them. You've seen that type. Just look at most church buildings today. This building does not have that feel. Maybe that is because it is used every day. Let's go inside.

Inside the main room of this building we notice a few differences between where the church assembled then and now. You might have noticed a cabinet in one end of

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the building. This is where the scriptures are kept. You see, not everyone can afford a copy of the scriptures. Most people would even be appalled at the thought of an individual owning a copy. After all, if you owned your own copy you might just leave it lying around, or put it where someone might put something on it. The scriptures are held in high regard, and are not to be treated casually. By the way, these scriptures are scrolls of what some today call the Old Testament. Most of the New Testament has not been written yet.

The most prominent feature of this room, though, is a platform in the middle of the room. All the seating is around this platform, and everyone can see each other when they are sitting or standing in the assembly. You see, we are standing in a synagogue. Yes, the church meets in a synagogue. But then, you should have known that. James told us that in what

may be one of the oldest writings in the New Testament.

For if there come unto your synagogue a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment; And ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool: Are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts? (Jas 2:2-4)

Many English versions use the word "assembly" instead of synagogue. Many English versions are wrong. He is clearly talking about the building here. Furthermore, James uses "assembly" (a different Greek word) later in his letter (Jas 5:14, commonly translated "church").

If we are over the shock of not having a pulpit up front while everyone faces the same direction, we can let the people in. They enter, an eclectic group of people. Men, women, and children from all walks of life, but mostly of modest means. In this particular synagogue the men and women sit separately, but there may be places where they mingle. There is no set time for the "order of worship" to start. The first few people to come in find a seat and may pray quietly. Some sing to themselves. As more people come in some might hear a song they know and join in. All the congregation present then sings that song. After that someone else may start another song. Nobody "makes announcements." But that man in the back of the east side stands up and tells of a family illness. The man in the front of the south side does so, too. Then another man stands up and prays for those two. It is getting close to half an hour after the first people came in, and still more are coming. The building is nearly full by now. The worship is in full swing. One starts a song. Another says a prayer. Yet another reads (or more likely recites) a portion of scripture and expounds on it. He may talk five minutes, or fifty, and other men may add to the discussion. It is a discussion, not a sermon. Sermons do have their place; that Paul fellow uses them quite effectively in the marketplace. Now, don't get too impatient. I didn't tell you we would be done in just an hour.

Darkness approaches. It is, after all, evening. You don't expect people to skip work in the middle of the day just to assemble with the saints, do you? Now most of the people who are going to be here have arrived. It is time for the Lord's supper. (Yes, Paul uses that term in 1 Cor 11:20, although that is the only time it appears in the Bible.) Apparently there are some places that hold a "love feast" and include the Lord's supper as part of that meal. We know this because Paul condemned the abuse of that practice in the aforementioned 1 Corinthians 11. Most

early sources say the two were not associated, the love feast occurring in a separate location, such as the pizza palace down the street. Well, maybe in a private home. In the assembly, however, most places apparently held an observance of the death of Jesus in accordance with his own instructions.

After that communion with Christ, the assembly continues on much as before. There is no set preacher with a sermon. Someone from another place happens to be there today. He tells about what is happening among the church in his home town. Someone like Paul might get up and relate what he is doing for the spread of the gospel. “they rehearsed all that God had done with them, and how he had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles.” (Acts 14:27) Nobody will be paid to preach. When Paul got paid it was more likely for his teaching those outside the church than for teaching during the assembly.

I notice one thing is missing. There is no formal invitation or altar call. Nobody is asked to come get saved. They did announce that a number of people were immersed recently, and introduced them, but no specific offer is made to afford someone the opportunity for immersion. There is a reason for this. Those who received salvation recently were all taught outside the common assembly. When they realized their unsaved state, and what needed to be done, they immediately sought immersion. There is none of the modern waiting for the assembly, or even scheduling a date a couple of weeks out. Salvation is too important to wait even a few hours. It is something that should be done “the same hour of the night” (or day). (Acts 16:33) What might happen to a person if he waits? Salvation is too important to put off. Certainly, if one present were to ask to be immersed the congregation would be happy to accommodate them, but that is less likely to happen.

After a couple of hours somebody might leave. It could be the first ones who came in, or even the last. As time goes on the entire congregation disperses, a few at a time. Some have a long way to go and it is dark outside. Others are getting tired. There is even a rumor that one young man fell asleep and fell out of a window during one of Paul’s discourses. (Acts 20:9) A few might even bed down in the synagogue for the night. It is too far for them to travel home at night. After most have left we go outside, and return to our own time.

If the situation were reversed, and one came from that congregation to our time, he might be as disoriented as we are. Our structured and very formal assemblies would bewilder such a person. Where, he might ask, is the heart if everything is already planned out? If someone is not done worshipping in an hour and a half why does everyone have to leave? And why do people take such tiny bites of the bread; do they not really want to participate in the body of Jesus? He would probably have as many questions to ask about our way of doing things as we have

of his. Does that make his way any more right than ours? No. Neither is more right or wrong, just different. We follow the same gospel. We just have a few centuries of formalized High Church background in our Orthodox/Roman Catholic culture. This person has none of that.

By the way, now that we are back in our century I might as well tell you that I have no idea what day of the week we just went to. It may have been a Sunday. It may have been the Sabbath. It may have been any day of the week. They might have had to coordinate their assembly with those Jews who did not share a belief in the Way, because they also used the synagogue for an assembly every day. But, you say, they took the Lord’s Supper so it must have been Sunday. Not necessarily. While over time a specific Sunday assembly developed, and while Paul indicates that the gentile congregations tended to have larger assemblies on Sunday (Acts 16:1-2), there is nothing to indicate that the early church limited the Lord’s supper to that day. Some say Paul waited seven days until the people came together to break bread (Acts 20:7), so that must refer to the Lord’s supper. That is no more clear than that “breaking bread from house to house” daily

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(Acts 2:46) refers to a common meal. Since Acts 2:42 mentions breaking bread in a context that indicates corporate worship, Acts 2:46 may indicate they took the Lord’s supper daily. Or it may not. The only absolute correlation between breaking bread and the Lord’s supper is 1 Corinthians 10:16. All other times the Bible mentions breaking bread it could easily mean one or the other, the Lord’s supper or a meal. In fact, since Acts 20:11 seems to imply a meal, there is no reason to demand that the reference four verses earlier refers to the Lord’s supper.

Well, we have just traveled two thousand years each way in just a short span. I’m tired. It’s not often I stay awake for 4,000 years. Maybe we have learned something together. God is less concerned with the cultural trappings of our assembly than he is with our faith. Yes, he wants our worship. But what he wants is *our* worship, wherever or whenever we are.

FOUR SPECIES

The Jewish holiday of *Succos* (beginning October 3 in 2009) is different from other Jewish holidays in a number of ways. Coming, as it does, less than a week after *Yom Kippur*, it is noticeably different in attitude, being a feast rather than a fast. It, like *Purim*, is a holiday of rejoicing. Like most Jewish holidays, it is a holiday of the home; yet it is not a holiday *in* the home, being celebrated in temporary structures. One particular mitzvah of the holiday is unique.

And ye shall take you on the first day the boughs of goodly trees, branches of palm trees, and the boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook; and ye shall rejoice before the LORD your God seven days. (Lev 23:40)

This is the command of the “four species.” On this holiday, celebrants carry two items. One is the *etrog*, the fruit of the citron. People will search carefully to buy only the most perfect of these heart-shaped fruits for this celebration. The other item is a bundle consisting of three branches tied together: the palm, the myrtle (a “thick tree”), and the willow. Commonly called the *lulav*, the Hebrew word for the palm frond, this makes up three of the four required species. Holding the *etrog* in one hand and the *lulav* in the other, the congregants then march around the synagogue reciting psalms and blessings, waving the four species in all four principal directions.

Some of the rabbis point out that the four species may represent organs of the body. The *etrog* looks like a heart. The palm, which should be the central palm frond rather than one of the side branches, resembles a straight spine. The leaves of the myrtle are like eyes, and those of the willow are like lips. Thus the four species represent the whole person.

There is, however, another aspect of the four species from which we may gain a measure of encouragement. The way the four species are carried may say something about us.

The celebrants carry the *etrog* in one hand (usually the left). This may represent the individual before God. We each have our own responsibility in our obedience and worship.

The soul that sinneth, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son: the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him. (Ezek 18:20)

One person cannot worship for another. The other person cannot repent for the one. Each heart is individually important to God. The Buddhist ideal is to lose individuality in the sea of consciousness. God’s people have as an ideal to present themselves individually to God. (Psa 5:7)

The bundle of branches held in the other hand may represent our other aspect before God. He talks in scripture about his *people*, not his person. Humans have a dual nature. We are individuals, certainly, but we are also social beings. We consider the hermit or the loner to be abnormal. While we make heroes of mountain men, few of us could live like that for long. We need the company of others. That extends also to our position before God. We can and do worship God individually. Nevertheless, he also expects us to worship together. (Psalm 95)

Succos is celebrated with the four species. Each, like we, has its place. Sometimes it is alone. Sometimes it is together. Always it is in reverence toward God.

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