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THE FIRST OF THE SABBATH

In some internet circles I am famous (infamous) as one who opposes Sabbatarianism. Some would think that there is nothing that could get me to agree with a Sabbatarian. This article may, therefore, surprise some people. In it I will not present anything dogmatically. I will just point out some possible interpretations of scripture that differ from certain traditions with which many of us grew up. I don't even claim that these interpretations are the only possible ones. I only claim that we have to be very careful in our teachings, because we often present tradition as truth, when it may not be.

There is a Greek word, *sabbaton*, that is variously transliterated sabbath or translated as week. Usually it is used in reference to the sabbath, Saturday. Jesus got in trouble for healing on *sabbaton*. Sometimes he taught in the synagogue on *sabbaton* (which is not to say he did not teach there during the assemblies on other days). Paul made it a habit when he went to a new city to first teach the Jews on *sabbaton*. Sabbath is always Saturday, never Sunday. Except perhaps in the phrase sometimes translated "the first day of the week."

The first day of the week, in Greek, is literally "the first of the sabbath." The traditional interpretation is that it signifies the first of the seven days that culminate in sabbath. Thus it is not sabbath, but the day after sabbath (which is proper). The problem is that this is the traditional interpretation, not necessarily the intended one.

Almost every time mention is made of "the first of *sabbaton*," it is in relation to Pentecost (*Shavuos*, which falls on June 8 in 2011). It may be that the phrase means the first day counted of the fifty leading to *Shavuos*.

The only time that *sabbaton* is almost definitely properly translated week is Luke 18:12, when the Pharisee says "I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess." It would not make sense to say that he fasted twice on a single sabbath. That is not fasting at all. Thus, a week is the most likely interpretation (as in "twice between the sabbaths"). An alternate possibility, though, is that he is saying that he fasts twice in the period between Passover and Pentecost. The Law required counting seven sabbaths after Passover and celebrating Pentecost on the following (50th) day. Normally this is not known as a time of fasting. So it could be that he is bragging that he fasts twice in the seven weeks between *Pesach* and *Shavuos*.

Two other times, besides the references to Jesus rising on the "first of the *sabbaton*," that this phrase is used the meaning is vague. In both of these other instances (Acts 20:7 and 1 Cor 16:2) mention is made, within a few verses, of Pentecost. That would almost force an interpretation that these two instances were references to the first Sunday after Passover, and thus the beginning of the period leading up to Pentecost.

If, as can be reasonably argued, these passages refer to the first Sunday after Passover, what does that mean for some of our longstanding traditions? Some use Acts 20:7 to "prove" taking the Lord's Supper every Sunday, even though they cannot with certainty establish that "breaking bread" there refers to that celebration. Even assuming that it is a reference to the Lord's Supper, perhaps this is only "proof" that the Jehovah's Witnesses are right in celebrating that feast only during Passover each year. Others use Acts 16:2 to argue that we should contribute to the treasury of the church (and therefore should assemble) every Sunday. Some even argue that Sunday is the only day on which the church may accept contributions. If, since verse 8 of the same chapter mentions Pentecost, Paul is telling the Corinthians to make the collection on the first day after Passover, so that he can collect it on his way to Judea for *Shavuos*, this may very well have been a one-time-only collection.

Most Christians assemble on Sunday. Many also do so on Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday. Some also assemble on sabbath. Nothing in the Bible would prevent assembling on any of these days. It would be wrong, though, to say that scripture says we must assemble on any one of these days, or even that the Bible says that the first-century church always or only assembled on Sunday.

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CHARACTER COUNTS

It has been said that character is what one is, and reputation is what others see one is. There are those who have good character but a lousy reputation. Others have a good reputation but a lousy character. The ideal is when the character and the reputation are very closely aligned. We don't generally brag about our character, unless someone impugns our reputation. Blessed is the man who can say, "you know my character, because you see my reputation." Such a man was Paul.

But thou hast fully known my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, charity, patience, Persecutions, afflictions, which came unto me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra; what persecutions I endured: but out of them all the Lord delivered me. (2 Tim 3:10-11)

Timothy probably was, at least in his later years, Paul's closest companion. Paul called him "my son in the faith." (1 Tim 1:2) It is likely that nobody knew Paul better than Timothy knew Paul. When Paul lists these various attributes of which Timothy was well aware, he was essentially giving his own definition of character. If these things were his reputation, and we want our public and private personae to align, then these must be the qualities Paul most valued. That begs the questions, what is so important about these qualities? Why does Paul list

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them as attributes of his character? And how can we incorporate them into our own character?

Doctrine

Doctrine has become a bad word in some circles. Some try to teach that doctrine is unimportant as long as we love one another. Others say doctrine is fine, but the Bible is so confusing that one doctrine is as good as another. Paul, however, lists doctrine as the first, and perhaps most important, aspect of character.

Why is doctrine so important to Paul? It seems to have been important all his life. He was trained at a young age by one of the greatest sages in Jewish history. Everything we know about him in the book of Acts occurred because of doctrine. He persecuted the church because they did not fit his view of Jewish doctrine. He was himself persecuted because of his doctrine.

Doctrine is simply that which one holds to be true, and teaches to be true. Whether a person likes it or not, everyone holds certain doctrines. Those who denigrate doctrine do so because of their doctrine. This is why Paul holds doctrine in such high regard. Every action in the character-filled life must be based on doctrine. If it is not, then it is hypocrisy. Either one acts in accordance with one's view of the truth, or he acts in spite of it. If the former, then he has character. If the latter, his reputation may be good, but his character is that of a liar. Doctrine is that important.

That which Paul taught was so important to the church that it was to be that on which fellowship was based. "Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them." (Rom 16:17) It was such an important part of Paul's character that he said he would not have any association with those who went contrary to his doctrine.

Manner of life, Purpose

Right conduct was part of Paul's definition of character. This is, however, more than merely doing what was right. The word translated "manner of life" only appears in this place in scripture. It comes from a Greek word which means to lead, intensified by a repetition of the root word. Essentially it could be translated "leading leading." What does that imply in defining character?

Paul seems to be recognizing that the way we live is right or wrong for more than just ourselves. Our manner of life is part of our character because others are watching us. While the word does include simple conduct, manner of life is more importantly distinguished by our example. We are what others see; we are our reputation.

Example was important to Paul. How we live, he says, is subservient to how we are seen to live. In Romans 14 he addresses whether people can be carnivores or vegetarians. His conclusion is that if a person is convinced in his own mind that it is a sin to eat meat, then one should honor that person by not eating meat in his presence. In 1 Corinthians 8 the question is a little more specific; should one refrain from eating meat if it may have been offered to an idol. Again, Paul's conclusion is that our example is more important than being technically correct. "Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend." (1 Cor 8:13)

Jesus knew of those who held their correct lives to be more important than their example. In fact, we have a word for such a person: pharisaical. The *P'rushim* (Pharisees) even bore a name that means "separate." Quite

often the reason Jesus berated them was because their practice, while correct, was presented in such a way that they were not good examples. Most people have known this sort of person. They teach the truth, but in such a way that they turn others off to that very truth. To them truth is a stick with which to beat others into submission. Paul was glad to know that Timothy knew him to be an example, not just a righteous man.

Every week the Jewish priests put twelve loaves of white bread on a table in the Tabernacle or Temple. In the Greek these were referred to as the showbread, or, literally, the bread of purpose. Perhaps this was in Paul's very Jewish mind when he mentioned purpose as a part of character. Purpose is more than just a meaning for existence. In Paul's mind it was setting one's life before God. If manner of life was our example to others, purpose is our offering to God.

Paul told the Romans, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service." (Rom 12:1) Our way of life is what we present to men, our purpose is what we present to God.

Longsuffering, Patience, Persecution, Affliction

Speakers of English often think of longsuffering and patience as synonymous. In the Greek in which the New Testament was written, however, these two words carry different, albeit similar, meanings.

Patience is steadfastness. It is the quality wherewith we remain faithful to God in spite of anything that will try to push us off course. It is not, as in the current interpretation, waiting for something to happen. Rather, it is being ready to remain on track whenever something untoward does happen.

Longsuffering carries the idea, in the original, of taking a long time to consider repaying evil for evil. It is equivalent to turning the other cheek. This is the person who counts to ten (or a hundred if necessary) before responding to an insult. True character is shown when we choose to act rather than react. It is under such times of stress that we show how prepared we are to deal with problems. Either we rely on God, and are prepared to do so, or we get in the mud with the pigs.

Persecution and suffering are related to longsuffering and patience. These are the things that can knock us off course. These are the insults to which we react or show longsuffering. Perhaps Paul lists them here because our reactions to suffering and persecution become part of our character.

Why did Paul specifically mention his persecutions in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra? He suffered in many other places later in his life; why go back to the early persecutions. Remember, this is in a letter to

Timothy, who was from that area. Over the last forty-one years there have been many tornadoes in many places. To those who were in Lubbock, Texas—or had friends living there—on May 11, 1970, one tornado is more memorable than all the rest. Students had to leave their dorm rooms and spend the night in the halls or the basement. Businessmen in the downtown area east of Texas Tech suffered extensive damage. To some of those people the recent tornadoes in the Midwestern United States are merely reminders of what happened that night in May. Paul suffered often, and often in Timothy's presence, but those persecutions near Timothy's home town are the ones Timothy would most remember.

Faith, love

"And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity." (1 Cor 13:13) In this

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verse Paul includes two of the characteristics he knew Timothy had seen in his own life. He is not telling Timothy that hope is any less important a characteristic. He is saying that trust and desiring the best for others even at one's own expense are important.

Faith is more than just believing in the existence of God. "The devils also believe, and tremble." (Jas 2:19) "Faith is trusting that God exists and that he will reward those who carefully search for him." (Heb 11: 6) Belief is internal; faith is visible. Paul said Timothy had known his faith, which implies that Timothy had been a witness to that faith. He had seen in Paul what faith is.

One way to show faith is through love. "By this shall all know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another." (Jn 13:35) It is our trust in God that motivates us to show goodwill to those who may even be the ones persecuting us. It is easy to love those who are like us. It is a positive character trait to love those who are unlike us, or too much like us. "If ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so?" (Matt 5:46-47) "Love is longsuffering." (1 Cor 13:4) In this it is intimately tied to other characteristics of which Paul is speaking.

Character counts. Paul may have considered other aspects to be part of character, but these are the ones he listed to Timothy. If these traits are not the sum total of character, they are a pretty good start.

HOUND DOG

(To my international audience, the following article is written in an approximation at a Southern U.S. dialect. If some of the words don't translate well, contact me at tim.ohearn@minuteswithmessiah.com and I will try to provide it in standard American English. And in case somebody wants to get upset again, this is not intended to be "Black" Southern or "White" Southern; it's "Stereotypical" Southern.)

There was a man what lived in a cabin in the woods. He kept a pack of hunting dogs, because hunting was his livelihood. One day a visitor remarked that he had no lock on the door. The old hunter replied, "Look around. What's to steal in here, but my hunting rifle? B'sides, I don't need no locks. Y'see that old hound lyin' out in the sun? Ev'ry night the last thing I do is check on my dogs. Then that ole hound follers me up on the porch and lies down front of the door. So, anybody wants to get in the house, he's gotta go 'crost that old hound. And every morning he's there waiting for me, just lyin' on my doorstep."

God once talked about an ole hound like that. Seems as how God musta told them first boys, Cain and Abel, how he spected them to sacrifice to him. Don't know just what he said, but he had to have told them what he wanted, 'cuz when them boys brung their offerings God liked what Abel brought, but rejected Cain's offering. Some folks'll debate as how it was because Abel brought critters and Cain brought crops. I'm a thinkin' it had some'n to do with attitude.

Anyways, soon as Cain saw that God had rejected his offering, his jaw dropped to the ground. Musta turned white with anger, too.

God asked him, "Whatcha so riled up fer? And why is your jaw on the floor?" (Here's where he talks about that hound dog.) "If you do right, I'll accept it. But if you do wrong, sin is lyin' acrost the door, jest waitin' for you to try and step over it. He'll eat you up. You gotta be it's master, though."

Now that young 'un, he didn't listen to God. He tried stepping acrost that ole hound of sin, and it bit him. He talked to his brother. "Let's not worry 'bout that sacrifice thing. C'mon. I got somethin' to show you out in my fields." Abel went with him, and soon as they was outa view of anybody else, Cain up and killt him.

Now that made God mad, 'cause he had warned Cain. Had to punish him, so he banished him.

What God told Cain about sin, well that applies to us today. Sin is still an ole hound dog, lyin' at the door, just waitin' for us to open it and try to step over. When sin bites you, you know you been bit. 'Taint nothin' you can do 'bout it, neither. God's gonna come and do to you what he did to Cain. You got bit by sin; you done been banished from heaven.

Good news is, we don't haveta stay banished. God loves us, like he loved Cain. He didn't wanna do what he had to do to Cain. And he don't wanna do what he has to do with us. No, he thunk, and he planned, and he said, "I'm gonna send someone to take their punishment." And that's jest what he did. He sent Jesus, his only son, to be a man. Now Jesus, he mastered that ole hound. He didn't sin, but he took our punishment anyways. God says, "You been bit by sin. Come to me and I'll bind up them wounds. I'll forgive you, and I'll keep on doing it. But you still gotta try and master that ole hound dog."

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