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TEACH THE CHILDREN WELL

One of the young people at the congregation where I attend recently asked whether she should start attending at the Baptist congregation across the street. I could have answered her on so many theological levels, but simply replied that we loved her where she was. Another teen responded that she should go where she feels the love of God the most. This conversation only showed me something I have suspected for years.

The group that calls themselves the Church of Christ has long been considered a people of the book. We can quote book, chapter, and verse for almost everything that we do, including some things where the scripture quoted only marginally applies. For a long time much of the growth of the church in the United States could be attributed to baptizing our own children. In recent years there has been a decline in membership of the church. Some attribute it, in part, to smaller families in the United States. If a couple has only one child, that growth would not even match the death rate, and therefore there is a decline in numbers. Even when you factor in the numbers of people being converted, though, the decline appears to be greater than just because of smaller families. Part of the decline has to be that we are no longer teaching our children why we do what we do, and why we believe what we believe.

I have met adults, even in my home congregation, who have been baptized, but have stated that they are no longer convinced that immersion is the point at which one is saved. That is the bedrock difference between the churches of Christ and many other groups that call themselves Christian. If our own adults no longer believe the clear teaching of the scriptures on immersion, then they are not teaching our children that, either. Although there are other fundamental differences between us and the Baptists, if one of our young people cannot see that difference then somebody has failed her. Nor can the blame be planted exclusively on the parent. When others her own age are advising her that the only difference is “where you feel the love of God,” then the fault lies in the teachers in the church as well.

If salvation were the only question, however, then one could advise this person that if she has already been saved she could attend wherever she wanted. Although I am a firm opponent of instrumental music in the worship

of the church, I accept that there are circumstances in which even I could attend a congregation that used instruments. I admit I would have difficulty in many such congregations, where the singing is more like entertainment and less like worship. There are obviously a number of basic differences or we would not assemble separately. Have we, as a church, failed to teach those differences and why they are important? Apparently, in some cases we have.

I know for a fact that most congregations do not teach their youth about the differences between modern Premillennialism and the teachings of God in the Bible, even though that is probably one of the headline issues in the world today. We have stopped, in many cases, teaching a belief in God’s creation of the world as described in Genesis. We have bought into the “many roads to God” theory, in spite of Acts 4:12. “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.”

One problem is that I suspect that doctrinal issues were not even behind the question. That congregation is larger and the “worship” is more entertaining. If that is the reason (and I am not sure it is), then we have really failed our teens. If we have not taught that what we believe is as important as how we feel, if not more important, then we have lost sight of the purpose of teaching.

We should teach love for one another. We should diminish an emphasis on attacking others. But that must not be at the expense of teaching essential truths that others do not teach. It must not be at the expense of teaching that some differences are so important that they could make all the difference in the world—this one or the next.

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HIGHLY PRIZED

Life was never dull on the road with the Teacher. How could it be? After all, we had anywhere from a couple of dozen to 250 people wandering the roads, camping out, sometimes being recognized as followers of the Teacher and sometimes trying to avoid recognition. And now we were headed for Jerusalem. Of course we had been there before. Who hasn't? But every time you go to the big city it is exciting.

This time three things made the trip interesting. It started when the Teacher told us we were headed for Jerusalem. Now, we all knew that. But he went on to say that "The son of man" (one of his favorite ways of referring to himself) was going to be arrested, delivered to the chief priests and lawyers, turned over to the gentiles (which in Jerusalem would probably be the Romans) and killed on a stake. We were pretty used to the Teacher making predictions by now, but this one was disturbing. First, it was very specific. Second, it was about the Teacher himself.

Seeing someone arrested was nothing unusual. The Romans could always find some trumped up charge on which to arrest someone who looked like he had money. This has always been a favorite form of extortion. But the Teacher was not talking about the Romans. He was saying his own people, the leaders of Israel, would arrest him. That meant serious accusations. Especially if he said they would turn him over to the Romans for execution. We aren't talking about stealing a loaf of bread here. He was saying he would be accused of adultery, idolatry, blasphemy, or something similar. This was unthinkable. We had never seen the Teacher even violate the sabbath; how could we imagine him to be guilty of a major crime?

And then there was the execution part. When the teacher predicted something, in three years I have never known him to be wrong. Now he is saying that he will be executed! Not a good Jewish stoning, mind you; a Roman hanging on an execution stake. Nails. Slow death. Torture. We Jews are known for humane slaughter of animals. That even crosses over into our executions, back when we were allowed to do them. Stoning is a quick and humane way to kill a person, compared to the Roman method. The convict was put down into a pit or the bottom of a hill. The executioners stood above him with huge boulders. His principal accuser casts the first one. Most of the time that one large rock (we're not talking about something you can pick up with one hand) was enough to render the victim unconscious, if not kill him outright. If the first one did not do it, the second would. If the man lived to the fourth or fifth boulder, he wasn't feeling a thing. Few lived very far into the execution process. Not so with the Romans. They delighted in drawing out the execution, sometimes

taking hours or even days before the convicted man died. And this was what the Teacher was predicting for himself. What could prompt the *cohanim* to do this to an itinerant preacher? Sure, they had some disagreements over doctrine, but you don't kill a man for that. At least, you don't do it through a legal process.

As if that wasn't enough, later in the journey James and John and Mrs. Zebedee, their mother, cornered the Teacher. We all knew what was coming. A rich woman and two momma's boys. A man with authority. We could read the recipe for what was coming; it just was not an appropriate time, after the Teacher's earlier announcement. Sure enough, those three marched right up to the Teacher and asked for a favor. Quickest way into the teacher's heart, that is; his own cousins asking him for "a favor." And what a favor. They asked to be allowed to sit at his right and left hands when he became king. No small favor, that. They only wanted to be the two most important people under the king. The *chutzpa!* This was the equivalent of Adonijah asking Solomon for Abishag as wife. How bold can one get?

Worse, they seemed not to have heard the Teacher. He says he is going to be executed, and they come asking to be his principal advisors in his kingdom. What part of executed did they not understand? Maybe they were counting on that cryptic remark about rising again on the third day. After all, that would be a major step toward becoming a king, dying and coming back to life. Still, to ask for such a thing now, that takes some pride.

The Teacher just took it in stride. He asked them if they could undergo what he would, and they casually replied that they could. This amused the Teacher. They had answered too quickly. So he warned them that they would indeed go through what he was about to, and that it would not be as easy as a hike to Jerusalem. Then he surprised us by admitting that someone would sit at his right and left, but that it was not his choice to make. Which is it, Teacher, execution or coronation? I just cannot figure you out.

The Teacher wasn't done, though. One of the reasons we have followed him so long is that we know he will take any situation to teach. So it was in this case. He turned to the rest of us, and spoke. He mentioned the Roman way of rulers over rulers over rulers. The emperor ruled over the proconsuls, for example. They in turn lorded it over the praetors. For lack of anyone else, they oppressed the questors. Finally, the questors intimidated the people. The Roman way was to find somebody lower than you to crush, so you looked better. The Teacher turned that upside down. We were to be servants, and try to find someone above us to help. Instead of oppression

from above, he taught that we were to spread beneficence from below. After all, he said, that was what he had come for. We had seen that throughout our time with him. Service was his watchword. He looked for ways to help others.

He said something about his going to be a ransom for many. We weren't sure what that was all about. It sounded like he was going to buy slaves and release them. Many a Roman had served as a slave until he was able to save up enough money to buy citizenship. That was even the Jewish way. The law provided for buying yourself out of slavery if you had the money before you were (supposedly) set free at Jubilee. (We knew about Jubilee; we just had never actually seen it put into practice. The masters always seemed to find some loophole.) The Teacher was a poor man, though. What could he pay to ransom one person, much less many?

It is kind of funny that immediately after the Teacher lectured us about something, an example would come up in real life. It happened again.

As was the custom for people going from Galilee to Jerusalem, we had bypassed Samaria, passing on the east side of the Jordan. That meant we had to cross the river again, at Jericho. I always looked forward to this part of the trip. The river crossing outside of Jericho is fraught with history. It was here that the Israelites under Joshua began the conquest of the Promised Land. This was one of two places most noted for people parting the waters and crossing on dry land. (The other is, of course, the Red Sea.) As we, wetly, ford the Jordan, I like to think that my footsteps actually rest at some point on the place where the priests stood with the Ark of the Covenant while Joshua crossed over. Even though I know it is long gone, I look for a pile of twelve stones left by the leaders of the tribes after the crossing. Nor was that the only crossing on dry ground at this point. It actually happened twice again, in one day. Going from Jericho eastward, Elijah struck the Jordan with his cloak and the waters parted. After he was taken up by the whirlwind, Elisha took that same cloak and struck the waters so he could cross westward. This was a very busy crossing. It always thrills me to be walking in the footsteps of the great men I learned about in my youth. Although the Teacher could walk on water, and could probably duplicate the dry-land technique, we just crossed in the normal way and proceeded toward the City of Palms.

As I said before, a crowd of people always surrounded the Teacher. Crowds draw attention, especially on the road. So it is no wonder that people quickly found out that the Teacher was traveling this way. Well, when people find out the Teacher is near, that means the beggars come out in droves. They are beggars because they have some affliction that makes it impossible for them to work. They come; the blind, the lame, the sick of various diseases.

As we passed through Jericho, a blind man learned who was passing. He cried out, "Son of David, have mercy on me."

Some in the crowd around him tried to silence him. Those of us who had trekked with the Teacher knew better than to rebuke him, but some of the Jericho crowd told him to be quiet. Perhaps they wanted an audience with the Teacher themselves. Maybe they just did not want the Teacher to get the impression that Jericho was a city of beggars. Whatever the reason, they demanded that he not cry out to the Teacher. Big mistake. That just made the man cry out even louder. If the Teacher had not noticed him before, he now could not help but notice the row around him. So he called the man over to him.

As soon as the Teacher spoke, the attitude of the crowd changed. Those who had been rebuking the blind man now were passing on the word that the Teacher was calling for him.

The man arose and threw aside his outer garment. Why? I don't know. Maybe he knew it was tattered and he did not want the Teacher to see him that way. Maybe he had been to enough physicians that had asked him to strip down to his tunic. Having stripped away those things pertaining to his old way of life, he came before the Teacher in trust, having no trappings of wealth or honor. Here was a humble, blind, dependent man asking the Teacher for mercy.

The Teacher asked an interesting question. "What do you want of me?" Like the man might be asking for a coin. Nobody in the crowd was surprised when the man replied that what he wanted was sight.

As soon as the Teacher had confirmed that he was begging for healing and not some temporary relief, he granted his request. Had he asked for money, he would have gotten money. By asking for his sight, he acknowledged that the Teacher had power to give him sight. The Teacher told him his trust had resulted in his healing.

The Teacher told him, "Go your way." Immediately the man joined our crowd, praising God. It seems that once he got his sight he realized that his way had to be the Teacher's way. He left his home, his family, his begging, and continued with us as we traveled up to Jerusalem.

Oh, I remember why I told this story. Remember that discussion with the sons of Zebedee? The Teacher had said that we were not to be lords but servants. We were not to be high but lowly. I don't think I ever learned the actual name of the formerly blind man. Everybody just called him the son of his father: bar Timaeus. It is more than interesting to me that his father's name means one who is highly prized. The son of the highly prized knelt before the Teacher, and by doing so he became highly prized, himself.

(Based on Matt 20:17-28; Mk 10:32-52; Lk 18:31-43)

SCHMACTING

The stage director in an opera I was in introduced me to a new term: schmacting. The word probably originated from the Yiddishism, acting schmacting, meaning you call that acting but it really isn't. (You may have heard various forms of this particular Yiddish phrase, such as taxes-schmaxes or the variation on the line from *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, badges-schmadges.) I have seen complex and simple definitions of the word, but one definition stands out. Schmacting is that point at which an actor stops playing a role and starts playing himself playing a role. It is when an actor stops asking the audience to look at his character and starts asking them to look at how well he plays the character. The story is told about actors Alfred Lunt and Lynne Fontanne, among the greatest married couples to act together. It seems that in a particular play Mr. Lunt had been getting a laugh every night in a scene in which he asks for a cup of tea, although he never thought of the line as funny. All of a sudden he stopped getting a laugh at that line. When he asked his wife why the audiences had stopped laughing, she told him it was because he had stopped asking for tea and started asking for a laugh. Even the great ones are not immune to schmacting, at times.

In listening to a "Christian music" station, I noticed a particular (and very popular) song, in which the lead singer breaks into a rock-guitar riff at one point. To me it was like the Jimmie Hendrix guitar version of the National Anthem. It sounded like the artist was no longer saying, "listen to praise to God," and was now saying, "see how well I can play guitar." It probably was not intentional, but it is one of the dangers of using

instruments in the worship. Someone who is good at their instrument, through their own choice or the prompting of others, shows off their talent, often unnecessarily.

Nor is that merely a danger with "mechanical instruments of music," as members of the Church of Christ are wont to phrase it. Long ago many churches got away from congregational singing because the congregations, frankly, did not sing well. Professional choruses and soloists became the norm in some Christian traditions. Again, the danger is that the professional might stop praising God and start showing off. Quite honestly, even in a congregational singing I admit that there have been times that I have thought, "I wonder if the people around me are noticing how good a singer I am." At those times I stop blending my voice with the congregation and try to out-bellow everyone around. Schmacting is an easy trap in any situation.

Paul knew the danger. It could rear its head when someone is tempted to accept the glory for an action rather than give God the praise. Paul told the Corinthians that some men falsely claimed to be apostles of Christ and boasted about what they had done. In 2 Corinthians 11 he even indulges in some of that boasting, but calls it folly. In verse 30 he concluded, "If I must glory, I will glory in those things that concern my weakness." In the next chapter he tells of a "thorn in the flesh" he was given to keep him from boasting in himself.

We serve God. Schmacting is the point at which we stop serving God and start serving ourselves serving God. At that point we need to be careful. When we start doing that, we should start watching out for thorns.

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