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TIME AND ETERNITY

My friend, David, is much more of a football fan than I am. Unlike me, he does not like baseball. He once told me that football was better because it had more action. When I watched a Cubs game (baseball) and a Redskins game (American football) at the same time I kept track and was able to show him that baseball had just over two plays for every one play in football. To this his only response was, "But football is a macho sport." At the time I didn't point out another significant difference: it would be possible to play baseball in heaven, but not football. Why not? Because baseball, cricket (in some cases), and tennis are the major sports that are not constrained by a time clock, while football and most other sports require a clock. If heaven is in eternity, there is not time there, which means no football.

We are people of time. More particularly, we are people of linear time. We can only go forward in time. Maybe that is why we are so fascinated by time-travel movies, books, and television shows in which a person goes backward. (Among my favorites are *Portrait of Jennie* and the remarkable *Somewhere In Time*.) A favorite question is, "If you could go back to any age of your life (or any period of time), what would it be?" We also dream of forward time travel, of being able to see what will happen, but most people seem to be more obsessed with the past.

Because we are constrained by time, we find it difficult to understand a God who is outside of time. It could even be argued that by creating day and night, God created time. As the creator, he is beyond the limits of the creation. When God said he was "I AM" we can understand the he is now, but we have difficulty with the concept of "I am, not was, yesterday" and "I am, not will be, tomorrow." The Sadducees of Jesus' day had the same problem. When they mocked the resurrection, Jesus replied, "But as touching the resurrection of the dead, have ye not read that which was spoken unto you by God, saying, I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living." (Matt 22:31-32)

We speak of *pre*-dicting the future, as if it is something yet to come. But with God it is not predicting, but simply stating what is, to him, a current event. How

could God know that Babylon would capture Jerusalem years before it happened? How could Jesus predict the destruction of Jerusalem? God knew that they would happen because to him they were currently happening. Of course, this leads to what is in our mind a paradox: Why would God create man or the devil, knowing they would rebel against him? The problem is, since we are constrained by time we cannot understand the intricacies of the mind of one who has no time. What to us may seem a paradox may be routine to God.

Along with this comes the issue of causation. . If God knows it is happening/going-to-happen, then does that mean it cannot help but happen? Can we choose to do something and change God's perception of what is? Does God's "foreknowledge" (which to him is current knowledge) cause something to happen? Certainly not. If we know that two trains are approaching each other on the same track, does our awareness of an impending crash cause the crash to happen?

It seems to us inadequate to answer all these questions with the thought that the mind of God is so much beyond ours that we cannot understand it. Still, to use Twain's example in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, to many in the Middle Ages our ability to accurately predict a solar eclipse would seem magical. It might even be interpreted as causative. Yet, we no more cause the eclipse than we can add eighteen inches to our height. In the same way, God's knowledge because he is outside of time, seems magical to us.

We don't understand it all now. But when we are, ourselves, in eternity, "we will understand it better by and by."

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A TRADITION OF GIVING

Contribution. Tithe. Collection. Treasury. Whatever you call it, this can be one of the most sensitive subjects in any church. It is also one of those that is bound by traditions, and when one starts messing with tradition that adds to the controversy. Nevertheless, it might be worth looking at the traditions to determine their value, or even their validity. Since it is the traditions of the groups known as Churches of Christ with which I am most familiar, those are the traditions I must necessarily address.

First of all, I have to emphasize that tradition is not necessarily a bad thing. There must be traditions. Tradition gives structure and consistency to what we do. Tradition can be comforting, because it becomes familiar. I knew a preacher who traveled a different route to his office every day, just to avoid it becoming routine. What he didn't realize was that just by actively choosing a different route each day he had established the tradition that he was trying to avoid. The problem with tradition comes when we try to impose our traditions on others as if they were biblical doctrine. When a congregation objects to carpeting in their building (which is in itself a tradition)

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because they have never had it, and the carpeting faction separates from the bare-floor faction as a result, then tradition has gone too far.

We constantly need to evaluate everything we do as a church, or as individuals in the church, to determine what is tradition and what is doctrine. Then we need to evaluate our traditions to see if we are binding them on others.

Tithing

The practice of giving specifically one tenth of one's income is not normally a tradition in the churches of Christ. I knew of a church in the Philippines that went by the name Iglesia ni Cristo (Church of Christ), that practiced tithing. It was the tradition in that church not only that every member should give a tenth of what they made, but that they should also submit a financial

statement. If they did not give ten percent during the year, the church billed them for the balance at the end of the year. That church had several other issues that were purely traditional and in conflict with the scriptures, most particularly that it was controlled by one man rather than the biblical practice of elders.

I have written about tithes before ("Ten Percent" in the December 2009 issue). In brief, the Jewish people were to set aside ten percent of their farm produce. They were to eat it in a specific place two years of every three. In the third year it was given to feed the poor. In practice, only about 3.3% ever left the hands of the individual. Other offerings were made, which essentially constituted a tax for the support of the priesthood.

The practice of tithing was not common in the early church. One reason was that there appeared to be no regular contribution, but more about that later. Another is that individuals were encouraged to give, when it was requested, as they felt they could give.

But this I say, He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully. Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver. (2 Cor 9:6-7)

Paul's standard, and that practiced in most Churches of Christ today, was that of a free will gift of what one chose to give. Paul's standard, however, encouraged liberality, with no upper limit of ten percent. Unfortunately, many today set their sights much lower, sometimes in the "sow sparingly" category. Others give liberally, though non-monetarily. Some things just do not show up well on a balance sheet, but without them the church would not function.

Passing the Plate

Let me describe the collection in most Churches of Christ with which I have worshipped. At the time of the weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper (occasionally at a separate time during the same assembly) the men who pass the trays with the bread and the fruit of the vine also say a prayer and then pass collection trays down each row of congregants. In some cases they may make an announcement that the collection is primarily for the regular members of that congregation and visitors need not feel obligated to give (although they will not refuse such a gift). Thus each person publicly gives or refuses to give into the collection plates. When one gives by check it helps keep the amount more private, but those around can see whether a person chose to give or not.

I suspect this practice is a holdover from Puritan practice in America. It is said that the ushers in Puritan congregations carried long poles with which they could strike anyone they caught sleeping. In like manner, when it came time to take the collection, the ushers passed collection baskets on the ends of similar poles. If a person did not put something in the basket they would hold it in front of that person until they gave something. People learned to put money in quickly so they would not be shamed by the basket lingering under their noses. Although in many churches today the passing of collection plates is not accompanied by such shaming tactics, nevertheless we have continued the tradition of the public passing of a plate, basket, or bag.

This tradition is of relatively recent vintage. The Jewish practice was to have a collection box available at the entrance to the Temple or synagogue. As people came in they would put money in these chests. Examples of this can be found in 2 Kings 12:9 and in Mark 12:41-44. This method of accepting the contribution continued well past the Middle Ages. I often wonder why some churches today do not use this more traditional method of collection. It would actually reduce the length of the assembly by as much as ten minutes in a larger congregation. There are even some congregations that have Automated Teller Machines in their lobbies, so that members can transfer money from their bank account to the church's account electronically. There is nothing wrong with any of these traditions, yet some would object loudly if a congregation did not pass the collection plates "during" the assembly.

Another tradition that has grown up around the passing of the collection plates is a prayer before they are passed. When I chose not to say a prayer, but just began passing the collection bags in the congregation where I currently worship, nobody said anything. That is to their credit, because in some congregations I have attended that would have been considered heresy. In this congregation the elders have even stated publicly that they would prefer that no prayer be said at least one third of the time, but nobody else seems inclined to take them up on the offer.

Weekly contribution

Even in congregations where the Lord's Supper is only taken quarterly or annually the collection is taken weekly. In almost every congregation of almost every denomination the giving and the sermon are the bedrock practices, and some of them will even do without the sermon. I have only been in one congregation in my many years on this earth where a contribution was not regularly taken. That was onboard an aircraft carrier, and we had no expenses. The only time a collection was taken was a special collection to purchase song books.

In reading the New Testament, one quickly notices, though, that this was the norm for the early

church. There appears to have been no regular contribution. Paul and Luke are the only ones who speak about money after the beginning of the church, and in every instance it is in relation to a special collection. Even the purpose of the collections differed from our traditions. Those collections were taken to help needy people in exceptional circumstances (drought or, perhaps, because a large number of initial converts to Christianity stayed in Jerusalem rather than going home after Pentecost) or to help those who were preaching the word of God elsewhere. Take a look at where the bulk of today's contributions are distributed. In most churches the biggest expense is staff salaries, and the next is building maintenance. Third might be Bible school supplies. Benevolence and external missions usually come close to the bottom of the list. Our traditions of preaching to the congregation and buying our buildings has turned our priorities upside down.

Rather than asking for special contributions as the routine means of collecting money, we ask for weekly

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contributions (and as in the Philippine example above, sometimes we make it a matter of doctrine). Rather than the money going outward, most of it stays within the congregation itself. If one wonders why churches are dying or only growing from within, perhaps we should look at our budgets. When our priorities are internal, is it any wonder that we have little influence outside our own four walls?

I am not saying it is wrong to have a regular collection, or even to spend it the way we do. We need traditions. We crave stability. All the things that surround our contributions—the visible trappings of our traditions—serve a purpose. They have a certain value. They lose that value when they move out of the realm of tradition into the realm of doctrine. If someone were to get upset because we did not pray before taking the collection, or just put up a box in the lobby, or did not even take a collection one day (or month, or year), then tradition has become doctrine to someone. If that can happen with something as simple as collecting money, might it not happen in areas of more spiritual import?

INTO THE UNKNOWN

People are fascinated by what happens after death. At any given time the booksellers' shelves have one to several best sellers about someone who claims to have died, gone to heaven (rarely hell) and returned to tell about it. Ignoring that most of these books do not agree on particulars, people want to know what will happen after we die. Nor is it a new phenomenon. After all, the whole purpose of monumental burial (think the pyramids, or any cemetery) is to prepare or preserve a body for the afterlife. Even the ancient Egyptians had their books of the dead, which were guidebooks through the underworld written by men who had never been there. Strangely, with all the books about what happens after death on the shelves, few people consult the Bible on the subject. Well, perhaps not strangely, since the Bible is essentially silent about the matter, and what it does say contradicts most of the books on the shelves.

Throughout the Old Testament there is extremely little about what happens after death. The Psalms, for instance, give the impression that once a person is dead they go into the grave and that is the end of the matter. And yet the Jewish people had a concept of the resurrection of the dead.

Actually, even two millennia ago that was a major point of contention for the Jews. The Sadducees denied a resurrection; the Pharisees advocated for it. It even got to the point that they practically came to blows over the issue. (Acts 23:6-10) The Sadducees, accurately, argued that the scriptures say nothing about life after death. The Pharisees argued it was true nevertheless.

Jesus and his apostles maintained the existence of the resurrection, and therefore of something following death. In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul argues that the resurrection of Jesus proves a universal resurrection, and gives one of the few New Testament descriptions of it.

Today we have all the books describing people dying and going to heaven and coming back to tell of it. All of them are in contradiction with Paul, who described one who had gone to heaven and was forbidden to speak of what he saw or heard there. (2 Cor 12:1-4) Although most attribute this experience to a death and return from the dead there is nothing in the passage to indicate that the person died. It does indicate, though, that he could not describe what he saw during the experience.

There is much argument today particularly about what happens between death and the final resurrection and judgement. Some, based on 2 Corinthians 12 and the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16, propose an intermediate waiting place where there is a separation of the saved and the non-saved, but in which they are all conscious and awaiting the final resurrection. Others argue that the soul loses all consciousness until the final resurrection of all the dead. The bulk of scriptures about the end of this world seem to indicate that the dead will be raised from the earth at that time. This would seem to support the latter contention, but it is possible that everyone will come back to earth from the proposed intermediate place, and then be raised bodily (although in a new body). Both sides use, and abuse, scriptures to support their contentions. Neither has any real experience with the matter, nor does it seem to make any real difference which is right.

Ultimately, the final judgement will be based on whether people followed Jesus or not. That is a decision that can only be made in this life. Therefore, whether we sleep or remain conscious or even cease to exist for a while is irrelevant. In eternity, that is the space between a period and the beginning of the next sentence. Asleep or awake, we may not even notice the time difference.