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BOOK, CHAPTER, VERSE

There was a time when literacy in America included, perhaps even meant, Bible literacy. The first European settlers of what is now the United States learned to read by reading the Bible. The oldest universities were founded as schools of preaching and teaching the Bible. Even Harvard, which is now considered by some to be non-Christian at best and anti-Christian at worst, was founded as a Bible based school. There was a time when even those who opposed the teachings of the Bible, or at least the teachings of those who claimed to be teaching the Bible, were as familiar with the book as those they opposed. The churches of Christ in the twentieth century were noted for being “book, chapter, and verse” Christians. Nowadays it seems that many don’t even know what that means.

In a recent study by the Barna Group, certain aspects of biblical literacy were found to be in serious trouble in America. When asked what the three in John 3:16 meant, only 68 percent of adults (and 61 percent of adults in the 18-27 age group) could identify it as the chapter number. One third of the respondents either got it wrong or did not venture a guess. Nor were those professing Christianity much better able to answer the question than those who did not claim to be Christians. While about 57 percent of all age groups were able to identify Hebrew as the original language of the Old Testament, fewer than half of that could identify Greek as the original language of the New Testament. (There was a time when Greek and Hebrew were considered part of a well-rounded curriculum, and that was not that long ago.)

The Barna study was a result of the predominance of that scripture reference in recent American professional football coverage. The publishers of the study chose not to present any major conclusions resulting from this study. The study does seem to indicate, however, that at least one third of Americans not only don’t know the meaning of “book, chapter, and verse,” many don’t even care. And that includes many who claim to be Christians.

Along with not knowing basic facts about the Bible, other studies also show that significant numbers of Christians deny that the Bible is the accurate word of God. One fifth of Christians do not believe the Bible to be “accurate in all the principles it teaches.” Although one of the things the Bible teaches is that Jesus was “without sin”

(Heb 4:15; 9:28), over one third of Christians believe that Jesus sinned while on earth.

Two questions seem to stand out as a result of these studies. What are we teaching our children about the Bible, if anything? And, why do people claim to be Christians if they don’t believe the basic, fundamental tenets of Christianity?

The second question may be answered simply. Many self-professed Christians are so little affected by their faith that they are easily swayed by cultural norms. If the only reason they are Christians is because their parents were Christians or because “America is a Christian nation” they are little invested in learning what their faith truly professes. The increase in those that do not believe the Bible to be totally accurate, even when they claim to believe that, shows that to many people Christian is merely a label.

As scary as that is to strong believers, what should be even scarier is that our children are not as knowledgeable about the basics of the Bible as their parents or grandparents. Knowing the meaning of the book, chapter, and verse designations is of small importance, unless one realizes that by not knowing even that basic information makes it impossible to find information to defend what they do believe. If a person cannot even begin to know where to find “For God so loved the world,” how can they be expected to believe it, live it, or teach it?

Biblical literacy is not a nice-to-have. In a world in which the word of God is under attack from all sides, it is a must-have. There are positive signs that those of faith are stronger in their faith than in previous years. Nevertheless, until we teach our children not only what we believe and why, but also where to find it, we are fighting a losing battle.

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A TRADITION OF HOLIDAYS

Especially from October through early spring we go through what might be considered one long holiday season. While there are significant holidays (in America) between Pentecost and October, most of the major ones in that period are not related to any particular church or religious event. Of course, even the name holiday implies some sort of holiness to the day. Some would celebrate all holidays; others would prefer to celebrate none. Most people fall somewhere in the middle. So, how much of what people celebrate as holidays is tradition? And does it really matter whether it is traditional or not?

The Jewish Holy Days

Most Christians do not celebrate the holy days listed in Leviticus 23 and other places. Some might celebrate *Shavuot* (Pentecost), but only because of its association with Acts 2. Others observe the sabbath, but not the rest of the Jewish calendar. Many Jehovah's Witnesses believe that the only time to partake of the Lord's Supper is on *Pesach* (Passover). (This is based on

Christians do not participate in the Lord's Supper because it was part of the Passover; they participate because of the new symbolism.

the command "This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." (1 Cor 11:25) The argument is that his disciples would have only participated in the Passover once a year, so Jesus was limiting their observance of the Lord's Supper to that time.)

Whether because of the explosion of Messianic Judaism or independent of it, many Christians are beginning to take part in the Jewish holidays. In some cases they modify the *seder* (order of worship) to include Christian references. In other cases they celebrate in virtually the same manner as the Jewish people. Some Christians object to this trend, claiming that it violates the principles of Paul's letter to the Galatians. They accuse those who participate in the Jewish holidays as relying on the Law for their salvation, and thus falling from grace.

Can a non-Jewish Christian participate in a Jewish holy day, either in its original form or modified into a Messianic form? Many Jewish people, including some Messianic Jews, would answer that they could not. This is

particularly true of *Pesach*, and some would extend that to all the holy days.

And when a stranger shall sojourn with thee, and will keep the passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near and keep it; and he shall be as one that is born in the land: for no uncircumcised person shall eat thereof. (Ex 12:48)

Others would point out that Paul said there is no distinction in Christ between Jews and non-Jews (Rom 10:12). Therefore, any Christian who chooses to participate in a celebration of one of the Jewish holy days should be allowed to do so.

But if it is allowed, should a non-Jewish Christian participate? As the reverse-legalists who point to Galatians would point out, motivation has a lot to do with the answer to that question. If one is keeping the Jewish holidays, including the sabbath, for the specific reason that he or she believes it is a requirement for salvation, then Paul points out that such a motivation would make it wrong. "Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace." (Gal 5:4) If it is only to fulfill the Law that one observes the holy days, then such a person stands condemned under that law. Nevertheless, if one chooses to participate in the holy days because of their symbolism both to the Jewish people and to Christians, that is a different matter. Christians do not participate in the Lord's Supper because it was part of the Passover; rather they participate because of the new symbolism (which may even be the old symbolism) based on the Messiah. If a Christian chooses to expand the Lord's Supper to its original form (a *Pesach seder*) in order to gain a fuller understanding of the meaning Jesus put into that portion of the celebration, that person gains a benefit. The benefit is not that of fulfilling a requirement, but that of understanding a deeper meaning. And so it is with the other holy days. If the participation is for the deeper meaning rather than the keeping of law, it becomes a tradition, and a tradition with value.

What about the post-Torah tradition of Hanukkah? Since that holiday is not found in the Jewish scriptures (and indeed only mentioned in the New Testament), it is purely a tradition. It might even be that by participating in this particular holiday one might become better able to teach his or her Jewish friends. This is particularly true because of the timing of that holiday being so close to another tradition.

Christian holidays

There are those that say the term "Christian holiday" is an oxymoron. There are no specific holidays

required in the New Testament scriptures. And that is true. However, there are many traditional holidays associated with Christianity. One such is Christmas, as alluded to in the previous paragraph.

There is no mention in the New Testament of the establishment of any day as a holy day. Because of the nature of man we have traditionally established holidays based on certain events in the life of Jesus or the church. Even though the birth of Jesus has no meaning without the death and resurrection, some choose to celebrate Christmas. Some object because the holiday is celebrated in December although Jesus was born either around Passover (March/April) or the Feast of Booths (October). Others object because there is no biblical precedent for such a celebration. Still more object for a reason to be discussed later. If there were any holidays to be celebrated based on biblical events, one would think they should be either Passover or the first Sunday after the beginning of Passover, or Pentecost. The one celebrates the death and resurrection, and the other celebrates the beginning of the church. Nevertheless, there is no biblical precedent for celebrating either of these within the first forty years of the church's existence.

Some Christian denominations have added even more non-biblical holidays. Many Irishmen celebrate St. Patrick's Day whether they are religious or not. Others celebrate various saint's days, as well as certain days surrounding supposed events in the life of Miriam, mother of Jesus (commonly called Mary). All of these days are purely traditional.

Does that mean we should not celebrate any of them? As with the Jewish holidays there may be value in some celebrations. Christmas is a time when many people are exposed to the Messiah or Christian concepts. Taking advantage of that interest has value. Some Christians who have not previously done so are beginning to celebrate Lent. In that this period of self-denial focuses one outward rather than inward, this is a celebration that may be a good tradition. While many Christians celebrate the death and resurrection by taking the Lord's Supper weekly, a special emphasis on Easter cannot hurt. Strangely, Pentecost may be the least celebrated of the important events in the New Testament. Perhaps people should celebrate it in the Jewish manner, by devoting themselves to prayer and study of God's word all night.

Pagan elements

Perhaps one of the biggest objections to some of the traditional holidays of Christianity is that those celebrations often contain elements taken from pagan (or at least non-Christian) religions. (Many things attributed to paganism actually belong to other non-pagan religions.) These objectors point out things like Christmas trees, Easter eggs, witches at Halloween, and many other traditions.

Someone recently asked, "Is Easter a pagan holiday?" One proper answer is that it is a pagan holiday if you are celebrating it as a pagan holiday, but it is not so if you are celebrating it as a Christian holiday or a secular holiday. In other words, thinking makes it so. If one puts up a Christmas tree in order to worship the gods of the forest, then it is certainly a bad tradition. If one erects the same tree because it points upward toward God and focuses the attention of the people in the room on a celebration of the birth of Jesus, then it is no longer a "pagan" tradition. The same with Halloween witches, which anyone would be hard pressed to prove that dressing up as one ever caused a person to convert to Wicca. Easter eggs are a celebration of new life (and an egg is even traditionally a part of the Passover *seder*, possibly even before Jesus' time). Can these traditions become bad? Certainly. Any tradition when held blindly or bound on another can become a bad tradition. Are they necessarily wrong and to be avoided? Only if in the mind of the person participating it is wrong, or if someone whose faith might be damaged by seeing someone

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participate in them objects. The principles contained in Romans 14 may apply in limited circumstances. In that chapter, though, Paul even says that each person should examine themselves and participate or not participate in holidays based solely on their own convictions.

One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind. He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it. He that eateth, eateth to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and giveth God thanks. (Rom 14:5-6)

Paul apparently continued to observe the Jewish holy days (Acts 18:21; 1 Cor 5:8). He clearly condemns judging any man based only on the traditions he keeps. "Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ." (Col 2:16-17) If Paul did not object to traditions in holidays, who are we to do so?

JOHN 11, BY ELEAZAR

Sick. So sick. Fever. Burning. Lips dry. They hurt. Light hurts. Moving hurts. Hot.

Cool cloth on my head. Water on my lips. Temporary. I hear, "Eleazar. Oh, Eleazar." My name? Surely. Must be. Miryam? She speaks? No, Marta. Miryam. Both?

Pain. Can't eat. Must sleep. Awake again. Sick. Never been this sick. Hours? Days? Just minutes? Don't know. Don't care. Let it end. Cool. Hot. Chills? But so hot.

Voices. People. Many people. Eleazar. Surely my name. Dying? Crowd here to see me die. Dying would be nice, right now.

Feeling better. No, worse. Lips hurt. Head hurts. Legs hurt. Clothes hurt. No, clothes can't hurt. Clothes hurt me.

Yeshua. Hear name. He here. No. Gallil. Surely in Gallil. Would like to see him. Friend. Good friend. Miryam, feet, hair. Her hair. Lovely hair. Yeshua has hair. He has feet. Where is he? Oh, in Gallil. Hot. Cool in Gallil.

Dying? Yes, dying. Miryam, Marta. Love. Who care for you? Marta, Miryam.

Cool. Dark. Something is wrapped around me. I can't see. No sound. Where am I? At least I no longer have the fever. It seems to have gone.

I don't want to move. But I have to move. I hear someone call my name. Yeshua is calling for me. I must go to him. But where? Surely he is here, not in Gallil.

I hear a low rumble, like rock on rock. There is a crack of light, there on my right. It is getting bigger. Hands are pushing a rock and the light increases. I am in a

small cave, with a rock blocking the entrance. A grave? Am I dead? No, I am alive; very much alive. I have never felt more alive. I feel...new.

I hear Yeshua calling, "Eleazar, come forth!"

I must go to him. He compels me. Was I dead? I was dying. Did I die? But then how could Yeshua be calling me? I am alive.

The light floods my cave. I am wrapped in grave clothes. I see them now. I was buried. I must have been dead. How long? But I have to get up and go to Yeshua. He is calling me.

It is hard to walk in these grave clothes. They just were not made to walk in. Of course not. What need has a corpse to walk?

The light is bright. After the darkness of the cave it hurts my eyes. But I hear a crowd.

I see him now. It is Yeshua. And Miryam and Marta beside him. They weep. Why? Yeshua comes and embraces me. Miryam and Marta won't let me go.

Everyone is babbling. I hear snatches of conversation. "Dead four days." "Raised from the dead." "A prophet." "No, Mosiach." I see a friend on the edge of the crowd, a Sadducee. He was a friend, but why that look of hatred right now? Some people look fearful. Others are happy. From some, if looks could kill I would be dead again.

It is becoming more clear. I was sick. I died. Apparently that was four days ago. Then Yeshua came from Gallil. Apparently he was later than some people expected. He called my name, and here I am. Alive. That is why some will hate me. I am living proof (literally) of the resurrection. I am alive.

"Baruch ata Adonai. I AM ALIVE!"