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THE INIQUITY OF THE HOLY

And thou shalt make a plate of pure gold, and grave upon it, like the engravings of a signet, HOLINESS TO THE LORD. And thou shalt put it on a blue lace, that it may be upon the mitre; upon the forefront of the mitre it shall be. And it shall be upon Aaron's forehead, that Aaron may bear the iniquity of the holy things, which the children of Israel shall hallow in all their holy gifts; and it shall be always upon his forehead, that they may be accepted before the LORD. (Ex 28:36-38)

There is an unusual word in this passage. At least many of us would not expect this word in this context; and yet there it is. Aaron was to bear the “iniquity of the holy things.” How are we to interpret this? If the things are holy, how can they have any iniquity or guilt? And if guilt, why should Aaron be the one to bear it? And how would wearing a gold plate on his hat (turban) indicate this iniquity?

The Hebrew word used here is *avon*, from a root word, *avah*, which means to twist or distort. Thus iniquity or guilt results from a distortion or twisting of God's word. (Peter expressed the same idea in Greek when he spoke of those who “wrest” scriptures, “to their own judgement.” (2 Pet 3:16)) The word is not to be confused with *avad* (work), from which is derived the Hebrew word *avodah*, which is worship. Nevertheless, Aaron's bearing the *avon* was part of the *avodah*.

Generally when we think of something as a holy thing we don't associate it with iniquity or guilt. After all, isn't a definition of holiness a state of being guiltless? Consider, though, the nature of the holy things in question—the Tabernacle and the offerings. There is an interpretation that says if it had not been for the incident of the golden calf there would not have been a Tabernacle. If the Israelites had not so quickly violated the Ten Commandments, God would have dwelt with them directly; because they sinned he needed a separation from them. The reason for most offerings, especially the sin offerings, was to take away the guilt of the sins of the people. Thus the holy things were as a result of iniquity; so when Aaron wore the holy garments he was bearing the iniquity that created the necessity for the holy things.

Even so, one would think that the iniquity would then be associated with the tent and the altar. But the word is used in the context of the gold plate upon the High

Priest's turban. For whom was that plate a reminder of holiness? It was not likely for the people, because most of the people would rarely see Aaron in his garments. They would deal mostly with the other priests. It might have been a reminder to God, but God is the one who actually imparted the holiness. Possibly it was a reminder to Aaron, himself. As he put on the garments of the High Priest he would see this reminder that he represented holiness to the Lord. Particularly in the fall, he was the only one who could atone for the people. In reminding him of his responsibility, the diadem also calls attention to the iniquity of his people. So in bearing the gold plate on his head, the High Priest actually bears the iniquity which causes the holy things.

The third question was, why Aaron? There is a whole branch of Christian theology that deals with types and antitypes. While we normally (typically) think of typical meaning routine, Typological Theology looks at things or events (usually in the Old Testament) as typical of (picturing) Jesus or the church. In this way of thinking, Aaron bears the iniquity of the holy (the word “things” being supplied by the translators for ease of understanding or misunderstanding) while Jesus bears the iniquity of the holy people. This is the main argument of Hebrews 9. The High Priest of the Tabernacle represents the Messiah who now has come to bear the sins of all people who will follow him. Aaron and his heirs represented a holy people to God. All of the guilt of the people was actually placed on the High Priest. In like manner, all the guilt and sin of those who choose to be God's people rested on Jesus, and was eternally removed in his death on the tree. Because he bore the iniquity of the holy, we are the holy.

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A TRADITION OF INVITATION

An American preacher in London was finishing his sermon. As he had heard and done all his life, he finished with an invitation for those who wanted to come to Christ or wanted prayers of the congregation to “come forward as we stand and sing.” One of the members of the congregation quickly pointed out, “We don’t do that here.”

For those not familiar with the churches of Christ, it is the practice of almost every congregation to offer an invitation at the end of each sermon, usually followed by an “invitation song.” This affords an opportunity for anyone present to let it be known that they want to be baptized into Christ. For members, it is a time for some brave soul to confess their sins and/or their need for prayers. In these churches it is called “the invitation.” In some Baptist churches, and perhaps some others, it may be called an “altar call.” In all cases, it is a tradition with no precedent in scripture.

Scriptural Invitation

Within the pages of the New Testament we do find people making known their desire for immersion or

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for prayers. These desires are not that which is being addressed; the public and ritual invitation is the issue at hand.

In Acts 2 we find the first recorded instance of the preaching about the risen Messiah. Peter and the other apostles spoke to a gathered crowd. Peter even offered an invitation, as recorded in Acts 2:38. “Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.” Two things are to be noted about Peter’s invitation, however. First, his remarks were in response to the audience asking what they must do to be saved. He did not initiate the invitation. Second, Paul did not end his sermon with this invitation and a song. “And with many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation.” (Acts 2:40) While the next verse does record that “then” many were immersed, the initial invitation did not follow the modern tradition.

Nor was this the only instance where the invitation was actually a response. Frequently in the book of Acts we find that the invitation was really an answer to

a question by the hearer of the message. Philip was teaching the Ethiopian (Acts 8) when the man interrupted to ask, “See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized?” In Acts 16 the jailer of Philippi did not even wait for a sermon. Any sermon that was preached, and any “invitation” that was given was in response to his “What must I do to be saved.” (That is true whether the salvation he sought was forgiveness of sins or only salvation from death at the hands of the Roman government; Paul and Silas taught as a result of his question.)

There are, likewise, examples of people who responded to the teaching. The magician in Samaria, who had been immersed but subsequently sinned, was told directly what he should do. (Acts 8:22-24) Lydia (Acts 16) responded to the preaching, but we don’t know the order of what was said and done. Others may have required prompting.

Taking the book of Acts as a whole, there appears to be no specific style or practice in regard to the “invitation.” The one thing that is consistent is that the people recorded as examples responded immediately and where they were.

Is it appropriate?

The modern practice of ending every sermon with an invitation may have some value. But is it necessary every time? Is it necessary any time?

Some preachers may go for years, offering the invitation after every sermon and never getting a response. This does not, in itself, mean they should not use their time in this way; after all, Jeremiah preached for many years without apparently having an effect on more than two or three people. There may be reasons for this lack of response. Perhaps the man is just not a very persuasive speaker. There are preachers who really have no business preaching. Perhaps his message is not conducive to a response, either because he chooses to speak on innocuous topics or because his timing is bad. Some men have written excellent sermons targeting the needs of a particular individual, only to find that when the powerful sermon is preached the individual for whom it was written is not present. (Usually in such a case the target is absent, or he comes up to the preacher afterward saying what a wonderful sermon it was and that he wishes brother so-and-so had been there to hear it.) There are certain other reasons that the vast majority of invitations go unheeded.

One such reason is the nature of the invitation itself. In the churches of Christ the most common respondent to the invitation to be immersed is a child or other relative of a member of the congregation. Perhaps this is because they have grown up hearing the public invitation and, often, believing that this is the only time to

seek salvation. They are accustomed to the public nature of the response. Many who have not had the benefit of years of training are not so sure that public humiliation is such a good thing. It is not easy to admit that you are in need of salvation. It is almost impossible to do so in front of a room full of strangers. In recent years, fortunately, more and more congregations are making public announcements of baptisms that occurred in a more intimate setting. Many of these are because people were afraid to do it before the whole congregation. Perhaps a second reason is timing.

When you read in the book of Acts about people responding to the gospel of Jesus the Messiah, you don't find that the person waited until the congregation regularly met (even though that might have been daily) in order to be saved. The phrases used are "the same day" (Acts 2:41) and immediately/straightway (Acts 16:33). Those who heard the gospel and were convinced of the necessity of salvation apparently felt the urgency as well. When they knew they were in need of a savior they also realized the possibility of dying without one. There is not a single specific example of someone putting off until a later day what they knew they should do. Since the most effective teaching is done apart from a public sermon, the public invitation may just be a case of bad timing. The people in need of responding may have already done so.

Yet another, related, reason may be the audience. In any congregation on a Sunday morning (or Sunday or Wednesday evening, even more so) the majority of the audience are longstanding members of the church. They have sat through many sermons and heard many invitations. If there are visitors present, in all likelihood they are also established members. On occasion one might find someone who attends the public assembly out of curiosity or at the invitation of a friend, but they are not likely to respond to the public invitation as a result of one sermon that is probably directed at the usual members. If they respond to the teaching at all it is because they have been prepared by the friend who asked them to attend, and the response is probably a request for further study. People respond to the gospel most often because they have seen it lived in a friend or acquaintance, and had it taught daily in word or deed. That is not to say that someone may not respond the first time they hear a gospel sermon; it happened frequently during the first century.

The nature of our assemblies, and the preaching that occurs in them, is just not conducive to eliciting such a response. Because of the rarity of a non-family non-member, most modern preachers practice "preaching to the choir." They teach and admonish those they know to be members, because they don't really expect anyone else to hear. Long-time members do not want to hear the basic gospel sermons that Paul might have preached, because they have already made their response. Modern preaching is not directed at converting the unsaved so much as

keeping the saved saved. Sometimes it is not even directed toward that end, but mere exposition of what the scriptures say, perhaps simply to justify the preacher's time and salary, and the invitation is merely a traditional afterthought. Sometimes it is jarringly incongruous.

Just as the majority of the audience is not those in need of salvation, so also the whole milieu does not contribute to conversion. Those that do respond have probably had the personal touch; while a congregational setting is most often quite impersonal. What is there of a personal nature in a few or a few hundred people sitting silently, taking in information, while all facing in roughly the same direction? And if a stranger were to visit and ask questions about what was going on, he would most likely be shushed by those around him, or at least be given glaring and disapproving looks. If he is lucky some kind soul might take him to a separate room and teach him privately. If he is not lucky, he may never return. Even in a congregation with a reputation for friendliness, the

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practical part of the assembly is often very impersonal, and that makes the invitation less effective.

Is it wrong?

Is it wrong to include an invitation after every sermon? Is it wrong to pick and choose which sermons include one? Would it even be wrong to never offer a public invitation?

Since the practice appears to be merely traditional, and mostly ineffective, the answer to all three questions is probably that it would not be wrong. Some preachers might actually be saved a lot of grief by choosing not to offer an invitation with some sermons; they agonize over how to make it sound natural in a sermon that really does not call for a response. Some American congregations have chosen to forego the invitation during Sunday evening and midweek assemblies. Many congregations outside the United States, such as the London one mentioned earlier, never have made it a practice.

We should be inviting people to respond to the teaching of the gospel. Such an invitation, though, should be at the most appropriate time, when a response is most likely to occur.

ONE NIGHT IN JERUSALEM

If you had stopped to listen that night, you might have heard the faint rustle of reins and the clop of a hoof or two. If you had opened your eyes you might have seen a vast array, poised above the hills of Jerusalem.

In military terms they were on “alert”, ready at a moment’s notice to spring into action. It was the strong presence of General Michael that kept them in check. Astride his horse he moved slowly back and forth in front of chariots and horsemen, their armor glowing softly.

Below on the Mount of Olives they watched as their Lord was arrested and led into the Temple. They moved uneasily as Jesus was spat upon and abused by the soldiers. They waited for any sign from Jesus to spring into action. They were confused by His silence in the face of a multitude of questions and further abuse.

They watched as he was led to the scourging pit; watched as He was tied to the poles; watched as the first lash opened up gaping wounds on Jesus’ back.

As one the chariots and the horsemen moved forward. Flames leapt from chariots, the sound of legions of horses and chariot wheels filled the sky. Looking to the East you might have thought you heard thunder and seen lightning.

Only the strong presence of Michael kept them in check. As one they turned and waited for the One sitting on the throne to issue the word. Only silence. Each lash reverberated through the skies. They all cringed as the scourges tore and ripped at the innocent one below. The One on the throne felt each blow.

Agitation grew among them as Jesus was led, dragged up to Golgotha. Agitation turned to rage as they nailed Him to the cross. Swords clashed against shield, horses reared in the ranks, they moved closer to the front.

Michael looked towards the throne. The head of the Father hung down, and moved ever so slightly left and right.

The assembly of troops closed in around the city below blocking the sun. They waited for the word to descend and rescue Jesus from the pain and humiliation. They waited for a word to turn Jerusalem into a wide spot in the road. They waited.

They heard the agony and pain in the voice of Jesus as he cried, “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?”

Then the unthinkable occurred, Jesus died on that cross. Michael again looked towards the throne but the God of the universe sat there, His great hands white as they gripped the arms of the throne. Tears ran down his cheeks and fell as rain.

“Have your army stand down Michael”.

“But Lord!”

“Send them Home, Michael.”

Confusion was on the face of Michael as he turned and gave the signal. As one the great army wheeled and was gone. Michael slipped down from his horse and picked up his sword where it had fallen.

He looked towards the throne but it was empty, God was on His way out of the room. He paused at the door, “Michael.”

“Yes Lord.”

“Wait!”

Three days later...

What occurred that weekend literally changed the whole world, although many who were involved had no clue just how much. The way God was to deal with sinful man, the way sinful man was to deal with God. Fifty days later...well that’s a different story, isn’t it?

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