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THE HARVEST FEAST

After the Days of Awe (September in 2012) comes the celebration known as *Succos*, or the Feast of Booths. It is described in Leviticus 23:39-43.

Also in the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when ye have gathered in the fruit of the land, ye shall keep a feast unto the LORD seven days: on the first day shall be a sabbath, and on the eighth day shall be a sabbath. And ye shall take you on the first day the boughs of goodly trees, branches of palm trees, and the boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook; and ye shall rejoice before the LORD your God seven days. And ye shall keep it a feast unto the LORD seven days in the year. It shall be a statute for ever in your generations: ye shall celebrate it in the seventh month. Ye shall dwell in booths seven days; all that are Israelites born shall dwell in booths: That your generations may know that I made the children of Israel to dwell in booths, when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.

Since verses 33-36 describe the Feast of Booths, some have said that this passage describes a second festival that runs concurrently with *Succos*. The latter part of the passage may suggest otherwise. Either way, a festival that starts on the fifteenth day of the seventh month of the Jewish calendar (October 1-6 in 2012) is clearly described as a harvest festival. It comes after gathering in the fruit of the land, and includes the “taking” of four species of plants.

Every major Jewish holiday speaks to a Messianic theme. Passover (*Pesach*) speaks to the separation of God’s people from the world. Pentecost (*Shavuot*) is about the giving of the Law and speaks to the beginning of the church. *Rosh HaShanah* is a day of blowing trumpets as a reminder of judgement to come, and reminds us that there will be a judgement after the last *shofar* is blown. That judgement is pictured in the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*). The writer of Hebrews reminds us that sabbath pictures our final rest. (Heb 4) So what may we take from *Succos*?

The obvious lesson is that we are wanderers on this earth, living in a temporary dwelling as we wait for the rest to come. Much has been written and will be written on that theme. Since one of the feasts that begins

on the same day is primarily a harvest festival, perhaps there is another lesson.

The holiday comes at the beginning of the holiday year, notwithstanding the holidays of judgement that immediately precede it. While it clearly was a holiday after the ingathering of the crops, maybe we can turn it just slightly and point it toward the other holidays. Rather than celebrating the ingathering, perhaps we can look at *Succos* as looking forward to the next year’s crops. But how does that relate to the Messianic faith?

Yeshua (Jesus) told his disciples, “I say unto you, Lift up your eyes, and look on the fields; for they are white already to harvest. And he that reapeth receiveth wages, and gathereth fruit unto life eternal: that both he that soweth and he that reapeth may rejoice together.” (Jn 4:35-36) He further pointed out, “The harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few; Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth labourers into his harvest.” (Matt 9:37-38)

Those who are seeking to harvest the fruit of the gospel may be few. Even in the new year, the fields are already ripe for the harvest. While one person may plant and another water, nevertheless it is God that gives the increase. (1 Cor 3:6-7) That does not absolve each of us from participating in the harvest. God has chosen human teaching as the means of planting his word in the hearts of other people. (1 Cor 1:21) Any farmer knows that the planting is followed by a long period of care. Even the ingathering takes time.

May *Succos* remind us that there is still a harvest, and we need to bring it in before the trumpet sounds and the opportunity for harvest is over.

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A TRADITION OF EDUCATION

Even among the churches of Christ there is controversy about the tradition of education. There are those among the congregations that call themselves conservative who refuse to participate in the tradition of Sunday school, or separate Bible classes in conjunction with the assembly of the church. They further deny that the tradition is acceptable in any congregations of the church. Others might support the use of these Bible classes but deny the support of colleges (in part because they teach more than just the Bible), or even preacher schools that teach only Bible. Still others support all of these traditions. Nevertheless, for over a hundred fifty years the Church of Christ has been noteworthy because of a tradition of education.

Why or Why Not?

Education is important. Without properly educating those in the church, divisions and heresies abound. Education of members has been a vital part of the life of the church since the first century. All of Paul's letters to the churches are instructional. Some, most notably 1 Corinthians, are primarily practical instruction

Bible classes should supplement, not replace, parental teaching.

on how the church should be. Others instruct on more theological topics. If the tradition of education were not a practical part of the existence of the church, we would not have the New Testament. Even before the written scriptures (which is a redundancy), the gifts, which included speaking in human languages not learned in the normal way (commonly called "tongues," were primarily instructional. (1 Cor 14) Those who practice some form of glossolalia today miss that important fact. "But if there be no interpreter, let him keep silence in the church; and let him speak to himself, and to God." (1 Cor 14:28)

Few would argue that education is not essential. Where some balk is with a formal educational program conducted by a congregation (Sunday school). If is, apparently, acceptable to include instruction in the assembly of the congregation as a whole, but it is apparently not acceptable to do the same thing with the congregations divided into separate classes. One argument for this is simply a tradition that has no basis in scripture. Interestingly, some of the congregations that object to separate Bible classes have no problem with a sermon in the general assembly, even though that is as much a tradition as Sunday school is.

Relinquishing Responsibility

A more common argument against Bible classes separate from the assembly is that the training of children is the responsibility of the parents, not the congregation. Few would object to this line of reasoning. It seems correct.

One flaw with the argument, though, is that not all Bible classes are for the children. There are adult classes as well. This argument says nothing to prevent those classes. If the only reason not to hold them is that it is giving the family responsibility to the church, then provide babysitting for the children while the adults learn together. But some would object to that as well.

It is certainly the responsibility of the parents to "bring them [children] up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." (Eph 6:4) It is also dangerous to put forth the argument that the church can also do everything that the family can do. Nevertheless, there are a couple of arguments in response to the idea that the church should not teach the children because that is the responsibility of the parents.

First, what do you do when parents relinquish that responsibility? Do we lose a whole generation just because the parents choose not to teach the children? According to one study by the Barna Group, 85% of parents acknowledge their responsibility for the moral and spiritual education of their children. More than two-thirds, however, abdicate that responsibility. (George Barna, *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions*, pp. 109-110) Properly done, the Bible class is supplemental to the Bible education given by the parents. Ideally, in the case of children's classes, the Sunday school teacher works with the parents to create a total learning environment. If, however, the parents relinquish their responsibility to teach their children, then for their spiritual growth the church may have to step in and offer training.

More and more, children and adults are coming to Bible classes from homes where nobody else chooses to follow God. This is not a case of the parent giving up the responsibility to teach the children; it is a case of them not even recognizing the need to do so. In these cases, the Sunday school often becomes a ministry of outreach. As the one family member comes to faith, that person in turn teaches the rest of the family. That is not to say that the primary purpose of separate Bible classes is ministry to the lost, although there is a tradition of that. Nevertheless, it has happened many times that whole families are saved as a result of a child going to Sunday school with a friend.

If a fear of taking responsibility from the parents is a valid reason for not having separate Bible classes in conjunction with the assembly of the church, then perhaps

some congregations might be better served with having a separate Bible class for parents. This need not be at the time of the assembly, although that is when most parents would be gathered together. The purpose of such a class would be to teach the parents to teach the children. Even in congregations that allow Sunday school classes, this might be effective. Many parents feel that they don't know enough about the Bible or about teaching in order to help their children. Whether it be math and history in the public schools or Bible in private, parents are afraid that they are not equipped to teach. A class just for parents to help them realize their responsibility and their ability could help overcome these fears.

Children's Worship

Some congregations have a practice of holding a separate children's worship. Sometimes this is totally separate from the "adult" assembly; sometimes it occurs only during the sermon. Other congregations or individuals are militantly in opposition to a separate children's worship. Because the children's worship is generally for those who have not been immersed for forgiveness of sins, it could be argued that the children's worship is actually separate from, and independent of, the worship of the church. And yet, there are also strong arguments for the inclusion of children in the assembly of the church.

There was a time that kindergarten and first grade teachers in the public schools could identify within days of the beginning of the school year which students were church-goers and which were not. Those who regularly attended church were able to sit still in class, while those that did not were constantly moving. With the advent of children's worship this distinction is no longer as clear. Many children's worships do not teach the children to sit quietly for a period of time. When children are included in the assembly of the whole church, this behavior is more readily learned, because children will, as much as possible, model their parents and other adults.

Those who oppose children's assemblies point to this modeling behavior as one of the strongest reasons that children should be kept in the overall assembly. Children learn by observation not only how to act, but how to sing and pray, the significance and importance of the Lord's Supper, and, most importantly, the importance of God in the lives of their parents and other adults. Some argue that one reason for the decline in musical sophistication in the churches of Christ is the advent of children's worship.

In some places the biggest reason for having a children's worship is simply to get the kids out of the general assembly. The main arguments are that the children take up space (as if this is really a problem in many churches) and are distracting. While the latter may be true, neither is a strong enough reason to deprive the children of the opportunity to see their parents' faith and worship.

On the other hand, some will make the very valid point that most "adult" worship (particularly the sermons) is geared to adults and bores the children, because they don't understand what is being taught in the way it is taught. Many congregations make children feel that church is for adults and not for children. Some preachers also like the freedom to discuss topics that might not be suitable for young children. Yet, even this is not necessarily a reason for isolating the children. Perhaps it just points up the problems with our traditions in the assembly. Even most adults are not as able to sit through a traditional sermon as they were several generations ago. If a sermon is boring for the children, it is probably equally so for many adults. Rather than separating the children, perhaps this should be a call for reform in the traditions of our public worship. Rather than a long sermon, which is itself a tradition, perhaps we should model the "adult" assembly to some extent on the children's assembly. Use the songs to teach a consistent lesson. Have prayers that

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come from the heart, regardless of how long or short they may be. Make the Lord's Supper more than simply a quiet time of passing trays down each row. Most of all, change the tradition of preaching. Most modern preachers are truly more properly called teachers, and yet their method of teaching is sometimes suspect. Interactive lessons, where the congregation takes part, or multiple short lessons (perhaps from multiple teachers) would engage the adult and child in the congregation much more than sitting through a 30-45 minute lecture. When children and adults are actively involved in the worship, they feel that worship is valuable.

We necessarily have our traditions in education. Some are good; some not so good. Some have a passing basis in scripture; others not so. We need to be teaching children and adults, preferably in a way that enhances actual education. This cannot be accomplished effectively in a church without the active involvement of parents and spouses. We cannot abdicate a personal responsibility to teach within the family. And yet, the church has a responsibility to teach as well. We have our traditions of education. As with other traditions, it might be beneficial occasionally to review them and see if we might not be able to alter them, slightly or significantly, to accomplish the purpose for which they are intended.

ROCK WALLS

In Ireland the most common material for fences is rock. The gates may be wood but the fences themselves are most likely piles of rocks. There is a simple reason for this. When clearing a field for planting you come up with many extra rocks. Some have gone so far as to say the most common field crop in Ireland was never potatoes, it was stones. Before you can plant a field it needs to be cleared of all these rocks, and what better way to use them than for fencing?

In our lives we also have fields of rocks. As we teach others (just as when we were taught) we often face fields full of the rocks of sin. We are people; sin is our most common crop. We must clear the fields before planting more productive things. Our tendency is to try to move the rocks one by one. But where to put them? We take people's sins and try to build walls out of them. In order to teach someone about Christ, we first pick up this sin (usually announcing loudly to the world that we found a sin) and move it to one side. Then we go back and find another sin, and place it with the first one. After a long time, and much back-breaking work, we figure that we have cleared enough sin to plant the seed of the gospel.

But now we have a wall of sin. In any given person we might even be able to identify that "I found this rock right over there," or "This stone was hidden in the high grass." We have cleared the field, but we have not gotten rid of the rocks. Instead we have merely exposed them all for every traveler to see. We have built a wall of sin around the field, but we forgot to build a stile so that people (Jesus) can get into the field. We have cleared the ground, but not gotten rid of the rocks.

By identifying and moving sin around in this way, we also create a wall that sometimes fences the individual in. When he/she sees all those sins that we picked up and pointed out, they realize the enormity of their sin, but often not the possibility of its total removal. They feel that their sin is too great to forgive.

This is the way many of us approach evangelism. Our top priority is to identify sin and move it aside. After all, we can't get rid of it ourselves. We just have to shift it. In identifying and opposing sin, we end up building a wall of defensiveness that actually keeps Jesus out of a life.

Recently the owner of a certain business was asked his personal position on a sensitive issue. Some people took his answer and blew it up into a national scandal. Some who claim to be Christians then made it appear that the issue was an unforgivable sin. They engaged in finger pointing, as if that were the only sin in the world. The implication was that they could associate with, or at least tolerate, any other sinners. One got the impression that some people would have stood by a friend convicted of murder, but would reject one who even hinted at committing this particular sin.

Jesus has a different approach. He doesn't seem to care how many rocks are in the field, or where they are. He doesn't even care how big they are. He simply removes them all at one time. He doesn't even need to point them out. They just disappear. No rock walls. No broken plows. He clears the field, and then plants the Holy Spirit who bears fruit. (Gal 5:22-23)

Maybe some rocks will reappear. He doesn't accuse, he just forgives. (1 Jn 1:7) Why can't we be like Jesus?