



MINUTES WITH MESSIAH

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OCTOBER SKY

Oc - to - ber sky, so clear and bright; Shep - herds keep - ing watch by night;
 De - cem - ber in the Tem - ple yard, Fac - ing down the Tem - ple guard
 In ear - ly spring nailed to a tree, Ex - e - cut - ed, one of three
 A Sun - day in the ear - ly spring. To the tomb their spic - es bring,

An - gels sing - ing in their flight, At the birth of the sa - vior. Hal - le - lu - jah!
 Know - ing that the way was hard. This the life of the sa - vior. Hal - le - lu - jah!
 Je - sus died to set slaves free. Oh, the death of the sa - vior. Hal - le - lu - jah!
 Wom - en are the first to sing: He is ris - en, the sa - vior. Hal - le - lu - jah!

Sing his prais - es, At the birth of the sa - vior.
 Sing his prais - es, This the life of the sa - vior.
 Sing his prais - es, Oh, the death of the sa - vior.
 Sing his prais - es, He is ris - en, the sa - vior.

CONTENTS

October Sky	1
A Tradition of the Book	2
Judge or Judgemental?	4

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A TRADITION OF THE BOOK

You may have heard them on the radio or television. They are some of the most popular media evangelists today. The preachers who fill an hour without once quoting, or even alluding to, the Bible. They can tell you what is wrong with the world, or right with it, and how to gain wealth and fame, or at least help them to. But when it comes to backing it up with scripture, and telling you where to find it just to make sure they aren't misquoting it, they just come up lacking. In contrast to them, one of the churches of Christ in San Diego, California, sponsored a long-running television show, at one time the show that had been on more years than any other locally produced show, called "Know Your Bible." During the show people could call in questions that would be answered in subsequent shows. Every answer was backed up by Bible verses, clearly referenced so people could follow along in their own Bibles. (This show was a strong influence in the development of the Minutes With

Perhaps some media preachers are afraid to give scripture references.

Messiah web pages known as What Does the Bible Say About..?)

For many years the members of the Church of Christ were traditionally known as "book, chapter, and verse" authorities, even by those who disagreed with their interpretations of those references. As traditions go, this was one of the desirable ones. In recent years it is a tradition that is less strong than it used to be, as many churches of Christ have become more like their religious neighbors. Nevertheless, it is a tradition that needs to continue.

By the book

An emphasis on justifying everything by the scriptures is not new. Of course, Moses didn't have much support in this area, being pretty much the beginning. Still, we find prophets such as Jeremiah quoting the Law in support of their messages. (That, by the way, seems to mitigate against the theory that the Law actually wasn't written until after the Babylonian captivity, unless you want to say that pretty much the whole of Jewish scripture was of late origin.)

Perhaps the best-known advocate of quoting scriptures in support of his major points was Paul. Without a firm grasp of the Jewish scriptures one cannot fully understand many of Paul's arguments, especially in the book of Galatians but also in his other writings. The writer

of the book commonly called Hebrews, whether Paul or some other man or a woman, quotes scripture more extensively than any other writer, although that is probably because of the audience to which the book was primarily written.

Among the gospel writers, who generally wrote after Paul or contemporaneous to his later writings, Matthew stands out as a by-the-book preacher. The premise of his gospel is that Jesus is the Messiah of promise. He does record many discourses, but even those are to show Jesus to be who he claims to be. Note, for instance, the rhetoric of the Sermon on the Mount (which may actually be a compilation of several sermons) with the repetition of its "ye have heard it said, but I tell you" formula. More famously, though, is Matthew's own formulaic rendering of variations on the theme that "this happened that it might be fulfilled what was written in the prophets." He then quotes the prophet. Matthew uses this formula thirty-three times in his gospel. When was the last time you heard a preacher quote thirty-three passages in one sermon, even in the churches of Christ?

We have an advantage over these writers. Paul and Matthew could only reference who wrote the original passage, if they don't just quote it outright and expect the reader to recognize it. They had to express it like the quote sometimes attributed to Marshall Keeble: "I can't tell you exactly where, but if you start reading at Matthew and keep going you will be sure to find it." Our advantage is that we can tell someone exactly where to find it, and in the churches of Christ we often do. Perhaps many of today's media preachers do not give scripture references because they are afraid someone will actually look it up and find that it doesn't say what they claim it says.

In the early 1200s an Archbishop of Canterbury divided the New Testament into chapters. (The Jewish scriptures were already divided, for the most part, into daily or weekly readings.) This made it easier to identify where in a book a particular thought or sermon could be found. Verses didn't come along until about three hundred years later. While there are several places where these divisions make no sense, and some objections to results of versification, the system of scripture references has been around since before King James ordered a translation four centuries ago. The insistence of some people to be shown exactly where the Bible says something has prompted some to call the churches of Christ "book, chapter, and verse people." (Not a bad thing to be called, by the way.) This system of scripture references has aided (and sometimes hindered) preachers in proving their points from the scriptures. Any preacher that will not tell where a passage is found may be considered suspect. Any listener who does not insist on knowing where the Bible says what the preacher purports that it says is of less "noble

character,” to use the phrase Paul used of the Bereans in Acts 17:11.

If we believe the Bible to be true, accurate, and authoritative, then we should expect to be told the source of anyone’s doctrine. If we are willing to take a preacher’s word that it is in there, without looking it up, we are denying one or all three of those attributes. We must be “people of the book” or we deny the authority or authorship of the book.

Memorization

Ray Bradbury wrote a book about a society in which firemen started fires to burn books. At the end of *Fahrenheit 451*, the protagonist learns the value of books and is taken to a place where everyone has memorized books or portions of them. If it is the word of God, what better book to memorize than the Bible?

There was a time when Bible classes included at least one “memory verse” for each lesson. Students were expected to learn the books of the Bible in order (at least, the order of modern, Christian Bibles). One teacher held a competition to see which students could say the names of all the books in under two minutes. When I was young, teachers would drill us to see who could find a reference quickest. My mother held a monthly competition between boys and girls in the class in which each student got a point for each verse or passage memorized. (I say “passage” because I once memorized and quoted the entire thirteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians and only got one point instead of thirteen. Her argument was that I quoted it as one passage without telling where each verse break was.) Of course, we always had the lazy students who would fight to be the first to quote “Jesus wept.” (John 11:35)

Rote memorization has its detractors. Individual verses should be learned in context. A text taken out of context may become a pretext for all sorts of error. Still, all those verses I learned as a child are still with me, and while I sometimes may have to look up the specific location I at least know what the Bible says about many subjects. Rote memorization can become a steppingstone to a more complete knowledge and interpretation. Failure to memorize at all certainly makes it easier to be led astray by “every wind of doctrine.” (Eph 4:14)

There are those who can accurately quote entire chapters, sections, or even books. Recently one preacher’s whole sermon was simply quoting the Sermon on the Mount. That is not to say that memorization is an end in itself. Clarence Darrow was quite familiar with the Bible, but used that familiarity to attack believers. Others may be able to memorize large portions of the Bible and yet none of it makes its way into faith. For them it is a mere intellectual exercise.

Paul told the Ephesians that the Spirit is the word of God. (Eph 6:17) That Spirit is much more than mere words, however. Some may learn the words without the power of the Spirit. It is just as dangerous, or more so, to

try to capture the spirit without the words. Because “Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light,” (2 Cor 11:14) thinking one has the Spirit without the word or in opposition to the word could be disastrous.

Interpretation

In recent years, the concept of interpretation has gained a negative connotation. We are told that one person’s interpretation is as good as another. The implication is that the individual ability to interpret according to set rules means nothing. A person who comes up with an interpretation based on his “I want to” is as competent as a person who studies text as well as immediate, historical, and cultural context. A person who may get upset when his own words are misconstrued determines that his own standards don’t apply when it comes to interpreting scripture.

In any communication there must be a certain amount of interpretation. What is spoken or written goes through the filter of the author’s life and experience; then the receiver filters the message with his or her own

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experience. No wonder people can argue for hours while saying the same thing. Rather than being bad, interpretation is necessary.

It is because of this that it is important to be a student of the Book. The more one learns about the spiritual, historical, and cultural context of a scripture, the more accurate the interpretation. Hebrews 4:8, in the King James Version, reads, “For if Jesus had given them rest, then would he not afterward have spoken of another day.” On man, who believed that the King James Version was the original text of God’s word rejected the New International Version because it used the name Joshua rather than Jesus in this passage. Because of his bias, and his lack of understanding of the context of the passage, he failed to realize that it makes more sense with the name Joshua. In fact, it becomes meaningless if referring to Jesus. Had he simply looked at the word “afterward” or taken the verse in the context of the Old Testament, he would have seen that his interpretation was untenable.

Incorrect interpretations are possible. They have even cropped up among people with a reputation of a tradition of knowing the Book. The more one knows the Book, however, and the more one is surrounded by others who know the Book, the more likely one is to come to a correct interpretation.

Traditions may not always be good. A tradition of knowing and following the Bible, however, is not only good; it is essential.

JUDGE OR JUDGEMENTAL?

A homosexual act is not an unforgivable sin. Neither, for that matter, is murder, divorce, or even failure to attend the assembly on Sunday night or Wednesday night. God can forgive lying, theft, adultery, and abortion. Because any one sin can cause a person to be lost, by the time they commit some of the big sins that people confront in the political arena, they are probably already lost, anyway.

The question is, how saved are those who are condemning others for all these sins? If by our hateful reaction to the sinner we are putting a stumbling block before those who might want to come to Christ, will God forgive us?

One must recognize sin. Many would say that if we are saved we should have a heart for those who are not. The problem is that some people go beyond that. They try to force others to be moral whether they want to be or not. They want to make decisions for everyone else. Someone recently said, "Someone telling me who I should or shouldn't marry because of their religion is like getting mad at me for eating a cupcake because you are on a diet." It is our responsibility to keep sin out of our own lives; we cannot keep sin out of the lives of those who want to sin, as much as we might like to try.

In recent years certain issues have so polarized people that some Christians feel it is their responsibility to legislate morality for others, whether by passing laws or simply telling people how they should act. Especially in America, trying to tell someone what they should do usually elicits the opposite response.

In the long-running musical, *The Fantasticks*, the parents plot to get their children together by keeping them

apart. One song in particular, *Never Say No*, emphasizes that children do things, such as putting jam on the cat or beans in their ears, "cause we said no." Nobody wants to hear what they should not do.

This is not to say that we should not point out sin. We can identify sin as sin, without reference to individuals. Our real job, however, is not to identify sin, but to identify the Savior. Pointing out that sin exists, and even what it is, is simply a foundation for the important structure. In fact, pointing out sin without pointing sinners to the solution is like building a foundation and never erecting walls. It leaves the impression that we cannot afford to finish the job.

For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it? Lest haply, after he hath laid the foundation, and is not able to finish it, all that behold it begin to mock him, Saying, This man began to build, and was not able to finish. (Lk 14:28-30)

Rather, we need to point sinners to the one who can save them from the consequences of their sin. Our ultimate aim should be pointing people to Christ. Put the options before them. Then let them decide for themselves whether to follow him or not. Many will choose to live in sin. We cannot help that; we must expect it. Trying to force people not to sin without giving them a reason not to do so is actually denying the grace of God. It is putting ourselves in the place of God and saying we have to act because he cannot. Will God forgive us for preventing others to come to him by putting a pit in their path? Do we really want to risk it?

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