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A SOCIAL DISEASE

A-rab (as Psychiatrist): Juvenile delinquency is purely a social disease.

Diesel: Hey, I got a social disease!

(From *West Side Story*, lyrics by Stephen Sondheim)

Diesel may not have had a clear concept of what is commonly meant by a “social disease.” The song does make a point that some diseases or conditions may be socially related. When using the term in that sense, many rabbis would say that biblical leprosy is a social disease.

Many people hear the term leprosy and assume that what is spoken of in the Bible is the same as the disease of leprosy known today. The disease, also known as Hansen’s disease, comes in two types. The milder form is characterized by flat, pale patches of skin on the trunk. The more serious type reveals itself in red or pale symmetrical patches of skin that may be flat or raised, and appear on the face or joints. Both may include nerve damage which, if ignored, may lead to loss of extremities such as toes or fingers. Without antibiotics, the disease is incurable. One does not normally fight it off like a common cold.

Biblical leprosy may appear in the whitewash of houses, and may appear in clothing. The symptoms are also somewhat different, with some similarities.

When the hair in the plague is turned white, and the plague in sight be deeper than the skin of his flesh, it is a plague of leprosy: and the priest shall look on him, and pronounce him unclean. If the bright spot be white in the skin of his flesh, and in sight be not deeper than the skin, and the hair thereof be not turned white; then the priest shall shut up him that hath the plague seven days: And the priest shall look on him the seventh day: and, behold, if the plague in his sight be at a stay, and the plague spread not in the skin; then the priest shall shut him up seven days more: And the priest shall look on him again the seventh day: and, behold, if the plague be somewhat dark, and the plague spread not in the skin, the priest shall pronounce him clean: it is but a scab. ... Behold, if the leprosy have covered all his flesh, he shall pronounce him clean that hath the plague: it is all turned white: he is clean. (Lev 13:3-6, 13)

If the leprosy of the Bible is not Hansen’s disease, a bacterial infection, then how was it contracted? Why would the rabbis consider it a social disease?

Many Jewish scholars believe that leprosy was a miraculous disease that was caused by *lashon hara*, evil speaking. In one of the most famous cases, the leprosy appeared instantly (not taking six months to several years to incubate) and followed a very specific case of disrespectful speech. In Numbers 12, Miriam (and Aaron) spoke what would today be called hate speech, condemning their brother for an interracial marriage, and compounded it by claiming equal authority with Moses. As a result, Miriam was struck with leprosy. Seven days later she was allowed back into the camp. In 2 Chronicles 26, Uzziah is not quoted as having said anything, but he was angry and so may have spoken evilly. He also was stuck with leprosy, and never recovered.

Another reason the rabbis think leprosy was speech related is the isolation of the patient. As long as one was leprous, that person was relegated to life outside the camp. He was to cover his lip, and when anyone approached he was to announce that he was unclean. In this way, evil speaking would not spread throughout the nation. If one is isolated, anything he says can hurt only him. If *lashon hara* is allowed to remain in society, soon it will spread and cause dissension. There will always be someone who is willing to spread gossip, rumor, and innuendo.

As soon as the leprous person learned his lesson, the disease would run its course and he would be allowed back into the camp. Even Naaman, as long as he spoke against the prophet and what God instructed him to do, could not be cured. But when he stopped complaining and started obeying, his leprosy left him. Evil speech is a social disease that requires an anti-social cure.

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TRINITY

I once heard from a preacher who wondered why many in the churches of Christ don't go back to the position held by some in the "Restoration Movement," such as Barton W. Stone, that there is no such thing as "the trinity." He proceeded to try to prove that the trinity was a Catholic doctrine that was continued in the Protestant tradition, but cannot be found in the Bible. Certainly, if we "call things by Bible names," or, as a preacher friend of mine likes to put it, avoid "the language of Ashdod" (Neh 13:24), we could not use the word trinity, for it is not found in the Bible.

A few years ago, I told a class of mine that the word may not be in the Bible, but the concept certainly is. I may not be ready to back off of that position yet, but there are some strong biblical evidences presented for consideration. The traditional doctrine of the Trinity is a long-established tradition that few are willing to give up. Ultimately, though, I personally maintain a long-held belief that this is one of those doctrines that, for the most part, don't really matter how you stand on them. Except when trying to teach Unitarians, Jews, or Muslims, the issue doesn't come up when teaching someone how to be saved.

It should also be noted that I use the phrase "the traditional doctrine" frequently. That doctrine is that God

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exists in three manifestations, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Some advocates disagree on the specifics. Are they three "personalities" in one? Three "persons" in one? Are they three who are "one in essence—not one in person"? (Tertullian, 3rd century AD) Perhaps the most common belief of Trinity today is that they are "God in three persons, one in nature." The Trinity is, using the wording of the Athanasian Creed, "one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; Neither confounding the Persons; nor dividing the Essence."

In Favor of Trinity

While there are frequent mentions of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, there are only a limited number of passages that indicate any "triune nature" for

the three. The more complicated involves three different passages. In John 8:54 Jesus refers to "my Father...; of whom ye say, that he is your God." John 1:1-2 says Jesus "was God. The same was in the beginning with God." In Acts 5:3-4 Peter tells Ananias that he lied to the Holy Spirit, which he also calls lying to God. So in these three passages all three are called God. But that doesn't necessarily imply that all are part of a "godhead," three in one.

The only passage that specifically says all three are one is 1 John 5:7—"For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one." If John is saying they are all one, in the traditional meaning of the Trinity, he loses the argument he is making. By law, something is confirmed only by more than one witness. If the Father, Son, and Spirit are "three in one" then they are not three witnesses, as he says. Most likely he is saying they are one in testimony, not one in nature. Furthermore, many newer translations point out that the earliest manuscripts do not include the reference to the Father, Word, and Spirit. It appears to have been a later insertion, and so its use to establish the doctrine of Trinity is questionable.

The other passage in favor of the concept of Trinity is Matthew 28:19. "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Again, though, this just shows that all three agree in authority, not necessarily in substance.

The Son of God

Denying the Trinity, or at least not affirming it, does not mean denying the deity of Christ. Even those that say the doctrine of the trinity is a tradition of man necessarily affirm the deity of Christ. How could they not? It is central to the gospel.

In fact, one of the principal arguments against the doctrine of the trinity is that Jesus is the Son of God. When I was growing up, and especially when in college, many people objected to the Revised Standard Version of the Bible and other, more recent translations or paraphrases because they changed the phrase "only begotten" to "only Son." In one more recent version it is translated "the one and only" son. The argument was that all Christians are children by adoption, but the Christ was the only son by birth. (The Greek word clearly means "only begotten.") I wasn't sure then what the conflict was about, only that it was important. Now I see that it is important because it may negate the traditional concept of trinity.

It is interesting that the New Testament writer who is the only one who uses the phrase “only begotten” in reference to Christ, John, is also the one who most vehemently argues the deity of Christ. If the Christ is, as John argues, *begotten* of God, then he is technically not co-eternal with God. For some small fraction of eternity (how long *is* 1/100th of eternity, anyway?) the Son of God did not exist. Before the creation, however, he existed, because through him everything was made. (John 1:3)

If Christ was born of God, and is the only one to be born and not created, then he does necessarily share the deity of God. A child born of a human is not a horse, but a human. The only begotten Son of God is, by nature, God. He is a totally separate entity, not a “personality” of the “Godhood,” just as my sons are separate from me.

Because the Son is “genetically,” so to speak, the same as God, he bears the same characteristics. He is eternal, powerful, pure, and loving. He was involved in creation, and in the salvation of that creation. He is worthy of awe, honor, and adoration. Yet he is separate and distinct. He now reigns, but will give up that authority to God. (1 Cor 15:24-28) If he is part of God, how can he deliver up the kingdom and relinquish his regency?

John’s main hobby-horse in all five of his books is that Jesus could be human and God at the same time. In opposition to the Gnostics or pre-Gnostics, who claimed that the fleshly and the spiritual were totally separate aspects of man, John claimed that in Jesus deity was merged with the flesh, yet without sin. To those that claimed that Jesus, as a man, could share no traits with God, John said, “the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.” God became man. Not “God became *like* man.” Jesus shared both deity and manhood. Yet John never asserts, with the possible exception of 1 John 5:7 mentioned above, the doctrine of the trinity or tri-unity.

The principal difference between the doctrine professed by Barton W. Stone and that professed by the Oneness Pentecostals is that the writings of John indicate that Jesus existed as the Son of God before he became man on earth. The Oneness doctrine generally states that God, the Father existed until the incarnation of Jesus. At that time God became man (presumably giving up his omnipresence). After Jesus died and ascended, he became the Holy Spirit. They present God as three distinct persons in time, not existing in any other form while in each form. This doesn’t explain how Jesus can now be sitting “on the right hand of God,” (Mk 16:19) if God no longer existed as any but Jesus.

The Forgotten Member

Most of those who deny the trinity spend most of their efforts showing from scripture that Jesus, whether he preexisted or not, was not identical to God the Father. The

emphasis is on the sonship of Jesus. Very little is said about the nature of the Holy Spirit. The Oneness Pentecostals claim that the Holy Spirit is the current manifestation of God, whose indwelling in man is necessarily shown by the ability to speak in tongues.

In Ephesians 6:17, Paul acknowledges that the Spirit is the word of God. Clearly that spirit is more than words on a page, or on a stone tablet. The word of God has power even to create, as in Genesis 1. The spirit has power to comfort, as Jesus indicated in John 16. The spirit has power to testify. (Rom 8:16)

Those who argue against the traditional view of “trinity” may point out that the spoken word of a person is not of the same essence, personality, or nature as the one speaking. A speaker has to exist before the spoken word. The word may have characteristics indicative of the

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speaker, but has no self-generative ability. That is, God may speak the word, but the word may not speak a new word. Thus the word may possess the power and reveal the personality of the speaker, but is distinct and different from the speaker. The word is dependent on, but never independent of, the speaker. The Spirit of God is not independent of God. He has certain powers and abilities, but is unable to operate independent of God who spoke the word.

Over the years, the nature and definition of Trinity has been argued and discussed. Tertullian said that Jesus was not created or born, but begotten, and yet coeternal with God. In fact, much of what has been said in this article coincides with the earliest orthodox doctrines of Trinity. There are some differences. Most peoples’ understanding (if that is a valid word) of Trinity today tend more toward the “God in three persons, blessed Trinity” concept that has properly led Jews and Muslims to question whether Christians believe in one God or three.

All of this is probably splitting hairs unnecessarily. Nobody is likely to be judged by God on their concept of Trinity. And yet, try telling a Jew or a Muslim that you believe in one God and he will laugh in your face. A blind insistence on what should be an obscure doctrinal issue could prevent some from obeying the gospel. For the most part, it may be splitting hairs; but for teaching some, it may be cutting one’s own throat.

AN UNIMPORTANT PERSON

“I am not important. Nothing I do will ever make a difference.” You think not. Well, ask Mordechai, the hero of the book of Esther.

Mordechai was the homeless guy that sat in the gate of the palace every day. Nobody knew he was guardian and cousin to the richest woman in the kingdom. They just knew him as the guy who spent every day sitting in the gate. Maybe occasionally someone would throw him a coin, but other than that he was not very noticeable. He was unimportant. Nothing he could possibly do would make a difference. Surely this man could not change the world. In fact, he was such a nobody that people even forgot he was there; and that made a difference.

How much of a nobody was Mordechai? So much that he was invisible. G. K. Chesterton wrote a mystery story in which a murder was committed, but nobody saw the murderer come or go in the place where the man died. It turns out (spoiler alert) that the killer was the postal person, who people were so used to seeing go into the building that he had become essentially unnoticeable. This was how Mordechai was. He was so invisible that Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king’s eunuchs, plotted to “lay hands on” the king in his presence, thinking they were in private. That’s about as nobody as you can get. And yet it was just that invisibility that allowed Mordechai to make a difference. He snitched on the plotters, and got his name into the king’s chronicle. That would later have a significant impact on the known world.

Because Mordechai was not totally invisible, Haman the Agagite had already established a law of government sanctioned genocide. While Mordechai was using his ward, Esther, to counteract that law, the king decided to reward the man who had saved him. His reward

of Mordechai included what Haman saw as the grossest humiliation. Thus when he went to Esther’s banquet and found that she was related to his mortal enemy, he lost his mind and appeared to attack the queen. This resulted in Haman’s immediate execution. It also, no doubt, helped when Esther pleaded for the salvation of her people.

This unimportant man became the catalyst for the Jewish response to possible annihilation. Had he been a somebody, the history of the Jewish people would have been much different. Esther’s paternity may have been known. Mordechai would not have been in a position to save the king, which means he would not have been in a position to save his own people. Haman’s anger at Mordechai’s refusal to bow to him was increased by his humiliation before a totally unimportant Jew. That combination showed his true personality to the king.

In a very real sense, then, the holiday of Purim (March 16 in 2014), which was instituted as a result of the salvation of the Jewish people, is a celebration of how much difference an unimportant man can make. Mordechai’s seeming lack of importance actually was his greatest strength. It was only when he appeared to be somebody that his people got into trouble.

So you seem to be unimportant. Embrace it. “God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace to the humble.” (Jas 4:6, a variant of Prov 29:3) “But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen.” (1 Cor 1:27-28) It is when we seem to be unimportant that we may be the most valuable to God.

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