



MINUTES WITH MESSIAH

Volume 15, Issue 12

Web Site: <http://www.minuteswithmessiah.com>

October 2014

CELEBRATING CAMPING

Americans love camping. Well, many Americans do. The last time I was camping was in the mid-1980s. My youngest son and I went on a Cub Scout trip into the mountains of San Diego County. That night is famous for having the worst wind storm the county has ever experienced. The only reason the tent didn't pull up stakes and fly away is that we slept (or tried to sleep) on the edges to hold it down. Although mine was a bad experience, many people have fun camping. Some cheat by calling spending a night in a recreational vehicle that has more comforts (and cost) than their "permanent" residence camping. Many others, though, enjoy spending time in a tent or out in the open under the stars.

Imagine, though, doing that for about forty years. The Israelites, on their way out of Egypt, did just that. They didn't exactly enjoy camping. They complained frequently. Thousands died. And yet, in spite of the hardships, they celebrate camping every year. (In 2014, the Feast of Booths begins the evening of October 8.) Why celebrate forty years of wandering, suffering, and death?

Well, it wasn't always that bad. In some ways this was more like camping in the RV. Well, maybe not that good, but consider what they had. Crossing the desert, they had air conditioning by day and heat (or at least a night light), by night. "Thy cloud standeth over them, and that thou goest before them, by day time in a pillar of a cloud, and in a pillar of fire by night." (Num 14:14) Who, in a desert crossing, would not want to be accompanied by clouds every day, and fire by night? They had an unlimited supply of food that apparently tasted like whatever fit their mood. (Ex 16:31; Num 11:8) They didn't have to worry about clothing or shoes. "Thy raiment waxed not old upon thee, neither did thy foot swell, these forty years." (Deut 8:4) Who hasn't come back from a camping hike with swollen feet? The Israelites, apparently. Nor were they ever fully at a loss for water. The rabbis say that the rock that Moses struck on at least two occasions was one rock that followed them around. Apparently even the apostle Paul, himself a rabbi, subscribed to this theory. "And did all drink the same

spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them." (1 Cor 10:4)

OK, they did have some problems. They had snakes. (Num 21) There were other problems as well. "Who led thee through that great and terrible wilderness, wherein were fiery serpents, and scorpions, and drought, where there was no water?" (Deut 8:15) Well, no water except what came from the rock. They faced hostile armies, and each other. They spent months or years in one location, and then had to pack up at a moment's notice, sometimes stopping for only a day. A whole generation died, just because of their disobedience and lack of trust. Life was not all a bed of roses. In the desert there probably weren't any roses.

In some ways this was a time to be celebrated; in other ways not so much. And yet the Jewish people celebrated this time with what was to become the most joyous festival of the year. God wanted them to remember. He wanted them to remember the bad times, but also the good. They were to dwell for a week in an incomplete building, with the roof open to the weather, just to remember that their forefathers had dwelt in tents in the wilderness. Good times and bad times. You will celebrate.

The point is, God is with us in good times and bad times. We should celebrate the good times, even while in them. We should celebrate the bad times, especially after God brings us through them. The Feast of Booths is a celebration of God's protection. Why shouldn't it be the most joyous time of the year?

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(This issue completes 15 years of publication.)

EVALUATING OUR GIFTS

Everyone has something that they do well. For one person it may be throwing a football. For another it may be playing an instrument, or singing, or acting. Yet another may write well. Some are encouragers. Others, unfortunately, are very good at discouraging or bringing people down. Some would say that every person possesses a gift from God, although that last may not be from that source.

Paul recognized that God gave certain people special gifts. Not everyone had all of them; some people did not have any of them. Paul saw in these gifts, and how they were used, an important lesson.

Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal. For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit; To another faith by the same Spirit; to another the gifts of healing by the same Spirit; To another the working of miracles; to another prophecy; to another discerning of spirits; to

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another divers kinds of tongues; to another the interpretation of tongues: But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will. (1 Cor 12:4-11)

Some have used this list to teach that every Christian has one of these gifts. Even those that deny that we have the miraculous gifts today may use this list to determine talents within the church. Even if they were miraculous gifts (as indicated in the context), and therefore not available to us today, they are evidence of some of the needs of the early church. Some of those needs may apply today, even if we don't have the miraculous gifts.

Not every person had every gift. The indication is that few, other than the apostles, even had more than one gift. Likewise in the church today, no one man has the ability to do everything, even though some expect our preachers to do so. The church depends on men and women, each with their own abilities, to accomplish the work.

Wisdom, knowledge, faith

To one is given by the spirit a word of wisdom. Not every person is wise. Even some of the smartest people are lacking in wisdom. There are some people in any group, though, who possess this quality. They can look at a situation and determine the best way to deal with it. Yet not even those people may be ideal for leadership positions. Many a man has known the proper course of action, but has been unable to get people to follow it, either because he cannot explain it or because his way of expressing it causes people to react negatively. Paul says that some were not just given wisdom; they may have already possessed that. Rather they were given the word of wisdom, or wise speech. Not only could they see the right course, but they were able to express it in a way that people would listen. While one would hope that elders, as the leaders of the various congregations of the church, would possess this ability, it is essential to a leader in any group. Anyone who expects followers needs wise speech.

To another is given the word of knowledge. Like wisdom, this is not just knowledge, but the word of knowledge. While there are some who instinctively know the right way to go, others can see the component parts of a problem and demonstrate to others why it is the right way. Often the wise man has as much trouble explaining his thinking as a person with perfect pitch has teaching singing. The man with the word of knowledge may actually be a better teacher than the one with a word of wisdom. But Paul might be using knowledge in an even more narrow sense here. Early in the history of the church, a group of people began claiming a special knowledge. They became known as Gnostics, from the Greek word Paul uses here for knowledge. Paul dealt with people in the early stages of this doctrine when writing to the Galatians. John's writings are all about defeating this doctrine. The "knowing ones" were similar to some cults today. The upper levels of the organization, consisting of only a few, claimed to have the knowledge. As people came into the group and moved upward they were given small pieces of the knowledge, but the leaders could choose who would advance and who would not. So it was with the Gnostics. They claimed to know about Christ, and that this knowledge was independent of the body. Thus they could do anything and it wouldn't affect their knowledge, or their salvation. Paul admits that not everybody had the miraculous knowledge. Nevertheless, he points out that those who have it did not get it of themselves. It came from the Spirit, so they could claim no special ability or authority. Their knowledge could be given, and taken away. In like manner, teachers in the

church today are valuable. They pass on the gospel and the morals. But whenever a teacher begins to think he is more important than what he is teaching, he needs to be replaced.

To another faith. We don't generally consider trust in God to be a miraculous thing. After all, doesn't every Christian need faith? Still, Paul calls faith a gift from God. "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God." (Eph 2:8) (It is the faith, not the grace, that Paul says is the gift of God.) Faith is a prerequisite to salvation, but the faith Paul is speaking of is a special faith. Every congregation needs people with this kind of trust. Many congregations make plans and programs, and yet go nowhere because they don't think they will work. Many congregations have failed, even, to make plans because somebody said, "We tried that before; it just won't work." To move forward, one must step out and trust God. There is a scene in "Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade" where the hero (Jones) must cross a deep chasm that is too wide to jump. There is, in fact, a way across. It is a bridge that looks so much like the chasm itself that it is virtually invisible. Our hero must step out, trusting that the bridge is indeed there and goes all the way across. (Granted he starts by throwing dirt on it to know that it is there, but then he still must continue across in trust.) Sometimes we need people whose trust in God is so strong that they won't let us give up. Whether it is a congregation or an individual, they encourage people to step on the invisible bridge. Unfortunately, some congregations do not have these people; others ignore them because they are women, children, or just not "leaders." These congregations are doomed to stagnation and death, unless such a person comes among them and becomes a leader.

Healing, miracles, prophecy, discernment

To another gifts of healing, or working of miracles. We might dismiss these as miraculous gifts that no longer apply; yet there are those today who hold these gifts in a non-miraculous way. It has been said that God sometimes gives us hardships so that we can know how to help someone else through the same thing. In a sense, this is the gift of healing. It doesn't take a trained counselor to heal wounds of the spirit; it takes someone who has lived through a similar experience. One man was an effective preacher to those with drug and alcohol problems because he himself had to regularly attend AA meetings. He knew how hard it was, but that it was possible to beat addictions with God's help. Another might be recovering from depression. A woman in the congregation (or even a man) might have experienced physical abuse, and can relate to the abused when others cannot. Empathy and sympathy are gifts of healing.

The phrase "working of miracles" is literally composed of the root words for energy and dynamo. It could as easily be translated "the working of power."

What nature does this power take? It may take many forms. It may be strength in the face of adversity. Most of us have known people that faced death with a calm strength that seemed superhuman. And maybe it was. They received their strength from God and his promises. This is a working of power. Others are able to reach people's hearts that have seemed to be beyond the gospel's influence. This is a working of power. The power is not ours; it is God's. He just uses some people to channel that power more effectively than others.

To some is given prophecy. This is a word that is badly misunderstood today. We see books about Bible prophecy that assume that all prophecy is predictive, and mostly predictive of our future. Prophets, in fact, were tasked with proclaiming the word of God. Miraculous prophecy usually involved a direct revelation from God. Modern prophets may get their words from the Bible. Not all prophecy was predictive. Moses was considered among the greatest of prophets, yet we are hard pressed to find anything truly predictive in his words. Jonah's prophecy was one predictive line, and even that didn't come true

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because the people of Nineveh paid attention to the non-predictive message of repentance. John the Baptizer was a prophet, but only in the sense that he declared that Jesus was the Messiah. He was not known for prediction, but for preaching. And that is where many of today's prophets appear. These are men and women who teach the word of God as it appears in the scriptures. They don't need to tell the future, because God simply wants them to talk to people today. If they tell of a future at all, it is that sinners will be punished and believers will be rewarded. Prophets in today's church may be paid, but more often are not. They can be found in pulpits or classrooms. They can be found in church buildings or on street corners, or in parks giving out food and Bibles to the homeless. They don't need a direct revelation from God because they are constantly in His word, the Bible. That is their direct, or indirect, revelation. Their message is simple: mankind sins, but Jesus was crucified, buried, and raised to give forgiveness of sin, and he is coming again to take his people home. Some prophets make it more complex, or teach the side issues of that truth. The church is full of prophets, but we need more. "Lift up your eyes, and look on the fields; for they are white already to harvest." (Jn 4:35) Prophets are the reapers of the harvest. (Continued on next page)

EVALUATING OUR GIFTS (CONT.)

To some is given discerning of spirits. Now, this one is harder to understand than most of the others. In the miraculous sense, it appears that some were able to distinguish between those spirits or gifts that came from God and those that were operated by the evil one. Even Satan can appear as an angel of light. (2 Cor 11:14) In a non-miraculous sense, we still need such people. There are preachers who have huge followings because somebody cannot distinguish between their spirits and the Spirit of God. And how is one to make this discernment? "Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." (2 Tim 2:15) Knowing the word helps one distinguish between the truth and error. Paul says the Spirit is the word of God, so distinguishing between spirits involves identifying God's word and separating that from falsehood. This is a gift that is invaluable in a church.

Languages and interpretation

To some are given various kinds of tongues. Actually, a better translation would be "families of languages." (The word "different" or "diverse" is not in the original Greek.) For those who believe that the miraculous spiritual gifts continue today, this seems to be the most important one; yet Paul considered it the least. (See chapter 14.) In Jerusalem on Pentecost, or in Corinth, there was a certain importance attached to being able to speak in a human language not learned in the normal way. There were people from all over the world in Jerusalem that day. For them to hear the gospel being preached by a group of monolingual Jewish blue-collar workers, there had to be a miraculous manifestation of languages. In cosmopolitan Corinth most people could understand Greek or Latin, but could be reached more effectively in

their heart language. It is no less important today to teach others in their own languages, but we generally do not need the miraculous gifts to do so. Faith Comes By Hearing has produced audio Bibles in over 840 languages. They even produce a player that operates on a variety of power sources, including solar and cranked generation, which can let up several hundred people hear the Bible read at once. In some seminaries, the language departments are as important as the Bible departments. Rarely do you hear of anyone, even those who believe in the miraculous gift of languages, going to another country to preach without learning the language. But learn they do, because even today we need the gift of learning families of languages. Some people are very good at doing so. We even call them gifted.

Even more important, perhaps, is the ability to interpret languages. There is a difference between translation and interpretation. A translator puts as literal a version as possible onto paper. An interpreter takes what is said and verbally presents it to someone in another language; they must understand the intent of the speaker, but need not render it literally. The difference is the immediacy. In this day it may not be as important to have an interpreter as it was in the first century. Nevertheless, because people travel all over the world at times, having an interpreter when preaching the gospel can be valuable.

All these gifts need to appear in churches in a non-miraculous way. Paul, however, uses this occasion to point out that merely having these gifts is insufficient. All of these have to work together for one purpose: unity of the body, the church. When any gift, miraculous or otherwise, takes precedence over the other, there is an imbalance that leads to sickness in a congregation. Regardless of our talents and abilities, our responsibility is to work with others to the benefit of the church.

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