



# Minutes With Messiah

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## SYNCRETISM

Any time a religion, or any culture, moves into a new area, a certain amount of syncretism results. With that said as a fact, perhaps a definition of terms is necessary. Syncretism is “the combination of different forms of belief or practice.” (Merriam Webster Dictionary) People are loath to give up some of their familiar traditions, so they keep them while finding a justification in the new culture. Many people, for instance, quickly point out that Jesus could not have been born in late December; however, since the Romans loved the festival of Saturnalia, they adapted the new religion in order to continue to celebrate the midwinter holiday. They created Christ’s natal mass, or Christmas.

Contrary to what some who object to celebrating Christmas, Easter, or Halloween believe, syncretism is not wrong in itself. In fact, it is unavoidable. The question should rather be whether the blending necessarily violates the tenets of the new culture. Is there anything, for instance, in the religious celebrations of certain holidays that would be inherently sinful in Christianity? If so, such a syncretism is bad; if not, it is acceptable, or at least neutral.

Over the centuries there have been many syncretistic religions based on Christianity. One could even argue that Christianity in the first century was a syncretism between Judaism and Universal Messianism.

Judaism itself was quite familiar with syncretism. Hardly had God announced his Law through Moses, when the Israelites brought in the worship of the golden calf. (Ex 32) They had not even entered the Promised Land when they began to worship the Baals. (Num 25) Throughout their history, until the captivity in Babylon, the Jewish people joined idols with their worship of God. They never fully left the Law of Moses; they just added to it. Ezekiel was even given a vision of the leaders of Israel turning the Temple into a place of worship of things, in addition to God. (Ezek 8)

Christianity is not immune to combinations of practice. These show up in Voodoo, Scientology, New Age, Christian Science, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, and (less obviously) Roman Catholicism and the Protestant groups coming from them, and even modern Islam. Some of these are more obviously incompatible with what we read in the New Testament; others less so.

There is a more dangerous syncretistic religion. It occurs any time Christians add their own culture to their Christianity, and make that authoritative. An Australian once said, “We want Christianity. What we don’t want is American Christianity.” He has a point, whether it be American, African, Mexican, or any other cultural brand of Christian syncretism. Because Americans after the Second World War, have been more missionary minded than some other cultures, it is American Christianity that is most commonly objectionable.

When we teach other cultures, do we insist on four-part harmony in singing? Do we institute the two-on-Sunday-one-on-Wednesday pattern of assembly? The list could go on and on.

The real danger, though, is not when we send missionaries abroad; it is in our own churches. Have we bound American materialism on our Christianity (and not just in the “prosperity gospel”)? Do we associate church growth with events, like car shows and concerts? Do we insist on middle-class suit-and-tie dress in the “sanctuary?” In many ways, the American church has become just that—more American and less church. We are satisfied with our upper-middle-class comfort in an air-conditioned building, assembling with the same people (same in culture, as well as invariably people we know), hearing the same sermons on comfortable topics. When you are used to the American church, it is hard to leave the building and get your hands dirty, literally or figuratively.

Until we give up our syncretic gospel and begin to practice only New Testament Christianity in different cultures, we are not practicing Christianity as much as we are practicing Americanism.

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# A FAILURE, OR NOT

*Back in the January 2014 issue of Minutes With Messiah, I published an article ([www.minuteswithmessiah.com/minutes/betterway.html](http://www.minuteswithmessiah.com/minutes/betterway.html)) on the first part of 1 Corinthians 13. This article will take up where that one left off.*

Ira Gershwin knew it. “In time the Rockies may crumble, / Gibraltar may tumble. / They’re only made of clay, / But our love is here to stay.” (Love Is Here to Stay, 1938) This world and everything in it is temporary. The Great Pyramid and its companions or the Coliseum are notable because they are two to five thousand years old. But even they are falling apart, and the civilizations of which they are monuments are long gone. Some people make a living photographing barns that are falling apart or old cars and tractors rusting in a field. We have a fascination with age, but a full understanding that even the most enduring things are only temporary. How much more, then, with things that were never designed to last.

Although 1 Corinthians 13 is known as the “love chapter,” it is really a part of a longer discussion on the nature and use of miraculous abilities from God. The King James Version uses the term “spiritual gifts,” supplying the second word, and most English translations since have followed suit. A few translations acknowledge the Greek, and just translate it as “spiritual” or “spiritual things.”

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Most people forget, however, that in teaching about love, Paul was saying the miraculous “will tumble” but love is here to stay.

## Love Never Fails

After describing the characteristics of love, Paul says “Love never fails.” (1 Cor 13:8) He finishes what we call the chapter by saying that faith, hope, and love abide, implying that nothing else will. Love is greater than the miraculous or spiritual because it outlasts them. Love is greater than we are, because we will die, but love goes on. Our loving deeds continue as our legacy, even after we are dead. Paul would disagree with the words Shakespeare puts in Marc Antony’s mouth: “The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interr’d with their bones.” Yes, evil

lives on, but so does good. We remember John Wilkes Booth as an assassin, but we also remember Andrew Carnegie as a philanthropist (from the Greek for lover of mankind).

Love cannot fail, because it is part of the essential nature of all things. “God is love.” (1 Jn 4:8, 16) God is other things as well, but the one quality we remember most is his love. Even those who do not believe in God throw his love in our faces. “If God is love, why is there evil in the world?” “If God is love, then won’t everybody be saved?” If God is eternal—which, by definition He is—then love must also be eternal.

“And now these three endure: faith, hope, and love; but the greatest of these is love. Follow after love.” (1 Cor 13:13-14:1) Other things may fail, but even after the things of which Paul is discussing fail, three things endure. Interestingly, the spiritual and miraculous things must necessarily end before the end of the world because of what remains after them. “Now faith is the foundation of things hoped for, the evidence of accomplishments not seen.” (Heb 11:1) If faith outlives the miraculous abilities under discussion, they must end before faith ends. And faith must end when that believed becomes seen in fact. When Jesus returns to take his people home, faith (as defined by Hebrews 11) will cease to exist; so the miraculous must end sometime before the end of the world.

Likewise with hope. “But hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for?” (Rom 8:24) When we see Jesus, what ground is there for hope to continue? If one hoped to get a specific gift for his birthday, and received it, he will not continue to say, “I hope I get it.” If hope must end when the reality of eternity with God becomes evident, then the miraculous must end before that time.

Love, on the other hand, is greater, because it outlasts even faith and hope. We have a timeline established. The miraculous “gifts” end; then faith and hope, which have continued, must end; but love never ends.

Between these statements, though, does Paul establish that it is the miraculous that will end? If love remains, what is that in contrast to?

## Miracles do fail

“Love never fails; but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away.” (1 Cor 13:8) Clearly Paul is contrasting two things: love, which is eternal, and the miraculous, which is not.

The question that people ask today must have also been asked by Paul's audience. When will these things pass away? If they do not last, will they soon pass or will they last as long as man is on the earth? As mentioned above, they will clearly not last until the end of the world. So, would they pass soon after Paul wrote this, or do they last even into our time?

The easy answer, without resorting to what Paul argues, would be the logical one. In Acts 8, Philip preaches to the Samaritans. Philip had the ability to perform miraculous signs, but did not have the ability to pass those on to others. The apostles come to Samaria, and "through the laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Spirit was given." (Acts 8:18) The logical conclusion may be stated: The apostles could pass on the miraculous gifts; those to whom they imparted the gifts could not pass them on further; therefore the miraculous gifts must end when the last person on whom the apostles laid their hands died. That would put the miraculous abilities ending in the late first or early second centuries.

Paul, however, does not use that argument. Instead, he says that the miraculous abilities were incomplete. "We know in part, and we prophesy in part." (v. 9) When "that which is complete" (v. 10) comes, that which is partial will end. So what did he consider complete? It couldn't be the end of the world, as already demonstrated. It couldn't be heaven, for the same reason. It couldn't be some reign by Jesus on earth, because Paul had no such concept. Based on verse 9, it must be when knowledge of God's will and prophecy are complete. That happened at the completion of what we call the New Testament. The only alternative would be that we do not have the "good, and acceptable, and complete will of God." (Rom 12:2) Then we are put in the position of having no faith and hope, because our faith is in something that could change tomorrow, and our hope could shift from day to day.

Regardless of what Paul means by "that which is complete," he makes a compelling argument against the use of miraculous abilities. Whether they were to continue indefinitely or not, the use of those abilities is indicative of a childish mind. Those who would say that we have those abilities today, and should use them, are saying that God has been unable to bring his church into maturity in two millennia. Yes, there are individuals who are still immature in the church, but the church has grown beyond the basics. He calls the miraculous abilities "childish things" (v. 11) and like seeing oneself in a bad mirror (v. 12).

Some people take the last phrase of verse 12 and misapply it. Some turn it around, making it say God will know us even as we know His truth. Others say we shall know (which is the condition of the end of the miraculous) when God acknowledges or knows us. This comes from an unfortunate translation in the King James Version.

"Then shall I know, even as also I am known." In the original Greek, however, Paul says "I shall know, just as I have been known." The being known is something that has already been completed. When the miraculous ends, Paul would know the mind of God as surely as God already knew Paul's mind. This is further confirmation that the miraculous, immature abilities would end when God finished giving his complete word. There are those (Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Christian Scientists, for example), who believe this word was not completed until the late 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Those groups, though, can't agree what the completed word of God is; just that the Bible isn't it. Paul, however, believed that the completed knowledge of God would come either in his day or shortly thereafter. (He said, "I shall know.")

The arc that is now divided over chapters 12, 13, and 14 of 1 Corinthians really consists of four parts. Chapter 12 says the miraculous abilities were designed to bring the church together, although immature Christians were using them to cause separations. The first part of chapter 13 says love is a better way than the miraculous

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gifts. The last part of chapter 13 says that the miraculous and immature will end when the church grows to maturity. Then chapter 14 says that while all the miraculous abilities had their place, the church was putting too much emphasis on the least important of those abilities, that of speaking in a human language not learned in the normal way (today called "speaking in tongues").

Unfortunately, many people have taken chapter 13 out of context. They have emphasized the importance of love, while devaluing the temporary nature of the miracles. This is not to say that love should not be emphasized; it should. The second half of the chapter, though, completes the thought of the first part. Love is a more excellent way; but it is more excellent because it is permanent and mature. The miracles are inferior because they were temporary and immature. There is always danger in taking a passage out of context. In this case, perhaps, the danger is enhanced by the artificial chapter divisions.

# *THE JONAH TYPE*

Jonah is listed among the Minor Prophets, even though there seems to be very little prophecy in the book. In fact, Jonah's prophecy consists of one line to the city of Nineveh, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh will be overthrown." Furthermore, that prophecy did not come true, because all prophecy is conditional and Nineveh repented of their evil. Jonah, as a book, though, may be more prophetic than the message given to the man.

A major category of prophecy is typology. This is when one thing is used to represent another. The author of Hebrews uses the Tabernacle as a type of heaven. (Heb 9) Jesus said Jonah was a type (picture) of him. In fact, Jonah is typical prophecy in more ways than the "three days and three nights." The following table shows the similarities, not only of Jonah and Jesus, but also Jonah being a representation of the nation of Israel.

<b>Jonah as a Type of Israel</b>	
<b>Jonah</b>	<b>Israel</b>
Despised Gentiles Opposed conversion of Gentiles (Chapter 4) Rebelled against God (1:3, 4:9) Was restored when he returned to God (2:10) Events at Joppa led to preaching to the Gentiles	Despised Gentiles Opposed conversion of Gentiles (Acts 11:2) Constant rebellion ended with the death of God's son May be restored if they obey (Rom 11:23) Peter's vision at Joppa led to preaching to the Gentiles (Acts 10)

<b>Jonah as a Type of Jesus</b>	
<b>Jonah</b>	<b>Jesus</b>
Through him many Gentiles were converted Born near Nazareth (2 Kings 14:25) Slept during a storm at sea (1:6) Calmed storm by his order to throw him overboard (1:15) Voluntarily "gave" his life to save others Gentiles (sailors) loath to shed his "innocent blood" (1:14) "Executed" by Gentiles (sailors) Three days/nights dead to the world A "sign" to Gentiles (Lk 11:30)	Through Him all the world may be saved Raised in and preached near Nazareth Slept during a storm at sea (Matt 8:24) Calmed storm by his word (Matt 8:26) Voluntarily gave his life to save all mankind Gentile (Pilate) loath to shed His innocent blood (Matt 27:24) Executed by Gentiles (Romans) Three days/nights in the tomb A "sign" to the Gentiles (Lk 11:30)

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