



Minutes With Messiah

Volume 18, Issue 3

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

January 2017

World Champion Cubs

World Champion Chicago Cubs. Those who know me know how satisfying those words are to me. (They should also have figured that an article would be forthcoming with those words.) I have been a baseball fan most of my life, and a Chicago Cubs fan for much of that time. How does a kid from a small town in New Mexico become a Cubs fan? My dad was raised in Los Angeles.

That takes some explanation. At the time my dad was growing up, there were no west coast major league teams. The Dodgers and Giants had not moved yet. So he was a fan of the local minor league team, which was a farm team for the Cubs. The Cubs also did their spring training on Catalina Island because the island and the team were owned by Wrigley. So when a favorite minor league player went to the bigs, he went to the Cubs, and so did my dad's loyalty. It was that loyalty I inherited (along with a stadium seat certified to have come from Wrigley Field).

The Chicago Cubs went 108 years without winning a World Series, and had not even played a game in that series during my lifetime. One psychiatrist had even written an article in *Psychology Today* claiming that Chicago Cubs fans were so because they had masochistic tendencies. They became called the lovable losers, and the loser tag even carried over to us fans.

So how does all this fit in an article for a Bible-based paper? Cubs fans are quite familiar with some biblical principles: persecution, patience, persistence.

Cubs fans are known for their persecution complex. Goat curses, black cats, a guy named Bartman, Leon Durham letting an easy catch go through his legs. All of these, and more, conspired against us. Losers. Maybe we haven't been persecuted on the scale of the Jews or Christians, but it was there. We could take some comfort in Matthew 5:11. "Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake." We Cubs fans understand persecution, so when persecution comes for the sake of Christ, we have a foot up on most others. We know how to take it. It is a good thing we do, because persecution is assumed for Christians. If Christians are not being persecuted, maybe they aren't doing their jobs properly.

It takes patience to say, year after long year, "Wait till next year." One hundred eight years is a long time. "My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into various trials; Knowing this, that the trying of your faith works patience." (Jas 1:2-3) That same writer later seems to say that the ultimate good requires patience.

Be patient therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord. Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain. (Jas 5:7)

Chicago Cubs fans know too well the meaning of patience. But all those years of waiting made the victory that much sweeter.

It is easy to be a fair-weather fan. Your favorite player moves to a different team, your loyalty follows him, even if he has only a year or two left to play. You tire of supporting a perennially losing team, so you jump on somebody else's bandwagon, until they become a losing team. It is harder to be a fan of the Cubs. But we know deep down the value of persistence, even if it is not immediately apparent. Jesus taught about persistence. He told a parable of a judge who eventually gave in to a woman who kept pleading her case before him.

And the Lord said, Hear what the unjust judge saith. And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him, though he bear long with them? I tell you that he will avenge them speedily. (Lk 18:6-8)

Persecution, patience, persistence. In my case it has been about sixty years. But that just makes it sweeter to say, "The World Champion Chicago Cubs." How much sweeter it will be to hear, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

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The Church as an Idol

Why are so many young people leaving the church? Why do many people say, “Jesus yes, church no?” There are, no doubt, many reasons. Pollsters and other experts analyze these questions and come up with a variety of good answers. What follows may not meet their scientific standards, but based on reading of several experts it might offer one answer. That answer is idolatry.

Many people leave the church because they believe what the world has to offer is better. They follow the idols of wealth, status, popularity, or appearance. What are the jobs that offer the best chance of wealth? If you can’t be rich, you can at least appear to be so. Self-worth is determined by the number of followers on Facebook or Twitter. Status is based on who you hang with, or who refuses to hang with you. All these are forms of idolatry with which we are quite familiar. Some people leave the church to follow those things. But there is a form of idolatry that is possibly as important a determinant in the choice to stay with the church or leave. That is the turning of the church into an idol. There is even a word for it: ecclesiolatry.

People, especially young people, hear us speak about idolatry. They read the stories about how Gideon destroyed his father’s idols, or the contest on Mount

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Carmel. They know what we say about idolatry, but then they see what they believe is our hypocrisy when we worship the church as much as any idol.

The church is a good thing. It was established by God for the good of his followers. Even a good thing, though, can be twisted into an idol. “[Hezekiah] brake in pieces the brasen serpent that Moses had made: for unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it.” (2 Kings 18:4) Some have wondered how they could do that, since it was because they spoke against God that the serpent was made. It may be easier to turn something good into an idol, though, than something less valuable to a person. The problem is not that the church is bad, but that some people put the church where Jesus should be. How do people do that?

Building idols

The building is not the church. We hear that a lot. The church is the people, not the building. And yet, sometimes we treat the building as the church, and then make it an idol. Sometimes this happens when people begin to believe that we need a modern, pleasing building in order to get people through the doors. Why, after all, would they want to worship in a building that looks like a warehouse when across the street there is a church complex, complete with gym, stage, flashing lights, and state-of-the-art classrooms? Glitz and glamour, that is what gets people into the church building. Perhaps, but when you get past the glitz and glamour, what do you have? Not much. Evidence shows that the millennial generation is not attracted by flash and dash, but by sincere worship in a quiet atmosphere. It doesn’t matter that the building was specially constructed to allow venting of the smoke from pyrotechnics (yes, that is a real thing). More and more people are looking at what goes on inside the building, and among the people that spend some time in the building, than the exterior trappings.

You don’t have to have a fancy building, though, to make it into an idol. People have left congregations over whether the floor should be carpeted, the pews should have padding, or the color of the paint. Some have left because the church wanted to expand on the building they already had, and they thought it an unnecessary expense. (That was an interesting case of making the building an idol by claiming that others were making the building an idol.) Others call the gathering place a sanctuary, giving it a status of holiness. One congregation that regularly preached that the building was not the church nevertheless had a sign over the entrance to the auditorium asking people to maintain proper decorum once they passed through those doors. The lobby was a place for socializing and loud talk, but the auditorium (and don’t you dare call it a sanctuary) was not.

Church buildings have become a part of church life in America, and even other parts of the world. There are places, however, that are glad to gather anywhere they can, even if it is open to the elements. There are congregations that have candles at the end of each pew because of the likelihood that the electricity will go out. Some are happy to even have a roof over their heads. They don’t make the building an idol because they are too busy praising God for what they have.

God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands. (Acts 17:24)

Worship idols

Even the assembly for worship can be turned into an idol. There are a number of symptoms of this problem.

Many buildings have a “cry-room” where parents can take noisy children to train them to sit in worship without disturbing others. There is nothing wrong with this, except that most cry-rooms are more play rooms, thus negating the intent. There have been congregations, however, that insist that anyone under a certain age be taken to such a room, whether or not they have been disruptive. The worship assembly is so important that it cannot be interrupted by a child crying or playing.

It is common courtesy, if you are late, to wait for the end of a song or prayer to enter the auditorium. It is making the worship an idol, however, to prohibit someone from entering at any time because they might disturb somebody.

A member of a church had a visitor that had never been part of the corporate worship. The member took the time to explain what was happening: why we sang as a congregation and without instrumental accompaniment, what the significance of the Lord’s Supper was, how to find scriptures while the preacher was talking. Those sitting around this member and her guest kept giving her dirty looks and even asking her not to talk during the worship. It seems that the worship itself, if worship were actually occurring, was more important than the soul of the guest.

Attending to idols

And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching. (Heb 10:24-25)

Some people have made this verse a sticking point for fellowship. If you don’t attend every time the congregation meets, you must not be a very good Christian. They turn church attendance into an idol. It doesn’t matter what you do the rest of the week, as long as you are sitting in your place on Sunday and Wednesday. You don’t read your Bible daily; no problem as long as you are present to sleep through the sermon.

In another example, a church member was questioned because they were not at the regular Sunday assembly. (The congregation kept track of who was there and who wasn’t.) They had skipped that morning because it was the only time that a person they were studying the Bible with could give them. “Well, why didn’t you just bring him to church?” Maybe because they wanted to teach them about God, not about the idol of the assembly.

Some people take Hebrews 10:25 out of context. They say you should not forsake the assembling of yourselves together, but forget the purpose of that

assembly. The start of the sentence says that the assembly is provoking one another to love and good works. When we make the worship an idol, we provoke God, but not one another. The assembly is a time of fellowship. That means togetherness and sharing. Too often we are individuals in a group of individuals. We are a hundred or so people worshipping separately while in the same room. There is no sharing. There is no laughter, or weeping. The gathering is not primarily for worship, but for encouragement.

Doctrine of idols

What does the church say about [fill in the blank]? When did the church become the authority rather than the Bible? When we made doctrine an idol. The question should rather be what the Bible, the word of God, says about an issue. Sometimes the church is much more clear

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on doctrine than the Bible is. Young people should not swim together because today’s swimwear might cause lust. Dancing, drinking, gambling, and any use of playing cards are forbidden. Do not go to the movies because they will tempt you toward violence, lust, or bad language. These are not just Puritan declarations. Some have come from churches within our lifetimes.

Even if there is scriptural evidence for or against a certain practice, doctrine becomes an idol when we attribute it to the church rather than to God. How much more so if there is scant scriptural evidence, or if you have to stretch the scriptures to explain the doctrine. If you have to explain how a scripture opposes a certain practice, perhaps the scripture is not so clearly against that practice. And yet many churches create chains of logic, or illogic, to justify the doctrine of the church. When the church becomes the authority for practice, then the church becomes an idol.

Why are young people leaving the church? Sometimes it is because we forget that the church was created by God for our good, rather than that the church created God. Young people see through idolatry in an instant, whether the idol is wealth, status, things, or the church.

Not the One and Only

Who are you? Or, as importantly, whose are you? A few years ago this might have been phrased, “Who’s your daddy?” The history of naming is a history of determining family ties.

Many surnames originally came from either a profession (Baker, Miller, Chandler) or a location (Forrest, Rivers, or something more specific). As surnames became more popular in distinguishing between people of the same given name (which John or Mary?), familial relationships became one determinant. This could have been specific to the parent. In Iceland, for instance, a child of Jon might be called by their given name and Jonsson or Jonsdottir. In Russian-speaking countries, the “middle name” will be the patronymic, such as Anastasia Nicolaevna Romanov or Alexei Nicolaivich Romanov. In many Western countries the family name may originate from a person farther back than the immediate parent. Thus we have Johnson as a name, whether the parent is John or Fred. Some countries have family names that refer back to some ancestral father (McSeverns, MacAdams) or grandfather (O’Hearn or O’Niall). Ancestry can be important to a person’s self-identification.

Some modern English translations of the Bible, including the New Living Translation or the New English Translation or the New International Version, seem to ignore the importance of belonging to a family, of bearing a family name. At least, this is true as it relates to their translation of the Greek word *monogeneis*. This word is a combination of the prefix *mono*, meaning only (monorail, monogamy, and monaural), and *geneis* meaning beginning or birth (Genesis, genealogy, and genetics). Literally, then, it means “only begotten,” as translated in the King James

Version and American Standard Version. In those versions Jesus is, according to the gospel of John, the only-begotten (son) of the Father. According to the versions mentioned earlier he is the “one and only” son of God. Does this really make a difference?

A person who is the only and natural-born son of a parent may not care which appellation you use. There are a number of people, though, to whom it would make a significant difference. Most people who adopt would never think of referring to a child by birth as “my one and only” child, especially not in front of the adopted child(ren). To do so would be a slap in the face. It would be like saying, “Yes, I adopted you, but not so that you could be my child.”

God does not treat us like that. Adoptions are not cheap. Adoption into God’s family cost a life. God is not going to say that he paid for an adoption with the blood of his only begotten son for no reason. Rather he says that through that adoption we have acceptance, redemption, and forgiveness of sins. (Eph 1:6-7) We are not as nothing, but are rather co-inheritors with the natural son.

For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together. (Rom 8:15-17)

If we be joint heirs, then the modern translations are wrong. Jesus is the only begotten, but he is not the one and only. We are siblings, pure and simple.

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