



Minutes With Messiah

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Concert or Worship?

It is Sunday; the day you always gather with others to worship. You are on vacation in an unfamiliar city, but you found a church in the phone book that looks promising. You drive up to the parking lot, and see a lot of people lined up at the door of the building. Since you are visiting here, you do what everyone else is doing; you fall into the back of the line. As you approach the door you see that there are people standing at the door, like ticket-takers at the theater. When you get to the door they tell you that the admission price is \$15. If you had prepaid online it would have only been \$12, and you would have priority seating. As it is, you pay \$15 per person and hope for a decent seat. When it is time to begin, everybody turns their attention to the stage (yes, it is a stage) where a moderately famous band starts singing their songs. After each song everyone applauds, and they introduce the next one. At some point a person (probably a band member) steps out and asks for further donations for a pet missionary cause. Then another band plays for a while. A preacher gets up and gives a short message, complete with multimedia experience. Some pyrotechnics go off and then a really big-name band comes out and performs. They might even ask you to sing along with some of their hits. Afterward, everyone files out, gets in their cars, and go home.

Sound more like a concert? Would you pay at the door, or turn around and find a different place? Is this what you expect from a Sunday worship assembly? This is exactly what to expect from some Christian entertainers when you go to their concert, only they don't call it a concert. Instead, it is a "worship experience."

Many people would stop at the door. They would willingly pay big money for a concert, especially for names like Chris Tomlin or TobyMac (don't forget your hearing protection). For the regular assembly of the church, however, they prefer the biblical model of collecting money; a free-will offering. "Let every one of you lay by him in store, as he has been prospered." (1 Cor 16:2) Setting a head-price of \$15 doesn't take ability to pay into account. "Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver." (2 Cor 9:7) Paul had a lot to say to the Corinthians about voluntary giving.

Suppose, though, that you do pay and get inside. Then comes the experience. Well, it does at least fit one definition of the word, something personally encountered. Higher on the list of definitions, however, is learning through participation. What is about to happen is an experience done to you, not necessarily one you participate in. Of course, that could be said about most sermons in any church today; but it is still hardly an experience in the active sense of the noun. The real question, though, is whether it is a "worship" experience. Somebody is worshipping, most likely. Most of the time, though, the audience is passive. When Paul gave instructions to the church about the public assembly, he generally advocated active participation. "Give attendance to public reading [of the scriptures]." (1 Tim 4:13) The whole passage from 1 Corinthians 12-14 is about the participatory teaching in the assembly. "Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord." (Eph 5:19) (Some try to take this verse out of the context of public assembly, but if you aren't assembled how can you speak to one another? The parallel passage in Col 3:16 refers to teaching one another, again implying active participation in the assembly.) Congregational singing appears to have been the norm, rather than the exception, among the early churches. If what the assembled church does is to be called worship, it clearly involves full participation of the congregation, not entertainment.

If you want to attend a concert, pay for a concert. If you want to attend a group worship, then it should be participatory worship, not passive listening. It should also not involve an admission fee. If you paid for a "worship experience" and got a concert with some preaching, maybe you should ask for your money back.

Contents

Concert or Worship?	1
Afikomen	2
Homecoming	4

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Afikomen

A part of the Passover *Seder*, the order of the meal that begins the holiday (which begins at sunset on April 10 in 2017), is the tradition of the *afikomen*. Among a number of items set on the Seder table, one finds three (or two in some traditions) pieces of matzah, or unleavened bread. At the portion of the evening's readings when discussing the departure from Egypt, the middle (or lower, if two) piece of matzah is broken and the larger portion is set aside in a bag or cloth. The best-known tradition is for the parents to hide this piece, known as the *afikomen* until the appropriate time at which the children search for it. The person who finds it is rewarded with a coin. The Talmud explains that the tradition of hiding the *afikomen* is primarily to keep the children awake through a long evening.

Nobody is even sure of the origin of the term for this piece of matzah. Some think it is from the Greek for "hidden," which it is whether searched for or not. Other say it is from Hebrew, meaning food after dinner. The name is as mysterious as the tradition. The Talmud says that nothing should be eaten after the Passover lamb, and yet this is the final course of the meal. Some argue that the matzah symbolically replaces the lamb since the destruction of the Temple by the Romans. Other say

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pagans went out partying after a special meal, and by making this the last thing eaten on the holiday, that prevents wild, drunken orgies. Although the practice of the *afikomen* is extrabiblical, nevertheless we can learn some biblical truths therefrom.

Unleavened

The use of unleavened bread is mandated in Torah. The Israelites were to be prepared to leave Egypt on a moment's notice, and did not have time to prepare leavened bread. "And the people took their dough before it was leavened, their kneadingtroughs being bound up in their clothes upon their shoulders." (Ex 12:34) That is possibly the reason for the mandate, even though Moses commanded them about the holiday of unleavened bread before they actually left Egypt.

Seven days shall ye eat unleavened bread; even the first day ye shall put away leaven out of your houses: for whosoever eateth leavened bread from the first day until the seventh day, that soul shall be cut off from Israel. (Ex 12:15)

It is because of this command that the unleavened bread is mentioned at the point in the *Seder* that talks about the departure. It is at this time that, centuries later, the tradition of the *afikomen* was introduced.

Long before July 4 in America, Passover was the holiday of freedom. That freedom is, in part, symbolized by the matzah, and particularly the *afikomen*. Many of the other trappings of Passover relate to that freedom. The lamb is the meat that they often were not able to eat in slavery, even though it was their job to look after the sheep. Reclining at table was a privilege of the free, not the slave. The four cups have their own symbolism. But it is the unleavened bread that is most specifically related to the exodus from slavery itself. It was unleavened because of the suddenness of their flight. They had been watching the plagues for (some say) up to two years. They had seen the Pharaoh deny them their freedom many times. Many probably didn't expect even this last plague to change his mind. (And if they hadn't left with their kneadingtroughs on their shoulders, he would have changed his mind again—and did.) They heard the command to go, and they left in a hurry. No waiting for regular bread. No, it was tortillas and green chiles for them. Well, maybe not the green chile. Unleavened bread shows how badly they wanted their freedom, and how quickly they acted to achieve it.

That part of this unleavened bread is broken and saved for later also shows that there is a later. Freedom was not short-lived, even though the Pharaoh tried to make it so. The symbolism of saving some for a future time, even just later that same evening, should not be lost. Because it was "with a strong hand hath the LORD brought thee out of Egypt," (Ex 13:9) they could trust that the new-found freedom would last.

Hidden

Whether a search is made or not, the *afikomen* is, as its name may imply, hidden. The leader of the *Seder* hides it in a napkin or a bag. In some traditions, he merely sets it aside in that condition. In others, the children (or adults) are made to look for it elsewhere.

With God there are secret or hidden things, and things he has revealed. The Law was revealed at Sinai.

The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to

our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law. (Deut 29:29)

God chooses when to reveal and when to conceal. Much of what the prophets had to say was actually the concealed word, rather than the revealed word. It may have been intended to reveal, but they would not hear, and so it remained hidden.

Who is blind, but my servant? or deaf, as my messenger that I sent? who is blind as he that is perfect, and blind as the LORD'S servant? Seeing many things, but thou observest not; opening the ears, but he heareth not. (Isa 42:19-20)

Years after Isaiah said this, a certain Teacher explained why he taught in parables, quoting Isaiah. The word of God, he said, was for those who would accept it, but hidden from those who would not listen or observe.

Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand. And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias, which saith, By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive: For this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them. But blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear. For verily I say unto you, That many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them. (Matt 13:13-17)

Among the things that were hidden from those who would not accept it was the grace of God to those who were not Jewish. God's grace to the gentiles was revealed long before in the book of Jonah. It was more fully revealed in the person of Jesus.

Which [grace unto the gentiles] in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit; That the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel. (Eph 3:5-6)

Redeemed

In those traditions in which the *afikomen* is hidden and then sought, the final act of the game is the redemption. The person who finds it is given a coin or a piece of candy to redeem (buy back) the piece of unleavened bread.

Wherefore say unto the children of Israel, I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will rid you out of

their bondage, and I will redeem you with a stretched out arm, and with great judgments. (Ex 6:6)

Years before, God had sold his people into slavery in Egypt. It was not necessarily for any wrongdoing on their part; it was rather to build them into a great nation. At the appropriate time, God would redeem his people, bring them out of bondage, and establish them on the land he had promised to Abraham. Just as part of the unleavened bread of Passover is hidden, it is also later revealed and redeemed. For Passover, the symbolism is unmistakable. Joseph did not know why he was sold into slavery. His father and brothers did not know why they traveled to Egypt. It was hidden from them. At the right time, it was revealed to Moses. Redemption was a glorious thing.

In the same way, we cannot understand everything even about ourselves. We have a propensity to sin. Some say it is the sin itself that is inherited from Adam; most

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would say it is the inclination to sin. Either way, we sin. We are sold into slavery. But redemption is promised.

I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death: O death, I will be thy plagues; O grave, I will be thy destruction: repentance shall be hid from mine eyes. (Hos 13:14; quoted in 1 Corinthians 14:54-55 as "Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?")

This redemption is much more than the exodus from Egypt. The Israelites had a redemption, but it was from physical slavery. There is a redemption from the slavery of sin.

[God] hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son: In whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins. (Col 1:13-14)

Even, or especially, for believers in Yeshua as the Messiah, the unleavened bread, and especially the *afikomen*, has great significance. For those believers, it symbolizes a sudden exodus from the former life of sin, the plan of God revealed in these last days, the redeemer who is the culmination of that plan. In that way, we, too, may celebrate the Passover. And in a sense, we do when we eat the unleavened bread in communion with Christ and with each other.

Homecoming

♩ = 72

I'm go-ing to home-com-ing. Please go with me? Home-com-ing in heav-en; What fun it will be.
I'm go-ing to home-com-ing. Please go with me? Home-com-ing in heav-en; What fun it will be.

It's not a bore at home-com-ing. Joy is in store at home-com-ing. We'll be with friends Where
We'll have some fun at home-com-ing; Be with the Son at home-com-ing. E - ter - nal - ly In

no-thing of-fends. And love nev-er ends, at home-com-ing.
heav-en we'll be; And God we will see At home-com-ing.

This song was written for Spiritual Explosion XVII, the seventeenth annual iteration of a youth rally at Riverside church of Christ in Albuquerque, NM. This year the event will be April 28-30. The theme, if you couldn't already figure it out, is Homecoming. I asked some high school students what homecoming meant to them. I incorporated some of their responses in this song.

Timothy J. O'Hearn
737 Monell Dr NE
Albuquerque NM 87123