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CHRISTMUKKAH

There used to be a staple of newspaper comics pages where two seemingly identical pictures were placed side-to-side and the reader was asked to find ten differences between the two. Some of the discrepancies were easy (a person wearing or not wearing a hat), and some were a little harder (three stripes on a cat's tail versus two). The Sesame Street version shows three things that are in some way alike and one thing that doesn't belong. Another variation can be found in some variety puzzle magazines. Along with crosswords and cryptoquizzes there might be a page with ten seemingly similar pictures and the reader is asked which two are identical. Each of eight options may have some minor, or occasionally major, difference from the two that match. To make it interesting the differences are often very subtle.

An even more interesting variation might be to take two apparently different things and ask how they are the same, and how different in their sameness. For instance, what do Christmas and Hanukkah have in common, and how are these commonalities different?

One obvious answer would be that they are both celebrated in or near December. Hanukkah begins on 25 Kislev in the Jewish calendar (the evening of December 2, 2018) and lasts for seven days. Christmas is always December 25 (Gregorian calendar). It is true that they are not identical in that one lasts for seven nights and the other just one. Another difference about the similar dates is a little more subtle. Hanukkah celebrates the rededication of the Temple after it had been profaned by the Greeks. This dedication, and the supposed miracle that happened, took place historically on 25 Kislev and the nights following. On the other hand, Christmas is celebrated on an arbitrary date that has nothing to do with the actual event being celebrated. According to hints in the Bible, Jesus was probably born in March/April or September/October. (For a detailed analysis of this, see "An Age Old Argument" in *Minutes With Messiah*, December 2008.) The most common explanation is that Christmas was placed a couple of days after the Roman Saturnalia to allow gentiles to still celebrate a common holiday but make it about Jesus.

Both are extrabiblical holidays. Hanukkah was ordained by the rabbis and is not found in Leviticus. It was established to celebrate events that happened after the

Hebrew Bible was completed. While the events that precipitated the holiday may have been predicted by Daniel, the revolt against the Greeks is recorded in the books of the Maccabees, which neither Jews nor most Christians accept as inspired. Orthodox churches and Roman Catholics include those books in the canon, although there are some problems concerning inspiration. Christmas, on the other hand, has no equivalent in the Bible, even in questionable books. The earliest known celebration of Christmas was about 300 years after Jesus was crucified. In 245, Origen of Alexandria argued that in the Bible only pagans (Pharaoh, Herod) celebrated birthdays, while saints lamented the day of their birth. Having no authority in scripture, however, does not mean that people cannot celebrate. It just means they have no scriptural authority commanding them to do so.

Both holidays are celebrations of light. Although the "miracle of the oil" often associated with Hanukkah was not recorded until the holiday had been celebrated for about 300 years, it has always been a celebration of the rededication of the temple, which would have been highlighted by (pun intended) the relighting of the menorah. Because the lighting of the candles is to be a very public display, it is a holiday that proclaims to the world the light of Judaism. Jesus said, "I am the light of the world." (John 8:12) Christmas is, therefore, a celebration of that light. It is symbolized by a star, and candles have long played a major role in Christmas celebrations. Decorated Christmas trees had candles on them. The lighting of "*luminarias*" is a major part of Southwestern tradition.

Christmas and Hanukkah may sometimes seem at odds with each other. In modern times there is crossover between traditions, though. There may be no real value in comparing the two, but it can be fun. And fun is always of value.

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PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS

After the movie *Jaws* came out, a lot of people were afraid to go into the ocean. While it never has made much sense to have a swimming pool at a beachside hotel, the pools did a booming business that year. When somebody would point out that a person is more likely to die from a heart attack, a car accident, a lightning strike, or all of the above combined, the common response was, “Yes, but it is still possible.” There is often a huge difference between possibility and probability. The same could be said for the difference between proponents and opponents of the Calvinist doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints. It can be like those times when you are listening to two people arguing and realize that they are actually agreeing with each other, but they don’t seem to know it.

One person may say that they believe in “the security of the believer” (another phrase used for perseverance of the saints) and that “once saved, always saved,” while the other person says they believe in “the security of the believer” in that one can know they are going to heaven while still acknowledging the remote possibility that some believers may choose to “fall from

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grace.” Both are actually agreeing on the main point, while disagreeing on possibilities. Both may be right and wrong at the same time. The essential point of agreement is a truth, that one can know without a doubt that they are saved. The one may be wrong in denying the possibility of apostasy, while the other may be wrong in implying the probability of the same.

Perseverance of the Saints

It logically follows that if God elects some to salvation and others to reprobation, and if the saving power of the death of Jesus was only for the elect, and if that grace is absolutely effectual, then the ones elected to salvation cannot lose that salvation; otherwise man has the power to overpower God. This is a necessary outcome of Calvin’s (and Augustine’s) belief in specific and individual predestination. Of course, if any of those premises can be proven false (see the August through November 2018 issues of *Minutes With Messiah*) then the conclusion does not necessarily follow.

Calvin points to several scriptures to support the perseverance of the believer. Most particularly he points to quotations from Jesus himself. “All that the Father giveth me shall come to me, and him that comes to me I will in no wise cast out. ... This is the will of him that sent me, that of all which he has given me I should lose nothing; but should raise it up at the last day,” (John 6:37, 39) He also appeals to the letter of Paul to the Romans.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 8:35-39)

The Calvinist view may actually be restated, at least in part, as the “preservation” of the saints. While believers must persevere in the face of salvation even through death, the point is made more sure by the idea that God preserves saints in the faith. “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.” (Jn 10:27-28) No devil or man may pluck the elect out of the saving power of God.

Moreover, it cannot be doubted, that since Christ prays for all the elect, he asks the same thing for them as he asked for Peter—viz. that their faith fail not (Luke 22:32). Hence we infer, that there is no danger of their falling away, since the Son of God, who asks that their piety may prove constant, never meets with a refusal. What then did our Savior intend to teach us by this prayer, but just to confide, that whenever we are his our eternal salvation is secure? (Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book III, Chapter 24)

Essential to this doctrine is the idea that those who appear to have been believers but who have (apparently) fallen away were never among the elect in the first place. They merely appeared to men to be believers. (Since man is totally depraved, they must have had a hidden, selfish motive in appearing to do good.)

But it daily happens that those who seemed to belong to Christ revolt from him and fall away. ... This, indeed, is true; but it is equally true that such persons never adhered to Christ with that heartfelt confidence by which I say that the certainty of our election is established: “They went out from us,” says John, “but

they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would, no doubt, have continued with us," (1 John 2:19). I deny not that they have signs of calling similar to those given to the elect; but I do not at all admit that they have that sure confirmation of election which I desire believers to seek from the word of the gospel. (*Institutes*, III, 24)

If you were to ask the average Baptist about the various tenets of Calvinism, he might deny most. He might balk a little at the idea that God chooses some before they are born to be reprobate, although he might pay some lip service to the election of the saved. He might grant that some people do good for the sake of doing good. He might even say that Jesus died for everyone, though not everyone will take advantage of it. He might even deny that every specific incident in life is predestined by God. But he will steadfastly affirm a belief in the perseverance of believers. Official church doctrine might include everything else, but individual belief may not, except for this one doctrine.

The Biblical View

Almost nobody questions a doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life." (Rev 2:10) Many, though, will say the first phrase is an admonition, while the Calvinists would say it is a guarantee. It does not say, however, "You will be faithful unto death." It is an encouragement to do so, which would be meaningless if one had no choice but to be faithful. Believers must persevere, but may choose not to.

It is interesting that the Reformed churches will quote some of the same scriptures in support of their view as those who oppose it, such as Revelation 3:11 ("hold fast what you have") and Philippians 2:12 ("Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling"). This could indicate that the passages in question are open to interpretation and thus not suitable foundation for a whole doctrine. Alternatively, it could mean that one group (or the other) chooses to form the doctrine and then give a reading to the passages that conforms with that doctrine. To determine the truth one must approach the scriptures without preconception and with a view to learning God's truth rather than one's own.

For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, And have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, If they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame. (Heb 6:4-6)

This may be the most troubling passage to believers in the perseverance of the saints. Calvin does not explain this verse at all. Some of his followers use the explanation (to some a copout) that the people addressed

were never truly among the elect. They say he had heard the gospel (enlightened and tasted) but had not surrendered to it. They were partakers of the Holy Ghost only in that they had physically been baptized and taken the Lord's Supper, but were doing so for an ulterior motive. It is true that the word taste can imply only trying something; but it is also used for full participation, as in the phrase "tasted death." The writer of Hebrews uses the word partakers in a very specific way, speaking of the saints (Heb 3:1, 14; 12:8) It is a reach to believe that he or she would have used it in a different way only in this passage. Therefore, it must be concluded that these people were true believers who fell away.

Holding faith, and good conscience, which some having put away concerning faith have made shipwreck; of whom is Hymenaeus and Alexander; whom I have delivered unto Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme. (1 Tim 1:18-19)

Again, the Calvinists will argue that the men named had never been believers. Paul says these men had

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at one time held faith and good conscience, but had put them away. That sounds very much like Paul, through inspiration, is saying that they had truly been believers, but put their faith away.

A similar difference occurs in the "parable of the sower." (Matt 13:18-23) Calvinists argue that the rocky and thorny ground represent people who appeared to believe but never did. In Luke 8 Jesus says those on the rocky ground "for a while believe, and in time of temptation fall away." If Jesus says they had faith, who are we to argue.

How, then, do we reconcile the two views. The scriptures do not conflict with each other. If nobody can pluck the believers out of God's hand, not even those things listed in Romans 8, then how could one who has believed lose their salvation? The usual answer, which to the Calvinist sounds like a copout, is that none of these things can pluck the believer out of God's hand, but the believer can choose on his own to leave. It all hinges on the question of free will. Is God satisfied with a robotic response; are we mere computers running whichever program God chooses? Or does God allow us to make choices which may appear to thwart his own will? From the standpoint of a human parent, the latter seems preferable, even if it is more dangerous. From the standpoint of scripture, God gives people choice. And where there is choice, even the faithful may make the wrong one.

ANTISEMITISM

The November 2018 issue of Smithsonian Magazine contained a translation of a diary of a holocaust victim and articles about other young women killed by the Nazis for being Jewish. Perhaps coincidentally, if you believe in coincidences, the magazine hit homes in the mail the same day as the Tree of Life Synagogue shooting, in which eleven people (at the time of this writing) were killed during a synagogue assembly. This confluence of events serves to highlight the continuing nature of antisemitism at a time when anti-Jewish hate crimes have increased by 53% between 2016 and 2017. Whether it be the Holocaust, modern America, or the days of the Inquisition, anti-Jewish sentiment has been prevalent in the world for centuries. Nor is it limited to those who claim Christianity. Although the early writings that were compiled into Qur'an advocated peace with the "children of the Book" (Christians and Jews), by the end of Mohammed's life Islam had become militantly anti-Semitic and Anti-Christian. The attitude, though, goes well back into biblical times.

In spite of claims intended to garner the support of the uninformed, it would be hard to find a truly religious war. Although the wars were for other reasons, we do find a group of people who were unabashedly anti-Jewish. When the king of Assyria had deported most of the inhabitants of Israel he had replaced them with people from other lands. (2 Kings 17:24-29) Although even the Assyrian king had tried to make them follow Judaism they had their own gods. After they had lived on the land for about a century, the Jews who had been taken from Jerusalem to Babylon returned. They had the king's authority to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple, and to administer the whole land of Israel/Judea. "When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official

heard about this, they were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites." (Neh 2:10) This was partly economic, but this verse indicates it was prejudice as well.

Much Christian anti-Jewish sentiment goes back to, or at least is justified by, a statement recorded by Matthew. When Pilate claimed innocence in the execution of Jesus, the Jewish leaders said, "His blood be on us, and on our children." (Matt 27:25) Some people have extended that to read, "and our children's children, and their children ..." It is interesting that Matthew records this; you would expect it of the gentile, Mark. It is a very un-Jewish sentiment, considering that Ezekiel 18 says the son should not suffer guilt for the sin of the father. In any case, it is doubtful that the Jews who said this intended the guilt to extend forever. If one justifies hatred based on this verse, moreover, than that hatred should extend to all but two of the writers of the New Testament, and yet they are revered rather than reviled.

Perhaps our best source on our attitude toward the Jewish people is a Jewish man living as a Roman citizen and preaching to non-Jews. Paul's citizenship gave him a unique perspective, as did, on the other hand, his education as a Pharisee. If anyone should speak on antisemitism, it would be Paul. And what does he say? "Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved." (Rom 10:1) Indeed, the whole book of Romans was written to combat anti-Jewish sentiment among gentiles in the early church. This indicates that antisemitism was in the church very early, and Paul fought to nip it in the bud. Apparently he was not wholly successful. Nevertheless, Christians today should heed Paul's words, and weep at incidents like the Holocaust or more modern hate crimes.

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