# MINUTES WITH MESSIAH

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# God Is Still Resting

My idea of the ideal job is the one Li'l Abner Yokum had—professional mattress tester. Another ideal would be a job where you worked for a week, and then retired. I only know of one such job, however, and it's already taken. What is the job? Creator of the Universe. Of course, God already has that one all sewed up.

> And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made. And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it: because that in it he had rested from all his work which God created and made. (Gen 2:2-3)

The interesting thing about this passage is that the scriptures never say that God went back to work. His job as creator lasted six days; he rested on the seventh, and is still in retirement. Like some of us who have retired from one job, God still works. He just doesn't work at that job anymore. How could he? He had worked himself out of a job. There was nothing left to create, so he rested from creation.

We are different from God, in a way. There is something about us that makes us feel that we can't continue to rest. We must always be making things, or fixing things, or buying things. When we get a day or two off from work, we do all those things that we "didn't have time" to do the rest of the week. In the United States some have taken it to an extreme. They brag about working eighty hours a week, even if they don't get paid any more than if they had worked only forty. People fill every waking hour with doing something, and even rob the hours they should be sleeping to be doing even more.

Maybe we should learn from God. He spent six days in creative work. Then he rested. Then he told his people, the Jews, that they must rest at least one day out of every seven. On that seventh day, that Sabbath, they were to do no creative work. If God could rest from creation after six days, so could his people. The difference was that God is still in his seventh day, but man starts a new week in a regular cycle. The passage says that God made a day of rest holy *because* He had rested. One might even say that a day of rest is included in the mandate, "be ye holy for I am holy." (Lev 11:44, 45; 1 Pet 1:16)

Lest I be misunderstood, I am not saying that the Sabbath is binding on gentile Christians. Even though the passage quoted is from Genesis 1, God did not mandate the Sabbath until the Exodus. Even then, it was only required of the Jews. Never has God required a Sabbath of anyone except those who followed the Law of Moses. Sunday is not "the Christian Sabbath." To call it that is to minimize the Sabbath of the Jews, the Sabbath God did decree.

Even to the Jews the Sabbath was not a day of laying around the house listening to the radio, napping all day. What was forbidden was "creative work," anything that would be involved in making something. After all, that was what God rested from. He didn't shut down completely, and is not asleep. "He will not suffer thy foot to be moved: he that keepeth thee will not slumber. Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep." (Ps 121:3-4) He is awake and maintaining the world, protecting his people. He is just no longer creating anything. So even the Jews had responsibilities on the Sabbath, primarily the responsibility of renewing family relationships.

The Sabbath may not be binding on most Christians, but that doesn't mean it wouldn't be beneficial. If God felt the need to rest from creation, shouldn't we as well. After all, we are certainly not God. Maybe we don't have a mandated day of rest. On the other hand, in going beyond law to grace we should be doing it without a mandate. Even if it is just a few hours, or minutes, rather than a whole day, maybe we should listen as God says, "be ye rested, for I am rested."

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# The Traditions of the Elders

> And ye shall count unto you from the morrow after the sabbath, from the day that ye brought the sheaf of the wave offering; seven sabbaths shall be complete: Even unto the morrow after the seventh sabbath shall ye number fifty days; and ye shall offer a new meat offering unto the LORD. (Lev 23:15-16)

Last year in these pages ("When Is Pentecost?", May 2002) I discussed the argument between the Pharisees and the Sadducees about what "Sabbath" is meant in this passage. The Pharisees argued from the oral tradition of the sages that this meant *Shavuot* (Pentecost) was fifty days after *Pesach*/Passover. The Sadducees argued from the plain reading of the passage itself that *Shavuot* was fifty days after the Sabbath after *Pesach*, thus always coming on a Sunday. This argument dated from before the time of Jesus, and he probably knew of the sometimes heated discussions that arose from this basic disagreement. Obviously the Pharisees eventually won out, because this year Pentecost falls on Friday, June 6.

To the Sadducees, the only authority was what was written in the five Books of Moses.

There is more to this question than whether Peter's sermon in Acts 2 came on Sunday or Saturday. Even at the time the argument was current, the fundamental question concerned the validity of oral tradition. This has been a concern in the church for almost two centuries, and is still of vital importance. How much importance can we give, if any, to that which can claim to be handed down, orally or in writing, essentially from the first century? Can we practice anything in the church that can not be shown directly from scripture? Does tradition have any place in the church?

## The Position of the Sadducees

The Sadducees held the "conservative" view. They said that in all things, not just this question, the only authority was what was written in the five Books of Moses. The "Oral Law" handed down from Moses through the priests and rabbis held no authority. If it was not written in the Law, it was neither binding nor generally desired. They generally held to the verbal inspiration of the Pentateuch (Genesis through Deuteronomy) and that such inspiration ended with Moses.

As a result, the Sadducees rejected a number of doctrines held by most Jews during the first centuries either side of the birth of Jesus. Among such doctrines were the resurrection of the dead, and the existence of angels. "For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, neither angel, nor spirit: but the Pharisees confess both." (Acts 23:8)

This is essentially the view of most fundamentalist Christian churches, including most of the churches of Christ. The primary difference is that the Christian groups accept the whole of the scriptures that were also accepted by the Pharisees, and claim that inspiration continued through, but not beyond the first century. Thus, if it isn't found in the Bible (not including the Apocrypha) the church is not bound by it. Tradition has little or no place in our faith.

Among the doctrines denied by this position one would find Papal Infallibility (even when properly understood), the veneration of Mary, infant baptism, the use of musical instruments in worship, most church organization, and additional scriptures such as the Book of Mormon or the Qur'an (Koran). The general, and essentially valid, argument is that if one accepts anything not found directly in the scriptures then one can have no way of knowing which among contradictory "inspired" doctrines to accept. If, for instance, one accepts that the Holy Spirit still gives direct prophecy to men, which of the books earlier mentioned is correct? If the Latter Day Saints and the Muslims can not agree, then one or both can not be inspired by the same Spirit.

One of the basic teachings that came out of the Restoration Movement in nineteenth century America was that we can only bind as a requirement that for which we find a direct command in scripture, a necessary inference from scripture, or tradition of the apostles. In part as a reaction to the proliferation of Christian denominations that each appealed to a tradition of men, the Restoration preachers approached the view of the Sadducees in limiting the traditions that were acceptable.

## The Position of the Pharisees

The Pharisees, and most other sects, held that the scriptures included the Prophets and the Writings (the

Chronicles, the books of poetry, and the book of Daniel). Beyond that, certain practices and interpretations of the Law had been handed down orally since the time of Moses. This "Oral Law" held standing with the written Law. Some believed it was valid, but the written Law held more authority. Others said the Oral Law had equal, or in some instances, greater standing than the written Torah. In either case, the interpretations and decrees of the priests and rabbis were in some great degree binding on all Jews. Since these laws and rulings came down in an unbroken line from Moses, then (the Pharisees argued) obviously they have the authority of Moses behind them.

Today we hear the same argument by the Roman Catholic Church. The Popes go back in an unbroken line to Peter (though that would be a surprise to Peter—see "What Would Peter Say?", November 2000), so their rulings must have been authoritatively passed down. Ignore the fact that at one time there were two, or even three, properly elected Popes. Ignore that some Popes have ruled exactly opposite from some of their predecessors. Ignore, even, that historically the Popes of Rome were considered heretics by the older Greek church. The oral tradition is still, by this argument, valid.

Since Jesus was, in most things, the closest thing to a Pharisee without being one, it is interesting that he disagreed with them so strongly in the matter of the Oral Law. He accepted more than the Sadducees in that he acknowledged the validity of the Prophets and the Writings, yet he rejected the authority of man made traditions. "But he answered and said unto them, Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition?" (Matt 15:3) What Jesus here condemns is not tradition, *per se*, but elevating tradition over the word of God.

## The Position of Paul, the Pharisee

The apostle Paul was, to the end of his life, a Pharisee. He had been taught by one of the greatest rabbis of all time. Even after changing his life to follow the Messiah he claimed to be a Pharisee as far as his approach to the Law of Moses. (Acts 23:6) Perhaps because of that background, Paul taught that Christians should follow, at least on a limited basis, the tradition he taught. "Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ. Now I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in all things, and keep the traditions, as I delivered them to you." (1 Cor 11:1-2) "Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle." (2 Thes 2:15) "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us. For yourselves know how ye ought to follow us: for we behaved not ourselves disorderly among you; Neither did we eat any man's bread for nought; but wrought with labour and travail night and day, that we might not be chargeable to any of you." (2 Thes 3:6-8)

The passage from 1 Corinthians may indicate that the "traditions" of which Paul spoke were imitations of Christ. The passage from 2 Thessalonians 3, however, indicates a tradition that we have no direct record of Jesus saying anything about. In Galatians, Paul points out that he was taught directly by God, and had the same authority as the other apostles. But this still raises some questions about how much of Paul's authority, or anyone else's, we may consider as being a tradition as opposed to a direct command.

In answer to my original questions, it does appear that tradition has some place in the church. That tradition that we hold as binding may be limited to the traditions of the apostles themselves, and nothing beyond them. On the other hand, those who argue against congregational autonomy point out that the tradition of bishops over several congregations dates back to within two generations (possibly one) of the apostles, in spite of the scriptural teaching that each congregation was to have its own government. Other traditions, that few consider binding, give structure and continuity to our worship. We can not totally eliminate the "oral law" within the church. Some things have been passed down for generations, particularly in America, that make our assemblies what they are, even if they can not be found in the pages of scripture. Are they wrong, just because they are part of our "oral law?" Certainly not. They may be considered non-scriptural, but not unscriptural.

What Jesus here condemns is not tradition but elevating tradition over the word of God.

When is Pentecost/*Shavuot*? The Oral Torah won out on that. However, to most of us as Gentiles in the church, it doesn't really matter. We are not bound by that Law. And yet, we might still need to consider the arguments of both sides of the issue. Which was really right, the Pharisees or the Sadducees? Might they not have both been right, and wrong? That is why we need to study the written word of God; so that we may not fall into the traps that they experienced. "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)

# Pentimento

Anyone with a passing familiarity with the art world has probably heard of someone finding a painting by a famous artist under that of some relative unknown. Occasionally people have paid a bargain price for a painting that later turned out to be valuable because of a painting underneath. I even heard once of a painting by a well-known artist that had a painting of an equally well known but older artist underneath (which led to the question, which should we keep?). Such a painting, with another one underneath, is known as a pentimento.

There is a spiritual application to the concept, as well. For better or worse, we paint a picture with our lives. For some it may be like the Picture of Dorian Grey, which showed the debauchery of its model even though his body never showed his sins. For others it may not be as bad. Nevertheless, it is a picture marred here and there with the jarring brushstrokes of sin. No matter how well we try to paint our picture, sin grabs our hand and paints a broad stroke of color across the scene we have painted. "Therefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; so death passed upon all men, for all have sinned." (Rom 5:12) Sometimes nobody else sees what the brush has done; at other times it is known to everyone, except maybe ourselves.

This is where the concept of pentimento comes in. We are, at best, amateur painters. At worst we may be botching a "paint-by-number" canvas. God, on the other hand, sees only a canvas that he can paint on. He sees our poor efforts at painting, but He has a grander art in mind. He is willing to paint over our poor efforts and create the most valuable pentimento of all time.

Some painters use watercolors; others use caseins or oils. There are some artists who make their own paints from natural materials such as soil and plant pigments. God uses a natural paint, as well. He uses blood. Not just any blood, though. God paints over our sins with the blood of His own son. "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanses us from all sin." (1 Jn 1:7) "Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever." (Rev 1:6) The really strange thing is that instead of getting red, God's blood-based paint comes out white. "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool." (Isa 1:18)

My mother, the painter, taught me to prepare a canvas by laying down a base coat of white, then add the color. This is what God does for us. Over our sins he lays a base coat of white. Then we can try again to paint our picture. And if we mess up, he lays down another coat of white for us to paint over. When we mess up, God says the process is simple: "Repent, repaint."

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