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WILL I GO TO HELL?

Part of the Minutes With Messiah web site, in fact the part that gets the most visitors, is a question and answer section. I allow people to ask Bible related questions and then try to answer them from the Bible. Some people try to turn it into a “Dear Abby” style advice column, and I try to explain that they need to talk to a trained counselor. Others use it as a forum to preach their own pet doctrines to me. Among the legitimate questions, though, many take the form, “Will God punish me if...?” Some are more direct. “Will I go to hell if I...?” The end of the sentence usually has something to do with sex outside of marriage. They may also end with such things as smoking, drinking, being a man who wears his hair in braids, or any of a number similar things.

Most of the time I simply answer their direct concern. Occasionally I will preface my answer by addressing the underlying question. The following is the answer I would like to give.

Will you go to hell if you [hang wind chimes/don't give to the homeless guy on the street/don't go to church/etc.]? I don't know. You really haven't given me enough information.

I do know this. If you are old enough to be asking this question, then any sin you commit now is probably not going to cause you to go to hell. Chances are you have already sinned enough to merit God's eternal punishment.

How many sins does it take to merit that punishment? Just one. “I don't kill people, perjure myself in court, steal, or worship idols. What sin is that one?” It doesn't matter what sin it is, as long as it was your first one. All those others after sin number one are just icing on the cake. You get them for free, in a sense.

What it comes down to is this. If you have sinned, even once and regardless of the nature of the sin, God has to punish you for eternity. Sounds harsh? Consider who God is. He is so pure and holy that he cannot abide the least sin. His demand is, “Be ye holy, for I am holy.” (1 Pet 1:16)

Now you are going to ask, “then does that mean I might as well just keep sinning?” That is the way I play basketball. My philosophy is that if I am going to foul out it won't be on a simple touch. If I'm going to foul out I'm going to take somebody with me. (That is also why I

rarely play basketball.) The problem with that thinking is that it doesn't address the problem. Why enter the game thinking you are going to foul out? Instead of saying that you are going to hell anyway, why not find a way to heaven instead?

So now you say, “I want to go to heaven, but since I have all these free sins coming I might as well use them.” This is the “sow your wild oats” theory. It might work, if you know what day you are going to die. The danger of deathbed repentance is that you might not get that far. “Fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee.” (Lk 12:20) “Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come.” (Matt 24:42)

“So if one sin is enough to send me to hell, how do I get to heaven?” Now that is the idea. Instead of saying, “will I go to hell if,” how about thinking how to avoid it altogether? The amazing thing is that God wants to forgive you. In spite of your sin, God wants you to come back to him. He made it simple. He punished someone else for your sin; his own son died in your stead. Instead of asking how to get to hell, return to God on his terms. Believe that God will forgive you. Turn away from all appearance of sin—what the Bible calls repentance. “The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.” (2 Pet 3:9) Access that forgiveness through immersion (baptism), and walk in his way. “Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.” (Rom 6:3-4) Then you won't need to ask about hell or punishment. You will have another goal in mind.

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CORE VALUES

This month I exercise my editorial privilege. Normally I present three articles a month. Because of the nature and necessary length of this article I am using the space normally allotted to a third, shorter, article.

There has been much talk about “core values” over the past several years. Every organization is now defining its core values. For one it may be “honor, courage, commitment.” For another it is “people helping people; stewardship; integrity; honest, caring relationships; and totality of health.” Inspired Christian writers have several definitions of the Christian’s core values. Perhaps the best known is Paul’s statement to the Ephesians.

There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all. (Eph 4:4-6)

This is a time when some people are challenging these values. Some would rather omit one. Others seem to say that some are contradictory. Why did Paul include

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each of these? Are they really core to the Christian experience?

I don’t know if Paul had a set order in mind when he listed these values. If so, one would think he would have listed one God first. It is entirely possible that they are not listed in any given order of importance.

One Body

The first thing Paul mentions is one body. Clearly he is meaning one church. “And gave him to be the head over all things to the church, Which is his body.” (Eph 1:22-23) “Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular.” (1 Cor 12:27) In several other places Paul, particularly, refers to the church as the body of Christ. Therefore, the one church is a core value of Christianity.

Paul would never understand those who say, “Jesus yes, church no.” Those who consider the church as either optional or an afterthought would baffle the

apostle. There is no possibility of Jesus without the church. That would be as inconceivable as a living head without a body. Such an abomination may be a staple of horror movies, but is not the intent or creation of God.

The church is essential to Christ. Our head is in heaven but the body is what works for him on earth. But the church is just as essential for Christians. Each member complements (and hopefully compliments) each other. Much of the twelfth chapter of 1 Corinthians is a discussion of our need for the different talents of each other.

The writer of Hebrews understood how important the church, as a whole, is for the individual members. “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) We encourage each other when we assemble together. That is important in a world that increasingly denies the validity of our faith. In addition to the encouragement, though, is the teaching we experience. “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.” (Col 3:16) The body is fundamental to Christianity.

More than just the church, Paul emphasizes that there is one church. Among “progressive” (their term, not mine) congregations there is a movement toward offering full fellowship to anyone who claims faith in Christ. In the religious world there is a tendency to say that there are many ways to heaven, and everybody can choose the one most comfortable for them. The apostles of Jesus understood differently. In addition to what Paul says here, Peter claims “Neither is there salvation in any other [than Jesus].” (Acts 4:12) If there is salvation only in Jesus, and the church is his body, there can be only one church consisting of the saved. All others must be counterfeits. If a head without a body is an abomination, how much more so would be a single head with multiple bodies! Full fellowship in the one church must be granted to anyone who accepts all of these core values. It cannot be granted to anyone who rejects even one of them.

One hope of your calling

Someone might say that Christians have many hopes. We have the hope of eternal salvation, of heaven, and of blessings on earth. Paul is very specific here about what hope is essential. While these other hopes are good, the core value is one hope of your calling. What does this mean? How is it different from all other hopes?

One way it is different is that this hope looks backward. “Ye are called in one hope of your calling.” As Christians we have already been called. As the church we are the called out. So this hope is one that we had previously, not one we now have. Paul says all the called shared in that one hope.

Sometimes people ask, “what about those who never hear about Jesus?” Will God save those who never heard? I don’t judge what God will or won’t do. However, Paul says those who are the saved all had one hope of their calling. All anticipated their salvation through one hope. There is only one way to salvation. There is only one hope of our calling. Jesus said those who hunger and thirst after righteousness will be filled. (Matt 5:6) This may indicate that if someone is seeking God—has this one hope—then God will make a way for him to hear the gospel. Whether that be so or not, Paul said that one of the essentials is that we had one hope of our calling.

One faith

The word faith is used various ways in scripture. It may mean the trust each Christian has in Jesus. (Rom 3:26; Gal 2:16) It may mean the faith that Jesus exhibited in his life and death on earth. (Rom 3:22; Gal 2:16; Gal 3:22) It may mean faith in faith. (Matt 17:20; Lk 17:6) It also means a system of belief. “It was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.” (Jude 3) “In the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils.” (1 Tim 4:1) It is to this latter sense that Paul is referring here.

This idea is similar to that of one church. As there is one group of people who are called out of the world, so there is one body of doctrine for that church to follow. As there cannot be many bodies for one head, so there cannot be many creeds for the church. No individual has the right to his own belief just because he thinks it “ought to be this way.” If the Bible says otherwise, he removes himself from the one faith (If the Bible is truly silent about a matter, then he is at liberty to believe what he chooses.)

Whichever Judas (possibly the brother of Jesus) wrote the book that precedes the Revelation in most Bibles, he argues persuasively for the completeness and unity of “the faith.” The system of faith which God gave was so important to him that he changed what he intended to write in order to defend it. The idea that “the Bible can be interpreted many different ways” was anathema to him. He spoke in very strong language about those who would destroy the faith, the one faith.

There is but one guidebook on our path of life. There is one map of the road to heaven. That is the faith that is defined and refined in the Bible.

One immersion

Somehow many people insist on the other values mentioned, but omit water immersion as a core value. They may wish it away by saying Paul is talking about immersion in the Holy Spirit, although he repeatedly emphasizes immersion in water. They may make it optional, thus saying it has no place in this list. Or they may determine that it is essential, but not for the reasons given in the Bible. Of all these essentials that Paul lists, this is the least popular.

He is not talking about Holy Spirit immersion, because most Christians never have and never will experience that like the apostles and Cornelius. He is talking about the immersion (baptism) common to all Christians. This is the immersion in water that Peter says saves us. “Eight souls were saved by water. The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” (1 Pet 3:20-21)

If Paul is saying baptism is not essential to salvation, then he must be saying that faith, Jesus, God,

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and all these other things are not essential. In a list such as this, either everything holds the same weight or nothing holds any weight. Baptism must, therefore, be essential. But to what is it essential? Is it a necessary corollary to one’s salvation; or is it necessary in order to receive that salvation? Can one be saved, and then baptized? Or must one be baptized in order to be saved?

There is one immersion in water. It is essential. It is essential because without it one cannot have forgiveness of sin. (Acts 2:38; 22:16) Salvation is forgiveness of sin. One cannot be saved and later baptized, because that would mean one could be saved and not have forgiveness of sins.

(Please see “What is Salvation?” in the November 2004 issue, as well as articles in the January and February issues of 2001. They are available at www.minuteswithmessiah.com.)

One Lord, one Spirit, One God

These three core values seem to go together, though Paul may have had a purpose for putting them where he did in the list. They go together because of a long held doctrine of the Trinity.

While the doctrine of the Trinity is core to many Christian groups it has generally been a matter of

indifference to the churches of Christ. The actual relationship and nature of “the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit” is not clearly defined in scripture. Men like Barton W. Stone denied the doctrine of “three in one” that is commonly called the Trinity. Others, like Alexander Campbell, staunchly defended the classic doctrine. Most in the Restoration Movement chose to let that be a matter of individual conscience. Many reject the doctrine because in so doing they avoid the classic charge that Christians believe in three gods, rather than one.

Whether one accepts or rejects the doctrine of the Trinity, the separate doctrines of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all in Paul’s list of core values. Paul addresses them separately, but he clearly lists all three as essential to Christianity.

In the doctrine of one God, Paul addresses four different aspects. First is that God is Father of all. This is more than just an acknowledgement of the creative power of God. The deists of the eighteenth century believed in a God as creator, but further believed that he then ignored his creation. Paul posits a creator who cares for his creation. “What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?” (Ps 8:4) Then Paul addresses God’s sovereignty. He is above all. Jesus was placed “far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion.” (Eph 1:21) And yet even he is below God. “When all things shall be subdued unto him, then shall the Son also himself be subject unto him that put all things under him, that God may be all in all.” (1 Cor 15:28) God is even above the son whom he placed above all things. Furthermore, God is through all. To a world that believed each aspect of nature was inhabited and controlled by a different god, Paul preached one God in every aspect of the creation. Most importantly, he is in those who obey him. Apparently this is something different than the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, but Paul doesn’t explain the difference.

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There is one Son of God. In the face of the Gnostics, John liked to use the word (in the Greek) “only begotten.” All Christians are adopted by God. (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:5; Eph 1:5) Only Jesus is the direct, unadopted, “blood-related” son of God. As such, he fully has the characteristics and power of God. “Without him was not anything made that was made.” (Jn 1:2) He is creator and savior. Paul says he is one Lord. He shares God’s sovereignty, especially over those who are in his kingdom. Our allegiance is to the son of God. There can be no other Lord in the life of a Christian. “No servant can serve two masters.” (Lk 16:13) Our one master is the Christ, the son of the living God.

Lastly, though not so in Paul’s list or in our lives, there is one Spirit. As surely as we are called, there is one Spirit. In Ephesians 6:17 Paul says this Spirit is the word of God. If there is one God, there can be but one Spirit. Unlike the Roman god, Janus, our God is not two-faced. His word does not change with society, time, or any other power. The Holy Spirit is the same now and always. “If any preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed.” (Gal 1:9) When one has a new revelation that disagrees in any respect with the revealed, established word of God, it must not be from the Holy Spirit. When anyone denies that Jesus came in the flesh, it must not be from the Holy Spirit. When anyone denies God’s power to save whom he will, it must not be from the Holy Spirit.

These are the Christian’s core values. When anyone rejects any one of these, he must not be speaking from the Holy Spirit. When any leaves out any one of these values, whether immersion for forgiveness of sins or the Lordship of Jesus Christ or any other, he must necessarily reject them all. That leaves him without any value whatsoever. And nobody wants to be without value, or without values.