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WHO NEEDS TRADITION?

Every day on the way home from almost anywhere I pass a church marquee. Most days it has something new on it, so I have to read it daily. Often I agree with the short sayings on it. Sometimes I disagree, either because I misinterpret what the person who put up the sign is trying to say, or because their understandings differ from what I read in the Bible. I recently passed by and read one such sign which I know without a doubt does not agree with what the Bible has to say. It said, "Who needs tradition when you have the Holy Spirit?"

My first thought was probably that they had a different understanding of the Holy Spirit than I do. My second thought was that it did not matter how they understood the Holy Spirit. This quotation does not stand up to scripture, regardless.

There are times when tradition can be unnecessary, or even counterproductive. Any time tradition replaces the Holy Spirit, the word of God, then the tradition is bad. It may not be wrong, just improper. "Thus have ye made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition." (Matt 15:6) Is washing hands before eating wrong? Certainly not! Is helping to support your parents evil? Certainly not! These things were not wrong in and of themselves. It was only when they took precedence over, or served as an excuse for violating, God's law that they become wrong. When washing became more important than saving or sustaining a life it became wrong. When giving to the church became an excuse for not supporting parents, it became wrong.

There are other times when traditions are neither right nor wrong. In the United States Navy (and other navies) when a ship crosses the equator those who have not previously been so honored go through a ceremony to make them "honorable shellbacks." Without revealing too many details about this ceremony, I may say that it is full of tradition. From the green food to the trial by Davy Jones every aspect of the ceremony is touched by tradition. It has nothing to do with salvation, and nothing need violate any religious scruples. In the Navy this is an important and necessary tradition. The need for this tradition has nothing to do with the Holy Spirit. Whether a sailor has the Spirit or not, he needs the tradition.

More to the point, though, Paul told the Christians in Thessalonica that tradition in religion was necessary

and good. When faced with the question "Who needs tradition when you have the Holy Spirit," Paul would have answered, "You do." "Brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle." (2 Thes 2:15) Moreover, he says it is so important that we need to watch out for those who don't follow certain traditions. "Withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us." (2 Thes 3:6)

In the middle nineteenth century, some of those who led the movement to restore New Testament Christianity proposed that there were three sources for authority for anything religious. The three were specific command, necessary inference, and apostolic example. The commands are obvious. There has been much debate over what inferences from scripture are necessary or not. Most notably, there has been a century of argument over whether the command to sing necessarily eliminates the use of musical instruments. In that case, though, there is no doubt that apostolic example (tradition, if you will) demands that instruments not be used in the assembly of the church. In other cases, though, many will question to what extent apostolic example applies. Even though Paul specifically advocates following tradition where the Holy Spirit has not spoken, some go to great lengths to try to make even specific commands into mere tradition, and thus disregard them.

If that congregation truly believes their sign, why do they have the traditional church building, or assemble for the traditional Sunday worship? No, even with the Holy Spirit, we need tradition. The hard part is figuring out what is truly the tradition of the apostles, and what is our own.

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SYMBOLS TO THE SEVEN

Perhaps the most familiar part of the book of the Revelation, at least among those who oppose the doctrines of premillennialism, would probably be the letters to the seven churches of Asia. In most people's minds this is the least controversial and easiest section of the book to understand. That may be true; nevertheless there are even aspects of this section that include symbols that we often overlook.

Before looking at the seven churches, something must be said about the nature of the Revelation itself. It is in the genre of apocalyptic literature. That means that it is a book of symbols. Even what may appear literal is probably symbolic. Thus the seven churches, though literal, are most likely symbolic. Certain symbols may be, and in this case are, explained in the text. Many other symbols are not explained. In some cases we have lost, over the centuries, the meaning of the symbols. In all cases, there is a temptation to put modern interpretations to ancient symbols. At least one person has tried to prove that mention of a bear, for instance, represents Russia, or an eagle the United States. When taken in the context of other, similar, biblical books, the bear, for instance, is more likely symbolic of Alexandrian Greece, as it was in

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the book of Daniel. So any interpretation of the symbols of the Revelation must be viewed from a first century, or before, perspective. Wherein we do not know the meaning of the symbols, we must either show their meaning from other biblical writings or leave off the guesswork entirely.

I saw seven golden candlesticks; And in the midst of the seven candlesticks one like unto the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle. His head and his hairs were white like wool, as white as snow; and his eyes were as a flame of fire; And his feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace; and his voice as the sound of many waters. And he had in his right hand seven stars: and out of his mouth went a sharp twoedged sword: and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength. (Rev 1:12-16)

This paragraph is vital to understanding the next chapters of the book. The symbols here are repeated in the letters to the seven churches. The seven candlesticks (menorahs) represent seven congregations (v 20), like the menorah in the tabernacle of Israel. The stars, according to that same verse, are the messengers (angels) of the churches. Whether those are angels, as in heavenly beings, or preachers is uncertain. It could be either; it could be both. All we know is that they were messengers from God. Gold is symbolic of royalty. Think of the gold on the statue in Nebuchadnezzar's dream (Dan 2). White is traditionally a symbol of purity, but white hair symbolizes wisdom. In Ecclesiastes 12 it is a symbol of age. So the one amid the menorahs may be wise, but it is because he is older than time and purer than man. Fire is often a symbol of judgement and a two-edged sword is the word of God (Heb 4:12). Water is usually symbolic of mankind, but here it is a voice as many waters. This may mean that he speaks for man, or that his voice is louder than all mankind.

Ephesus

The letter to the church at Ephesus is addressed from the one who stands among the menorahs and holds the stars. Ephesus was one of the oldest churches in Asia Minor. It seemed to be Paul's favorite congregation. As the second largest city in the Roman Empire, Ephesus held a place of honor, and the church in that city held similar honor among the Kingdom of God. Yet they are addressed by one who stands among the churches and their messengers, not by one who holds them as higher than others. Because they had left their first love (Rev 2:4) they were no better and no worse than anyone else. Nevertheless, they will be rewarded with a taste of "the tree of life, which is in the midst of the garden of God." A church that has held preeminence, if they return to following and loving God, will be granted to return to their first prominence. They will, symbolically, return to the Garden of Eden.

Smyrna

One of the churches about which nothing negative is written, Smyrna is addressed by the eternal and resurrected one. These aspects of the Messiah are meant to give hope to a church undergoing trials. Jesus was tried, and crucified. But he arose from the grave to live eternally with God. Although undergoing severe trials, churches that endure like Smyrna have hope in the one who is their head. Because he lives, we live. The first death is sin. But those who remain in Christ need not fear "the lake which

burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death.” (Rev 21:8) They have no fear of further punishment for sin, because their sin is forgotten.

Pergamos

The church at Pergamos is addressed by the one with the word of God in his mouth. This congregation, or those congregations symbolized by it, began well, but then began listening to others. They followed a message which was not from God. The message is to repent or face the judgement of God’s word. When the writer of Hebrews compared the word of God to a sword, the context was unbelief. The idea was that the word divides between believers and doubters. So it is in Pergamos. Those who endure in the word are promised hidden manna. “For the bread of God is he which cometh down from heaven, and giveth life unto the world.” (Jn 6:31) Life in the Son follows those who follow the word. The letter also says they will be given a white stone with a new name. The meaning of the white stone is pure speculation. But we do know the meaning of a new name. They will be called the bride of God. (Isaiah 62:1-6)

Thyatira

He who has eyes like fire and feet like brass writes to the church at Thyatira. The obvious parallel is the one who speaks to Daniel in chapter 10 of that book. He is one who has power over nations; who fought with Persia and established Greece. In this church there are those who follow other gods, as did Jezebel. They need to remember what happened to her, and who foretold her death. Those who remain faithful to the God who controls nations will be given power over nations. They will remain in the eternal kingdom, rather than being broken in a temporary one. They will also be given the morning star. That phrase is only used of Jesus (Rev 22:16). Jesus, who has authority over his and all kingdoms, will grant his followers to rule with him.

Sardis

The letter to the church at Sardis is signed in the same way as that to Ephesus, the one who is among all churches equally. Apparently the congregation in Sardis had gained in prominence as Ephesus declined. And yet much of their reputation was only show. They looked good to men, but God called them a corpse. Yet those that had not totally died would be granted a white garment. They would maintain their purity in the midst of corruption. More importantly, their name would not be blotted out of the book of life. That is, they would not see the corruption of those among whom they lived. Most importantly, the Messiah would mention their name to God. We have name-droppers here on earth, but none like the ultimate name-dropper. In a church that had a name

but was dead, those who persevered would have fame before God, like the Ephesian church once had.

Philadelphia

The church at Philadelphia (not in Pennsylvania) was written to by the one who held the keys. Jesus claimed the authority of the key holder (Matt 16:16). He had the authority, and granted it to the apostles, to open the door to the kingdom, and to judge who would go free and who would remain imprisoned. When a city was under attack, the gatekeeper could maintain the safety, or he could give the city over to the attackers. The one who holds the keys tells the church at Philadelphia that they need not fear that the gate will be breached. To them he promises much. They will be pillars, upholding the truth. They will have the new name promised also to Pergamos, but also the names of God and the church (which is the New Jerusalem).

Laodicea

The Amen, the faithful witness, the beginning of creation. The church that has through the ages received the worst condemnations is addressed by the one who has the

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power to create in them all that is good. He is the “so be it” and the “that’s the way it is.” Even though they pretended to be what they were not, he has the power to make them what they could be. The one who was from the beginning promises those who come out from their pretence that they will be with him at the end. They will sit on God’s throne, because one went before them to show the way.

These seven churches are all the churches of all times (seven being a number of completeness in God). We are they and they are us. We are not one of them. We are all of them, with their faults and their glory. The symbols of the one who addresses them, and the promises of their rewards, are for the church today. They are not just our future; they are our past and present. We must listen to the symbols, because they are God’s word to his church. May we, with God’s help, get it right.

LIMITING GOD

Some people ask questions about God's power. Some are argumentative. "If God is so powerful can he create a rock so big even he can't move it?" Others are serious. "If God knows everything that is going to happen, then how can you say we have free will to change what God knows?" Still others spring from a curious mind. "How can God listen to all the prayers of all people at the same time?" Sometimes we tell people that God is all-powerful, all-knowing, all-present. But is he? Is he always?

Before you burn me as a heretic, be aware that the Bible says that there are times that God's power is limited. Not only that, sometimes we are the ones that limit him.

Sometimes God limits himself. Perhaps the prime example of this is forgiveness. Since God is, by definition, in all times, he must necessarily constantly experience every instance of sin. By being everywhere everywhen, how could he not be aware of every sin? And yet he, himself, says that he forgets sin. "For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more." (Jer 31:34, quoted in Heb 8:12; 10:17) God limits his own knowledge. Imagine, if you can, someone who sees everything and cannot forget anything. Such a person would eventually go crazy, and probably not take long in doing so. God, of course, has infinitely much more capacity to remember than we, but even he chooses to forget. That is how he can be a loving and merciful God while also being a just God. His justice is limited by his forgetfulness. We should thank God every day that he limits his own power to remember.

It is possible that this ability to forget also answers the problem of free will. If God knows it is going to happen, do the participants have any choice?

Yet few doctrines are so clearly taught in the Bible as the doctrine of free will. How, then, can God know everything and yet a person have free will to obey or disobey? God's ability to forget, or from our time perspective his ability not to see the future, may answer that dilemma. There are other options to answer that problem, but each involves God's choice to limit himself.

As important as God's ability to limit himself is the idea that we have the ability to limit God. One way would be the choices we make. More specifically, though, the scripture says we limit God by testing him. "Yea, they turned back and tempted God, and limited the Holy One of Israel." (Ps 78:41) The clear implication in the words of the psalmist is that we limit God by tempting or testing him. In the context, we may limit God's power by a lack of faith in that power. The Israelites limited God by forgetting what he had done for them in the wilderness. "And they were offended at him. And he could there do no mighty work, save that he laid his hands upon a few sick folk, and healed them." (Mk 6:3,5) The people who knew Jesus best limited his ability to perform miracles by their doubt. The passage does not say that he chose not to do miracles there; it says he could not.

It is wonderful for us that God chooses to limit himself through forgiveness. But consider; how much more could God do for us if we did not limit him? "Ye have not, because ye ask not." (Jas 4:2) Do we limit God by not believing enough to ask? Do we limit God's forgiveness because we don't believe he could possibly forgive what we have done? Ours is a God of power. When we remember that, he remains powerful. When we forget that, we limit ourselves because we limit God.

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