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FIFTY DAY PROBATE

Your rich uncle dies. You know you were left something in his will. Now what? You wait. Until the will is probated you can't touch that gold watch or Rolls Royce, or whatever he left you. You may not even know *what* he left you until a formal reading of the will or a letter from the lawyer.

Jesus died around Passover. He left a will, but there was a period of time when that will was still in probate. It lasted for fifty days. And we think lawyers are slow today. Seven weeks of probate before *Shavuos* (Pentecost). Granted this was an unusual probate, since the deceased was alive and could be consulted about the intent of his will, but God still held off the reading of the will for fifty days.

Why fifty days? The simple answer is that God had built in the fifty day probate period hundreds of years before. Nobody knew until Jesus died that this was God's intent those many years before. Nor was it the only time God had worked this way. It is believed that the great fish that swallowed Jonah was created at the beginning of the world just for that specific event. But why had God chosen fifty days so long ago. We cannot know the mind of God fully, but he leaves us some hints.

The people of Israel had been allowed to leave Egypt. They headed eastward, not knowing what was going to happen. Up to this point they had been given two laws: circumcision (which was actually a much older law) and Passover. A million people wandering in the desert with only these two laws, and a pillar of cloud/fire to follow. Why did God wait until Sinai to give them the tablets of the Law? Fifty days of wandering without even knowing what their purpose was, just that they were free (whatever that meant). During that fifty days God was preparing them for the giving of the Law, in essence the reading of the will. Within that seven weeks He took them to the brink of death, and then walked them through the Red Sea. He fed them with quails and with manna. God made bitter water sweet. And with Jethro's help God convinced Moses that a little delegation was a good thing. Had God given the Law when the Egyptians were still chasing the Israelites, they would not have been ready to say "we will do, and we will hear." The people needed a period of time to prepare and adjust their thinking from a slave mentality to the concept of a nation.

When Jesus died, even his closest companions were confused. They did not go about teaching the coming of the kingdom; they went fishing. They were not ready for the reading of the will, because they weren't even aware there was a will. Peter was depressed about denying his teacher three times in one night. John was busy getting Miriam, Jesus' mother, moved into his household. Thomas thought it was the end of the Grand Adventure. The other Simon was probably casting about for another Zionist leader to follow. Even after they realized that Jesus had risen from the dead, they were not ready. It took forty days to "open their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures." (Lk 24:25) This was followed by another ten days of uncertainty and prayer. Only then were they ready to read the will.

Pentecost celebrates the giving of the Law on Sinai. What better time to reveal the new and better covenant? Peter's depression had become boldness. Thomas was confident. Simon had a new cause of freedom. They had received final instructions from the testator, and were now ready to execute the will

And for this cause he is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance. For where a testament is, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator. For a testament is of force after men are dead: otherwise it is of no strength at all while the testator liveth. Whereupon neither the first testament was dedicated without blood. (Heb 9:15-18)

(Pentecost/*Shavuos* falls on May 27 in 2012.)

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A TRADITION OF PREACHING

At work I recently heard a description of two people and their attitude toward government regulations in the health insurance industry. One was described as believing that if the government did not specifically mention something in the regulations, the company was free to do it. The other, it was said, believed that if it was not in the regulations it was specifically forbidden. This is a pretty accurate description of church attitudes toward tradition. Some will say that if something is not specifically allowed or forbidden it is a tradition that should be discarded. Others say that traditions are fine as long as they are not specifically forbidden in the scriptures. Most people probably take a view somewhere between these two extremes, often changing where they stand based on whether the tradition being challenged is one they hold or not.

Tradition gives flesh to the bones of law, society, or scripture. Traditions are unavoidable because they make life simpler. Sometimes, though, they make life too simple, and that is where some people start leaning toward

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the stricter end of the spectrum. Some might say that traditions related to preaching and teaching in the church have reached that level.

Before discussing that thought more fully, perhaps the terms should be defined. Although there may be some exceptions, generally preaching, in the New Testament, is proclaiming the gospel to those who have not heard or not obeyed it. Generally the concept comes from two Greek words meaning to proclaim publicly (to herald) or to announce glad news (evangelize). Teaching, on the other hand, carries the idea of holding a discourse for the purpose of instruction. It is variously used in scripture to describe those who teach unbelievers and those who teach believers more fully. Preaching generally implies a more public proclamation, while teaching implies a more intimate setting. That is also the way we generally use the words today. In the Churches of Christ and many other groups, the preacher is hired primarily to make proclamations in a public (and usually large group) setting. Teachers are often volunteers who work in smaller classes to instruct and discuss in more detail about the scriptures.

Audience

Perhaps the most important change in the traditions of preaching relates to the audience. This is one area where we have adopted traditions primarily to become more comfortable.

In the scripture there is little, if any, evidence of a professional preacher in the modern sense. Paul, Philip, Barnabas, and Mark all had as their focus the proclamation of the gospel to those who had not yet obeyed the gospel. Their mission was primarily to those who were not yet in the church. There were times when they spoke specifically to those in the church—when Paul and Barnabas reported about their trip to the congregation in Antioch (Acts 14:27), and Paul addressed the Trojan church and the Ephesian elders (Acts 20)—but every indication is that these were exceptional events. When Paul did stay in one place for a year and a half, it does appear that he taught those who were recent converts as well (Acts 18:11), although he clearly spent much time also converting the unbelieving gentiles.

Compare with this the modern preacher. Whether by his own choice or that of the congregation, it has become traditional that the professional preacher spend the majority of his time preaching to, teaching, and counseling the congregation of believers. Because it is difficult, embarrassing, and sometimes dangerous, many preachers would rather be comfortable preparing two not-so-challenging sermons and a Bible class per week. It is much easier teaching those who already claim to believe what you believe than to challenge people to really change. Some have even expressed a personal distaste for the type of preaching found in the scriptures. We do have a class of preachers, commonly going by the designation of missionaries, whose principal purpose is converting lost souls; however these are usually sent somewhere away from the congregation that hired them. Rare is the congregation that has a man or men hired specifically for the purpose of local “mission” work. Perhaps this is the reason that church attendance is declining in the United States and increasing in Africa and Asia. Have we made our preachers comfortable as teachers, so they don’t attempt the work of increasing the numbers of believers?

Function

Or have we just given them too many responsibilities in the local congregation that they do not have time to teach outside the church? Perhaps the modern church has gotten so comfortable in doing little that they assign as many duties as possible to the preacher that are really the responsibility of the individual members, the

deacons, or the elders. Today's preaching schools have done many preachers a disservice by not including classes on accounting, taxes, and construction contracting.

Many preachers have been tasked with the details of planning and construction of a church building. Many preachers are given the task of keeping the congregations financial records (or, worse, doing self-employment taxes). These seem to be duties that would belong to the deacons.

Then they are expected to keep office hours on the off chance that someone will need counseling. How many people, even in the churches of Christ that have designated elders, would rather consult the preacher about problems with sin in their lives rather than going to the elders who are specifically assigned that task (Titus 1:9)? How much more so in those groups that do not designate elders but rather leave pastoral duties to the preacher?

Whether by design or tradition, preachers are given the jobs that scripturally belong to deacons or elders, often without giving them the titles. In some Christian denominations this has led to the elimination of elders, and sometimes deacons, altogether.

It is important to reiterate at this point that traditions are not wrong. If a congregation chooses to hire a man to teach the congregation publicly, that is their choice. Many congregations have several men, elders or not, who would be more than happy to fill the pulpit on a regular, unpaid basis. Some might be willing to accept pay, but at a lower rate than most congregations pay the full-time preacher. While the quality of the sermons might vary, in congregations with several men able to teach there would be little danger of getting the same perspective every week. Even if only one man were able to do this for part-time pay, how much more money might be made available for helping the poor and teaching the lost. Nevertheless, unless one is of the "if it doesn't say it you can't do it" end of the spectrum there is nothing that would prevent hiring the modern preacher.

Nor is there a requirement that a congregation hire a man specifically to teach the lost. In the early years of the church this was the principal duty of the preacher. Perhaps it still should be. Most congregations, even in the first century, did not hire the man who preached in their area. Paul received his support as he could get it, or worked for himself. Yet he told the Corinthian church, "If we have sown unto you spiritual things, is it a great thing if we shall reap your carnal things? If others be partakers of this power over you, are not we rather? Nevertheless we have not used this power; but suffer all things, lest we should hinder the gospel of Christ." (1 Cor 9:11-12) One who preached to increase the size of the church in a locality had the right to be supported by that church. If forty people are baptized in one week in a town in Texas, as happened recently when visited by a mission team, could not one man following the example of the preachers in the New Testament do that much in a year? If a church

is comfortable maintaining its own membership with minimal teaching of those outside the church, then the tradition of the modern preacher is the appropriate model. If they are concerned about the lost in their area, then perhaps the biblical model would be more appropriate. Some churches might even choose to combine both models and grow from within and without.

Women

There has been much controversy over the idea of women preachers. Part of that is an unwillingness by some to listen to God's word. Part of it is also based on traditions.

If the Bible were talking about the traditional pulpit preacher in an assembly of the church, then Paul makes it very clear that women cannot preach. "Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence." (1 Tim 2:11-12) Of the type of teaching that elders (who cannot be women) and others were doing in the early church, women were clearly not to be active

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participants. And so today a woman should not be hired as the traditional preacher, although she could be hired as a counselor, contractor, accountant, or many of the other functions of the modern preacher.

The Bible says nothing, however, that would forbid a woman from being a preacher in the sense the word is used in the Bible. This is one reason this article started out with a definition of terms, because this statement could be controversial in the context of tradition. A woman can preach, in the sense of publicly or privately teaching the lost. A woman could be hired as a "missionary" (local or foreign) as long as she stayed within the constraints of her job description. Lest some object, there is clear scriptural support for this position. "And he [Apollos] began to speak boldly in the synagogue: whom when Aquila and Priscilla had heard, they took him unto them, and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly." (Acts 18:26) Paul refers to Priscilla and Aquila (half the mentions list her first) as his companions in the work of preaching. (Rom 16:3) This was apparently a husband and wife preaching team, and both participated equally in teaching men and women. In the modern church Priscilla would be relegated to running the church library rather than the outreach ministry. And there is where comfort and tradition may be wrong.

SWORDSMITHING

I have a dagger, but it is purely decorative. The edge of its blade is extremely dull. I know another who possesses a very nice sword, which is also, unfortunately, quite dull. These blades do not have an edge for safety sake. Were they properly sharpened they would be extremely dangerous to have around. They are good to look at, but they do not serve the purpose for which they should be expected to have been made.

How often do we meet people who are just like those swords? They look quite nice, but have no practical use to God. Some of them may even think they are “good” people. They perform good deeds. They donate their money to important causes. Because they have never placed themselves in God’s hands we judge that they are merely decoration in this life. While I would like to see them become useful weapons for God, they are not the ones that scare me the most. Having no edge, they can do limited damage in the hands of the Adversary.

Everyone who has ever handled a weapon should know that the most important thing is that you keep it in working order. When I handle a sword on stage I don’t expect to cut anyone because I don’t sharpen the blade. But if I were to try to use a sword in a real life-or-death situation, I would want it to be sharp. God wants his weapons to be sharp. It doesn’t matter as much if the devil’s weapons are dull, but it matters a great deal if his are.

Making a proper sword is a long, painstaking process. The swordsmith must make the right kind of steel for the blade. Some smiths take as much as twenty tons of raw material to make one ton of properly carbonized steel. Then comes the process of forging. Heat is applied, but never to the point of melting the metal. The swordsmith

then hammers a piece of metal into the right shape, sometimes folding the metal and reshaping it many times. In fact, the more a blade is folded in forging, the more pure the steel. Different parts of the blade require different characteristics, and so may need to be forged more or less diligently. This folding and forging requires almost constant pounding with a hammer, frequent reheating, and more hammering. Finally the sword is reheated and then baptized. The hot blade is plunged into cold water to temper it. This is the point at which many swords are ruined because they break. Once this process is completed the blade is polished, in a multi-week process that further sharpens the edge.

God is a master swordsmith. He wants us to be flexible when struck, but able to maintain a sharp edge. He wants us to last through many a battle. To that end he wants to forge us. It is a painful process, that forging. We must be pounded and heated, and pounded again. Sometimes we may feel like we are merely being beaten up, but in fact God wants us to be beaten down. We can only become sharp if we let him work with us.

My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into various trials; Knowing that the trying of your faith works patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that you may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing. (Jas 1:2-4)

The problem with being forged into a weapon for God is that we have a choice. We can be forged, or we can sit around and just become decorative. Many Christians want to quit when God applies the heat and the hammer. Enduring the work of the swordsmith, however, makes us into the weapon God can wield to good effect. We will be both decorative and functional.