



Minutes With Messiah

Volume 18, Issue 11

Web Site: <http://www.minuteswithmessiah.com>

September 2017

DEAR DOCTOR LUKE

Dr. Luke,

Thank you for your recent letter asking about the Teacher's final day. I am surprised that you seem to be the only person interested in recording those events in detail. As you know, I have related to others my part in some of the main events of his life and death; but until now nobody has shown an interest in those final hours.

You are, I am sure, quite familiar with the events immediately after he came back from the dead. Those first few days have been extensively recorded, and I am sure John will have more to say when he gets around to telling his side of the story. Those accounts, however, only cover about a week of his final forty days, and the first week at that. Other than one sentence in Peter's account (your acquaintance Mark being his amanuensis), the events beyond that first week are pretty much ignored.

Yes, he told us to meet him in Galilee. We traveled there, learned much from him, and then went back to Jerusalem. Such travel took a big chunk out of those forty days. (And, of course, the Teacher even spent much of that travel time telling us things.)

(There was an incident by the side of the sea that directly affects Peter, and started some rumors about John. I think, though, you should talk to John about that, if he is willing to say anything.)

After we got back to Jerusalem we spent most of our days on the slopes of the Mount of Olives. The Teacher loved that place, although it probably held some troubling memories for him, what with Judas and the Roman gang. Of course, the Teacher was big into prophecy, so he was well aware of what Ezekiel said about the Mount of Olives. But I think he also liked it because of the privacy. Only a Sabbath journey from the capital, it was a peaceful place. Olive trees are unlike many others. They offer shade, but also frame marvelous views of the city and the mountains. And they make decent benches to sit on while teaching. It was a natural place for the Teacher to spend time.

And it was a natural place for the events of that day. I already mentioned Ezekiel. That was one reason. This was where he had been betrayed, so in a sense it was a place where the Teacher had been taken away from us

once already. And we had spent so much time here, not just in the past forty days, but in the past three years.

We thought we were just getting another lesson when the Teacher told us to wait in Jerusalem for the promise of the father. Not that we understood what he was talking about; we often didn't. "John immersed with water, but you will be immersed with the *Ruach ha Kodesh*, the Spirit of God, in just a few days." On the night he was betrayed, the Teacher had spoken of sending a Comforter. Was this the same thing? And not many days from now.

I think it must have been Simon who asked if the Teacher was going to restore the kingdom to Israel. He really hated that we were under Roman rule. The Teacher replied that knowing the times and the seasons was not our responsibility. Instead, when we had the *Ruach ha Kodesh*, we would be his witnesses in to the Jewish people, the half-Jews, and the rest of the world. You know, Dr. Luke, all about that last part.

We were expecting him to explain all this, when suddenly he began to rise. That is really the only way I can describe it. Not exactly flying, just being taken up into the clouds. After all that talk about power, I felt a little like Elisha watching Elijah being taken away, except this time there was no whirlwind. We were in such shock that we just stood there, staring into the clouds.

Suddenly, two men in white stood beside us. They asked why we kept staring upward. Then they told us the Teacher would come back the same way he left. In a way, that was a comfort to us, although we are still waiting. We will continue waiting.

Thanks for asking. I hope this helps.

(From Acts 1:1-11)

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TIME TO MOVE?

A friend recently attended a church because her children like the youth group there. This is a large congregation that fills two huge parking lots for multiple assemblies each Sunday. Their traffic attendants are generally respectful of traffic from surrounding locations. They play popular Christian music on the patio, and it can be heard over a block away. Several visitors have complained that they felt the assembly time was more of a show than worship. This friend complained about several things there. The music was too loud, and they refused to turn it down when she pointed out it was hurting her ears. One time she was running late and another time she left to go to the bathroom, and they locked the doors and told her she had to go to the “overflow” room, even though her family was in the auditorium holding a seat for her. She felt disrespected and unwanted. She doesn’t like going back to that church anymore. Perhaps this points out some reasons you can know you are going to the wrong church.

In fairness, I should say that I do not know many specifics about their doctrine. Like most “community churches,” they seem to be more closely aligned with Baptist doctrine without claiming to be Baptist. They may be teaching the gospel exactly as put forth in scripture, or

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they may not. The following points don’t judge their basic doctrine, or that of other congregations. These are more about what is practiced than what is preached. Nor is this about one congregation. This particular one is not alone in these failings, nor are all of them necessarily exemplified by this congregation.

Entertainment trumps edification

Entertainment is fun. Entertainment is good. Entertainment can even be educational, *a la* Sesame Street. It might even be that entertainment has a place in the church. But churches can get carried away with entertainment. Sometimes it is because entertainment may fill the seats. Sometimes it is because it is easier than actually teaching.

Entertainment may take many forms. Most commonly it is music, but it may come in other ways.

There is a man who paints portraits of the common idea of Jesus to contemporary spiritual songs. There may be a message that unfolds as he builds the painting, but it is not always clear, and he doesn’t explain it. There is a juggler for Jesus, who is quite talented and at least teaches as he juggles. Magicians, dancers, and comedians. All may be entertaining, and some may actually speak a clear message from the Bible. Others say nothing and leave one wondering what their talent actually communicated.

Churches have turned singing into entertainment. There was a time, a few centuries ago, that musical instruments were added to the a capella singing of the church. At first it was designed to help the congregation sing. An organ or piano may help with the melody, and especially with harmony. When J.S. Bach composed a whole new mass every week, the organ helped the chorus (by now not the full congregation) with unfamiliar music. As time went on, people started being entertained rather than just assisted. They let the professional singers form a chorus, accompanied by professional organists and, eventually, orchestras. The modern equivalent is the “worship leader” and the electronic band.

Studies show that fewer members of the congregation sing (on the whole) at each stage along the continuum from congregational vocal music to worship bands. All along the scale there are those who do not participate, but the percentage is greatest when the music moves into professional entertainment.

Part of this may be a function of volume. Even as non-instrumental congregations get larger, a greater percentage feels that they don’t need to sing. After all, their voices are no longer as vital to the congregational sound. When the decibel level gets into the “you need earplugs” range, most people feel that their input would be minimal, and even unheard. Sometimes even the band cannot be understood. (I went to a TobyMac concert where my son couldn’t even identify his favorite song from one of the supporting bands because the volume was unbearable. Interestingly, they seemed to turn it down for the headliner.)

What is the purpose of the assembly of the church? Is it entertainment? Is it something else? What do the scriptures say?

“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.” (Heb 10:24-25) The writer, while comparing the church to the priesthood, says that principal functions in the assembly include encouragement and exhortation.

And what about the singing, specifically? “Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and

spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord; Giving thanks.” (Eph 5:20-21) “Teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.” (Col 3:16) Part of our singing is directed toward God, but part is also directed toward each other. Everyone is a teacher, if they sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. Some people have abrogated their responsibilities to bands and worship groups. That may not in itself be wrong; we have done the same with professional preachers. When those bands cannot be understood, then they have gone from edification to entertainment. When bands (or even song leaders in a congregational setting) call attention to themselves rather than the teaching, they have become mere entertainers.

The preaching becomes an end in itself

With the advent of professional preachers whose main concentration is on the flock (taking away the responsibility of the elders) rather than on growing the flock (the work of an evangelist), preaching had become the centerpiece of the assembly. Unfortunately, we have all seen or heard of those men or women who have decided that they are the center, rather than their message.

Sometimes it is the congregation that elevates preaching for preaching’s sake. When a member comes late to the assembly and then leaves as soon as the sermon is over, that person gives a clear indication that the preaching is the sum total of what is important. I once attended a congregation that unintentionally gave that message. Because the sermon was being broadcast on the radio, the order of worship was one song, then the preaching (for precisely 28 minutes), more songs, and then the Lord’s Supper and the contribution, along with some prayers. The unwitting message, at least to the radio audience, was that the preaching was all that was important.

Because the preacher has a message for the congregation, it is good that he not be interrupted. Congregants should be reminded to silence their electronic devices. Conversations should be held to a necessary minimum, although sometimes it is good to explain things to a visitor or a child. Bathroom breaks should only be taken when absolutely necessary.

When a congregation locks the doors as soon as the sermon starts, and doesn’t allow someone to join their family (or especially their guests) if they had to leave the auditorium, then the sermon is no longer all about the message; it is about the process. When a congregation banishes the babies to a cry room, or the toddlers and developmentally disabled to a “training room,” they are giving the message that the message is less important than order. Children may be a distraction at times, but a congregation that says that children are only a disturbance may end up with parents that make sure their children go where they will be welcomed and loved.

A lot of churches have signs in front of the building giving the assembly times and maybe the church web site. Many of these also name their minister or preacher. While there is nothing wrong with that in itself, it is really unnecessary. If people are coming just for the preacher, they are coming for the wrong reason. If the preacher insists on his name being on the sign, then he is preaching for the wrong reason.

The individual doesn’t matter

In the incident where the person complained about the painful volume of the music, it is likely that she was not the only one who felt as she did. Whether that is true or not, the person who responded to her complaint essentially told her that she did not matter. The desires of the many outweigh the needs of the one.

“And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst

A congregation that believes children are a disturbance may end up with no children.

come.” (Rev 22:17) But only let him come if he is not going to upset the status quo. Only let him come if he is in complete agreement with how we do things. Don’t come as you are, but as we want you to be.

Somehow, it doesn’t appear that this is what the scriptures teach. What James said about the poor man applies to more than just dress and wealth.

For if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment; And ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool: Are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become evil-thinking judges? (Jas 2:2-4)

Every congregation will make mistakes. Until those grow into a pattern, they should not cause a person to want to move to a different church. There are times, though, when congregations show that people are less important than process; that entertainment is of more value than education or encouragement. When this becomes the pattern, then it may be a time for migration. Even worse, though, is that the mere appearance that the individual or the gospel is not important may cause people to turn away, and maybe turn others away, from what may truly be a gospel-teaching congregation. That is a serious responsibility to bear.

BREAD, APPLES, AND HONEY

There are a number of traditions associated with *Rosh Hashana*, which begins the evening of September 20 in 2017. Actually, almost every holiday, Jewish or Christian or otherwise, is accompanied by its own traditions. Since *Rosh Hashana* is a celebration of the new year, many of its traditions relate to that.

The rabbis hold that the holiday relates to the ultimate beginning, the sixth day of creation when man began to be. Although the Jewish people have multiple “new years,” this is the most significant, because it is the new year for man. As such, it is a time for a new beginning for mankind, just as January 1 is for those who use the Julian or Gregorian calendars.

Perhaps the best-known tradition for this holiday is the blowing of the *shofar*, of which a number of blasts are heard on this one day. I will not go into detail on that in this article, since I have written several articles about it in previous issues of *Minutes With Messiah* at this time of the year. Instead, I will concentrate on one of my favorite subjects: food.

The Code of Jewish Law lists a number of foods that should be eaten on the holiday. Among these are gourds (bringing to my mind pumpkin bread), cabbage or leeks, beets, and dates. These foods were chosen, apparently, because their Hebrew names sounded like Hebrew words appropriate to the holiday: proclaim, destroy, remove, and consume. The associated prayers ask that our enemies be destroyed, removed, and consumed. Another interpretation is that a new year is proclaimed, a time when our sins are cut off and removed far from us.

Better known at this time of year, though, are traditions involving bread, apples, and honey. These relate more directly, perhaps, to the holiday.

Bread is a staple of Jewish culture. It isn't a meal if no bread is eaten. For the Sabbath and most of the holidays, except Passover of course, the *challah* is a braided loaf of leavened bread. Traditionally, the *challah* on *Rosh Hashana* is round. An obvious reason for this is that the years are cyclical. One year ends, a new year begins. The designation of a new year is a somewhat arbitrary convention, as the years continue regardless of what day you choose to begin them. After all, *Rosh Hashana* falls on a different day than Chinese New Year, which is also not January 1. Logically, one would even expect the new year to begin on the first day of spring, or winter. This holiday also celebrates God as king of the universe (*melech ha olam* in many Jewish prayers). A king requires a crown, and the circlet of *challah* represents that crown.

The tradition of eating apples is a little more obscure, perhaps. The fall of the year is when they normally ripen, and so they might be appropriate to this holiday. This tradition looks back to the smell of apples as the dominant aroma of Eden (although the fig, rather than the apple, is the Jewish traditional “forbidden fruit”).

Apples and *challah* are dipped in honey. This is simply looking forward to a “sweet” new year. Honey is the traditional sweet, long before sugar candies. Growing up, I was never much of a honey person, although that has changed. In New Mexico, though, you can't avoid honey altogether. After all, the traditional dessert in a New Mexican restaurant is *sopaipillas* and honey. In this state we do have a long, although often secret, Jewish heritage. So maybe I will celebrate *Rosh Hashana* this year with *Sopas* and honey. Mix my Jewish and New Mexican heritages. Why not?

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