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Something worth thinking about...



By Joseph Tkach

Turning water into wine

The Gospel of John tells an interesting story near the beginning of Jesus' ministry: He went to a wedding and turned water into wine. Several aspects of this story that make it unusual:

It seems like a minor miracle, more like a magician's trick than the work of a Messiah. It prevented a little embarrassment, but didn't really address human suffering the way that Jesus' healings did. It was a private miracle—done without the knowledge of the main beneficiary—and yet it was a sign that revealed Jesus' glory (John 2:11).

The literary function is puzzling. John knew of many more miracles than he had room to write about, and yet he chose this one to begin his book. How does it help achieve John's purpose—to help us believe that Jesus is the Christ? (John 20:30-31). How does it show that he is the Messiah, rather than a magician (as the Jewish Talmud later claimed him to be)?

A wedding in Cana

We can start by examining the story in closer detail. It begins with a wedding in Cana, a small village in Galilee. The location does not seem to be important—what is important is that it was a wedding. Jesus did his first messianic sign at a wedding festival. Weddings were the biggest and most important celebrations among the Jewish people—the weeklong party signalled the social status of the new family in the community. Weddings were such joyous occasions that when people wanted to describe the blessings of the messianic age, they often used a wedding banquet as a metaphor. Jesus used the image of a wedding banquet to describe the kingdom of God in some of his parables.

Jesus often used miracles in the physical world to demonstrate spiritual truths. He healed people to show that he had the authority to forgive sin. He cursed a fig tree as a sign of coming judgment on the temple. He healed on the Sabbath to show his authority over the Sabbath. He raised people from the dead to show that

he is the resurrection and the life. He fed thousands to show that he is the bread of life. And here, he provided abundant blessings for a wedding to show that he is the one who will provide the messianic banquet of the kingdom of God.

When the wine was gone, Mary told Jesus about it, and he said, "Why do you involve me?" (v. 4). In other words, what does that have to do with me? "My time has not yet come." And yet, even though it was not yet time, Jesus did something. John signals here that what Jesus is doing is somehow ahead of its time. The messianic banquet is not yet here, and yet Jesus did something. The messianic age was beginning, long before it would arrive in its fullness. Mary expected him to do something, for she told the servants to do whatever Jesus said. Whether she expected a miracle, or a quick trip to the nearest wine market, we do not know.

Ceremonial water turned into wine

Now, it so happened that six stone water containers stood nearby, and they were not regular water jars, John tells us—they were the kind the Jews used for ceremonial washing. (For ceremonial cleansing, the Jews preferred water from stone containers rather than clay pots.) They held more than 20 gallons of water each—far too heavy for picking up and pouring. That's a lot of water, just for ceremonial washing. This must have been at the largest estate in Cana.

This seems to be a significant part of the story—that Jesus was going to transform some water used in Jewish ceremonies. This symbolized a transformation in Judaism, even the fulfilment of ceremonial washings. Imagine what would happen if guests wanted to wash their hands again—they would go to the water pots and find every one of them filled with wine! There would be no water for their ritual. The spiritual cleansing of Jesus' blood superseded ritual washings. Jesus has fulfilled the rituals and replaced them with something much better—himself.

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The servants filled the containers to the brim, John tells us (v. 7). How appropriate, for Jesus filled the rituals completely, rendering them obsolete. In the messianic age, no space is left for ritual washings. The servants drew some wine out and took it to the master of ceremonies, who then told the bridegroom, “Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now” (v. 10).

Why do you suppose that John records these words? Was it advice for future banquets? Was it merely to show that Jesus makes good wine? No, I think it is reported because it has symbolic significance. The Jews were like people who had been drinking wine (performing ritual washings) so long that they could not recognize when something better came along. When Mary said, “They have no more wine” (v. 3), it symbolized the fact that the Jews had no spiritual meaning left in their ceremonies. Jesus was bringing something new and something better.

Cleansing the temple

In keeping with this theme, John next tells us that Jesus drove merchants out of the temple courts. Commentators write pages about whether this temple-cleansing was the same as the one the other Gospels report at the end of Jesus’ ministry, or whether it was an additional one at the beginning. In either case, John reports it here because of the significance that it symbolizes.

John again puts the story in the context of Judaism: “It was almost time for the Jewish Passover” (v. 13). And Jesus found people selling animals and changing money—animals for sin offerings, fellowship offerings, and other sacrifices, and money that could be used to pay the temple taxes. So Jesus made a simple whip and drove them all out.

It is surprising that one man could drive all the merchants out. (Where are the temple police when you need them?) I suspect that the merchants knew that they should not be there, and I suspect that a lot of the common people didn’t want them there either—Jesus was simply expressing what the people already felt, and the merchants knew they were outnumbered. Josephus describes other occasions when the Jewish leaders tried to change the way things were done in the temple, and the people raised such an outcry that they had to stop.

Jesus did not object to people selling animals for sacrifice, or changing money for temple offerings. He said nothing about how much they were charging. His complaint was simply their location: They were turning the house of God into a house of merchandise (v. 16). They had turned the religion into a moneymaking scheme.

So the Jewish leaders didn’t arrest Jesus—they knew the people supported what he had done—but they did ask him what gave him the right to do this (v. 18). And Jesus said nothing about the inadequacies of the temple, but shifted the subject to something new: “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days” (v. 19).

Jesus was talking about his own body, but the Jewish leaders did not know that. They no doubt considered it a ridiculous answer, but still they did not arrest him. Jesus’ resurrection shows that he had the authority to cleanse the temple, and his words foreshadowed its destruction. When the leaders killed Jesus, they were also destroying the temple, for the death of Jesus brought all the sacrifices to obsolescence. And in three days Jesus was raised, and he built a new temple—his church.

And many people believed in Jesus, John tells us, because they saw his miraculous signs. (John 4:54 reports the “second” miraculous sign; this makes me think that the temple cleansing has been reported out of sequence because it is an advance indication of what the ministry of Jesus is about.) Jesus was going to bring about the end of the temple sacrificial system and the end of the rituals of cleansing—and the Jewish leaders were unwittingly going to help him by attempting to destroy the body of Jesus. But in three days everything would be changed from water to wine—from lifeless ritual to the best spiritual drink of all.

Bringing it closer to home

What do these two episodes have to teach us today? First, Christians might well wonder if certain of our traditions have outlived their usefulness and blinded us to new developments in what Christ wants us to do. It might be the holidays that we keep, or the way in which we keep them. It might be the way that churches are organized and governed. It might be unnecessary restrictions on who can do what. It might be attitudes toward evangelism.

But we can do well to ask if our traditions have become as meaningless as water, and whether Christ wants to transform them into something more stimulating. We can also ask about our attitudes about money. Has money become more important to us than our relationship with God? We can certainly ask this from a denominational perspective, or from a local church perspective as budget committees are being set up. And we can ask it from a personal perspective, whether we might be letting commerce take over time that should be used for the community and people of God. Do we allow shopping and banking to occupy space in our lives that ought to be devoted to worship? Both of these are worth thinking about.

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Don't just grow older... Grow up!



By Dexter H. Faulkner

Not everybody who grows old, grows up. There is a difference between age and maturity. Ideally the older we are, the more mature we should be; but all too often this is not the case.

What's the result? Problems in personal lives, on our jobs, in our homes and with people. Many of these problems are caused by a lack of maturity in some area.

The book of James was written to help us understand and attain spiritual maturity. "Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything!" (James 1:4). I like the way the Phillips translation puts it: "and you will find you have become men of mature character"—men and women of integrity with no weak spots.

As we read the epistle of James, we discover that these Christians were having problems in their personal lives and in their church fellowship. Members were competing for offices in the church, particularly teaching offices. Many weren't living what they professed to believe.

Furthermore, the tongue was a serious problem, even to the point of creating divisions.

Worldliness was another problem. Some were disobeying God's Word and were physically ill because of it.

Were their problems much different from those that beset us today?

Is not worldliness—the desire to get more and give less—something we all face? It seems that James was dealing with up-to-date matters.

All these problems have a common cause: spiritual immaturity.

Look at the problems James dealt with: showing impatience in time of trouble (1:1-4); talking but not living God's way (2:14); lacking control of the tongue

(3:5); fighting and coveting (4:1); collecting material things (5:1).

Sound familiar?

Here are a few questions we can ask ourselves:

- Am I becoming more patient in life's little tests and larger trials?
- Do I play with temptation or resist with God's help from the start?
- Do I find joy in God's way, or do I merely hear and read about it?
- Do I hold prejudices that Jesus doesn't?
- Do I control my tongue and my thoughts?
- Am I a peacemaker or a troublemaker?
- Am I close to God's ways or am I a friend of the world?
- Am I selfish when it comes to money?
- Am I unfaithful in paying my bills and taxes?
- Do I always go to God in prayer when I find myself in trouble?
- Do I criticize and gossip, or do I pray and put everything in God's hands?
- Do I pray for my enemies?

We could all add to the list. Just because we have been Christians for five, 10 or 20 years does not guarantee that we are spiritually mature. We all have room for growth.

Christ gives us a mandate in Matthew 5:48: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." That is, grow toward godly maturity in mind and character.

Don't just grow older... grow up!

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The Passover-Easter-Quartodeciman Controversy

By Ralph Orr

Early church history contains records of an obscure, but once quite heated controversy... The Quartodeciman controversy. (Quartodeciman refers to the 14th day of the month.)

It is sometimes called the Passover-Easter controversy. Others have called it the Easter controversy or the Paschal controversy. Perhaps it is not even fair to call it a controversy.

That some scholars refer to it as an Easter controversy is unfortunate, since Easter is an English word. Today the word implies, for most English-speakers, a host of cultural assumptions alien to the original controversy. The disputants in the Quartodeciman controversy did not use "Easter" to describe what they were arguing over. Therefore, to describe the Quartodeciman controversy as a Passover-Easter controversy can obscure the nature of the dispute rather than clarify it.

Focus on three events

The controversy involved three events:

- The controversy between Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, and Anicetus, the bishop of Rome, that occurred around 155 AD;
- The more heated controversy between Polycrates, the bishop of Ephesus, and Victor, the bishop of Rome, that broke out around 195 AD;
- The decree of Constantine following the Nicene Council in 325 AD.

Scholars disagree about the controversy's details. They do agree that its arguments revolved around whether the primary Christian spring festival should happen on Nisan 14 (the Passover day) or annually on a Sunday.

Eusebius is our primary source for the controversy between Polycarp and Anicetus. Polycarp knew the apostle John and was of such stature that many considered him John's spiritual, though not apostolic, successor in Asia Minor. Polycarp believed that Nisan 14 was the correct time for the spring festival, but Anicetus, bishop of Rome, favoured Sunday.

But what were some Christians doing on Nisan 14 and others doing on "Easter"? Were some observing the Passover as the only time for the Lord's Supper, while others were observing a pagan holiday? If so, how did each view the other?

A careful reading of the evidence shows that an annual Lord's Supper was not the issue, neither was Easter, or at least what we think of as Easter. No one

was arguing that the Lord's Supper should only be kept once a year. And no one was arguing over Easter bunnies and coloured eggs.

Furthermore, none of the Quartodecimans claimed that it was wrong to celebrate Jesus' resurrection. To the contrary, the evidence indicates that both Polycarp and Anicetus celebrated Jesus' resurrection. Polycarp's claim seems to have been that the best day to do so was on Nisan 14. Anicetus argued for Sunday.

What is more intriguing for us is that Polycarp claimed his practice came to him from the apostle John. In other words, Polycarp essentially argued that the practice of celebrating Jesus' resurrection on Nisan 14 was an apostolic practice, at least for the apostle John. His argument was not so much scriptural as it was traditional.

Eusebius, in his *Ecclesiastical History*, chapters 23 to 25, makes it plain that the Quartodeciman controversy involved in part when to celebrate Jesus' resurrection. He tells us that the churches in Asia Minor, focusing on the crucifixion as of primary importance, argued for Nisan 14 as the day to commemorate the entire story of Jesus' death, burial and resurrection. The church at Rome, focusing on the resurrection, argued that there was no need to depend on the Jewish calendar and that Sunday was the most appropriate day of all. Not about day of Jesus' resurrection.

No one in the Quartodeciman controversy argued over the actual day of the resurrection. This was not in dispute. When Rome said they memorialized the resurrection on Sunday, neither Polycarp nor anyone else argued that the resurrection wasn't on Sunday. The argument was not over the day of Jesus' resurrection, but over what day was most appropriate to commemorate it annually.

To resolve the dispute, Polycarp travelled to Rome. A since-lost letter by Irenaeus, quoted by Eusebius and others, tells us what happened. "When the blessed Polycarp was at Rome in the time of Anicetus, and they disagreed a little about certain other things, they immediately made peace with one another, not caring to quarrel over this matter. For neither could Anicetus persuade Polycarp not to observe what he had always observed with John, the disciple of our Lord, and the other apostles with whom he associated... Neither could Polycarp persuade Anicetus to observe it."

So what did they do with this impasse? Did Anicetus call Polycarp a Jew for commemorating the resurrection on the Passover? Did Polycarp call

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Anicetus a pagan, or one who had denied the faith for celebrating the resurrection on a Sunday? Did he accuse him of denying God's law? Not at all, both men decided they would not quarrel. They chose to live in peace.

What happened next we would have thought extraordinary. Irenaeus' letter records that Polycarp and Anicetus took the Lord's Supper together. It didn't matter to them what season or day it was. Taking the Lord's Supper together symbolically showed their unity in Christ. After this, "they parted from each other in peace."

We can be certain that this happened because Irenaeus' letter, written only a few decades after the original event, called on another bishop of Rome to repent and follow the well-known example of his predecessor.

A few decades later Polycrates and Victor did not get along nearly as well. The discussion began to degenerate. In anger, Victor excommunicated the Quartodeciman Polycrates and those who shared his views. Many bishops protested, such as the aforementioned Irenaeus, though they did not agree with the Quartodeciman position. Victor's attempted excommunication apparently failed.

By the 300s AD, the Quartodecimans were much less influential. Though the Nicene Council dealt primarily with the issue of the Word's eternal divinity, it also considered and rebuked the Quartodeciman position. Where once churches found unity despite their diversity, some types of diversity were now beginning to be seen as a threat to unity and not every diversity had proven healthy to the faith. The passage of several hundred years since John's death saw the church combat many heresies. As persecution became less of a problem, the church spent more time defining orthodoxy. The Nicene Council decreed that Christians should celebrate Jesus' resurrection on a Sunday.

After the Council's close, Emperor Constantine supported its judgment with a vile anti-Semitic attack against all Quartodecimans. He ordered a severe persecution of those who refused to comply.

Celebration of Christ's resurrection

In summary, the Quartodeciman controversy was not an Easter-Passover controversy, as we have framed those terms. The Roman church apparently did not initiate the celebration of Jesus' resurrection, as the Asian churches had no objection to this practice. Evidence indicates that they and the apostle John did the same.

"False Christians" at Rome were not rejecting God's law by substituting pagan festivals for God's Holy Days. There simply is no evidence that because they were anti-Semitic the early Roman church chose Sunday as the day of their celebration. Vehement anti-Semitism arose later. The record shows that they chose Sunday based on their understanding of when the Gospels said Jesus arose.

The issues that separated the Quartodecimans from other Christians were over the timing of their customs, not the value of the customs or the timing of the resurrection. Initially, those holding differing views considered each other Christian. They understood each other to be a part of the body of Christ. To display their unity they took the Lord's Supper together whatever the date.

It should go without saying that celebrating the foundational events of our faith, especially events having to do with Jesus' earthly ministry, is fitting. Celebrating his resurrection is the joyful response of believers to the message: "He is risen!"

It is not surprising that early Christians formalized such celebrations as a part of their annual cycle of worship. By contrast, those who argue over dates often miss the profound significance of the events being celebrated.

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Bible Study of Romans Chapter 12

Attitudes that please God

In his letter to the Romans, Paul has presented the gospel—from our need for divine rescue to the glorious future that Jesus Christ offers us. In chapter 12, Paul explains that the gospel has implications for the way we should treat one another. He begins with attitudes and principles rather than specific actions.

Living sacrifices

Paul begins with the word therefore, indicating that he is drawing a conclusion. *Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your proper worship as rational beings*

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(12:1). Since God is giving us mercy, we should submit ourselves to him.

Our bodies are to be given to God in worship—not to be killed, but as a living and continuous response to God. We are set apart for him, to serve him—and as we do his will, he is pleased.

A literal translation of the last clause says, “this is your reasonable service.” Sensible people respond to God’s mercy by serving him.

What does this involve? Paul explains: *Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind (v. 2)*. Our standard of behaviour is no longer the society around us. We do not just continue doing what we have always done. Rather, we are to change, and this change begins in the mind. It takes conscious effort—thinking about how God’s way is different from the world around us. *Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

After we stop looking to the world, we will see what God wants, and we will find that his way is better. His instructions are not arbitrary rules just to test our loyalty—they are to help us avoid causing pain for ourselves and for others.

Serving with our gifts

Paul first describes how the Roman Christians are to work together as a worship community: *For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you (v. 3)*. By grace, God authorized Paul to give commands, and this first command is a call to humility. Take a realistic look, Paul says. Whatever faith you have, has come from God. We have value only because God chooses to give us value; no one has any reason to boast.

For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others (vv. 4-5). Not only do various members have different functions, they also belong to each other. We have duties to each other; according to the way God has blessed us.

We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement (vv. 6-8). God has given us different abilities, so some people serve through words, and some through their hands. Those who prophesy should stick to the faith, not their own opinions, to strengthen, encourage, comfort and edify the church (1 Cor. 14:3-4). Each person should do what he or she does best.

For the next three gifts, Paul adds an adverb to emphasize the way we should serve: *If it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully (v. 8)*. Paul summarizes by saying, *Love must be sincere (v. 9)*. All service should be sincere—gifts should be motivated by generosity; mercy should be given joyfully.

Paul does not give these commands as requirements for salvation. Rather, these are what we should do after being saved, after God has shown us his mercy.

Harmony in the body of Christ

In verse 9 Paul begins to list some qualities that should characterize Christian love. He begins with a general principle: *Hate what is evil; cling to what is good*. Love is not a vague feeling, but it discerns the difference between good and bad.

He is focusing on attitudes within the Christian community: *Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves (v. 10)*. Most people struggle to get more honour, but as we imitate our Saviour, we should try to excel in humility and give more honour. Our status is secure in Christ, so we do not need to fight for it.

Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord (v. 11). Or as Paul says in Galatians 6:10, Do not grow weary in doing good. It’s not always easy or fun; we have to remember that we are serving God.

Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer (v. 12). When life is difficult, don’t give up hope—be patient and keep on praying, looking to God for a way to deal with the problems.

Share with God’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality (v. 13). Our possessions, like other gifts, should be used to serve others. Even if we don’t own a home, we can be hospitable. At church, for example, we can be hospitable by welcoming others, being easy to approach and willing to help.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse (v. 14). Most people want revenge, but that is a destructive approach. If we respond to people in the way that Christ has treated us, then we will respond with good rather than evil.

Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another (vv. 15-16). If other Christians are blessed, rejoice with them, rather than being jealous. If they are suffering, empathize with them rather than looking down on them.

Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not think you are superior (v. 16). Some Christians are in a high position; others are low—that has not changed. But those external

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matters are not the basis of a person's real value. If people are less fortunate than you, don't think less of them for it. Count them as an equal.

Responding to enemies

In verse 17, Paul returns to the way that we should respond to persecution or injustice: *Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone.* In other words, do not harbour grudges, and be sensitive to social values.

If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone (v. 18). We should do our best to avoid offence. Sometimes that means accepting restrictions on what we can do (1 Cor. 9:20). At other times, it is necessary to stand up for the truth of the gospel (Gal. 2:11).

Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I

*will repay," says the Lord (v. 19), quoting Deut. 32:35). Let God take care of whatever punishment is needed—that will stop the cycle of violence. Instead of vengeance, Paul assigns us a different job: *On the contrary, Paul says, If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head (v. 20, quoting Prov. 25:21-22).* Various suggestions have been made about why it might be good to put burning coals on someone's head, but the expression is probably figurative, meaning simply that if we treat our enemies well, they may blush with shame.*

Paul concludes the discussion by saying; *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good (v. 21).* That is the way of Christ. Evil cannot be beaten by more evil—it can be conquered only by good.

Michael Morrison

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Questions for application

- What steps can I take so that my mind is being conformed to God's will? (vv. 1-2)
- Am I using my abilities to serve others? (vv. 6-9)
- In what ways can I give honour to others? (v. 10)
- What social values do I need to pay more attention to? (v. 17)

Lessons from the Bible

The Gospel of Mark, LESSON 16: MARK 2:23-28

A Lesson About God's Love

One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grain fields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"

He answered, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions."

Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."

The consecrated bread consisted of 12 loaves placed on the golden table outside the most holy place in the tent of meeting. It was a special offering to God, and was set out fresh every Sabbath. It was to be eaten only by the high priest and his sons (Leviticus 24:5-9).

Nevertheless, in the absence of any other food, David and his men ate it (1 Samuel 21:1-6). Jesus cited this incident as an example of how rules, even God-given

ones, are not intended to take precedence over human need. In this way, Jesus tells us something important about divine rules: God made them, and he made them to serve humans, not to rule humans.

Love

In Jesus, God shows us that the core of authentic human life is love. The person who loves, Paul wrote, fulfils the law. We could say that the only reason the law of God exists is to point us toward the life of love.

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To love is to enter into the divine fellowship of the Holy Spirit, to dwell in the eternal love of the Father for the Son and of the Son for the Father.

People are more important than systems and programs. People are more important than rituals and religion. John wrote that if a person loves God, then that person will love his brother (1 John 4:20). William Barclay wrote: "The best way to worship God is to help men" (Gospel of Mark, *Revised Edition*, Saint Andrew Press, 1991, p. 64). It might be easy to think that loving God and loving one's neighbour are two different things. They are not. Our love for God is expressed precisely in how we treat others. If we are mean, hateful, cruel and inconsiderate of others, that is a demonstration of how devoted (or not devoted) we are to God.

God loves all people, even the ones we have no use for, and the ones we treat as though they don't matter. When we behave poorly toward the people God loves, then we are behaving the same way toward God. God is interested in people, not in rituals for rituals' sake.

Sabbath

When it comes to the Sabbath, an idea has gotten around that the Sabbath is greater than God. Let me explain. It is as though God is the guardian or protector of the Sabbath, making sure that people keep the Sabbath holy, and finally awarding salvation only to those who are faithful Sabbath keepers. In other words, in this kind of thinking, the main thing is the Sabbath; God is the enforcer of the Sabbath. God made the Sabbath, then made himself subject to it, then made people subject to it.

Jesus cleared all such convoluted recipes off the dinner table. He made things plain: people were not made to be servants of the Sabbath; the Sabbath was made to be a servant of people. Furthermore, Jesus was not talking to or about all people. He was talking to first-century Jewish teachers of the law. And he was talking about Israel, the specific humans to whom God gave the Sabbath.

For Christians to assume that the Sabbath commandment is for Christians is to misunderstand the covenant between God and Israel. And for Christians to hold out the Sabbath, as a criterion of the truly faithful believers is to misunderstand the new covenant written on the hearts of all God's people, Jew and gentile alike.

Evangelism

The gospel declares God's love. It's interesting how carefully calculated step-by-step programs for evangelism seem to come and go, much like the latest fads in business and management.

Maybe one reason is that programs, by nature, are contrivances. They might work well for business endeavours, where advertising and manipulation of

emotions is crucial to selling a product. But the gospel is not a product; it is a declaration of God's love.

Love doesn't come by programs. It comes in its own way in its own time. It is strengthened and proven in the crucible of self-sacrifice, patience and forbearance. It cannot be explained; it can only be lived. It's something you live out, not something you evaluate on a scale of measurable outcomes. It's messy, not predictable. Sometimes it hurts, sometimes it thrills. It's never static. It doesn't play by the rules; the rules can't keep up.

The main reason most people come to church and keep coming to church and become believers is the same today as it was 2,000 years ago—they meet people who like them and accept them and become their friends. Programs don't do it—love does it.

New command

Jesus gave a new command to his disciples: "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34-35).

That's a novel thought in our highly organized, programmatic society. Suppose Christians were well known for being the kind of people anybody would enjoy having for a friend. Suppose they weren't known for being pushy and judgmental. Suppose they weren't known for well-rehearsed emotional spiels designed to press people into a so-called "decision for Christ."

Suppose they were genuine, caring and harmless people, who in the love of Christ loved others for who they are. Suppose they didn't make friends with people as part of some new evangelism program, but simply because faithful friendship is what Jesus Christ is all about.

Peter said we should always be ready to give an answer for the hope that lies within us (see 1 Peter 1:15). Paul said we should let our conversation always be full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that we may know how to answer everyone (see Colossians 4:6). Neither Peter nor Paul said we should press people to ask. Instead, we are told to live the life of love. We are to make no secret of our faith. But neither are we asked to push it on others.

The Holy Spirit moves people to ask. And the Holy Spirit works in us to give an answer that is "seasoned with salt" and full of "grace."

Some people call this kind of living "whole-life evangelism" or "relational evangelism" or "life-style evangelism," etc. But by giving it a name, we run the risk of turning it into a just another program.

Imagine a young man walking up to a young woman outside Lakeside Ice Cream Parlour and saying:

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“Excuse me. Do you know me? Well, I know you and I know you’re miserable and pathetic and need a great husband. I can fix all that. If you’ll just repeat after me these words, “I will marry you, and we’ll live happily ever after.”

She’d slap his face, of course, or call 000, or jab him someplace with her keys.

That’s not how good relationships start. Yet, something akin to that is how some Christians have been taught that a good relationship with Jesus Christ should begin. Thank God, he can and does clean up our messes and turn lemons into lemonade, but what makes us think that is how Jesus wants us to help people learn who he is for them?

Trust

Another word for what Jesus was confronting in this story is legalism. Legalism is incompatible with the gospel. Jesus Christ is who he is for us before we ever do anything. The gospel is the truth about the reconciliation God has already brought about in Jesus Christ (Colossians 1: 19-20). Jesus’ work of reconciliation doesn’t depend on us. If it did, we’d never be reconciled, for our faith and our behaviour are always substandard at best. God did what he did

in Christ because he loved us, not because we loved him first (1 John 4:19).

That’s why we can trust him for our salvation fully, from beginning to end. That is why we do not have to carry a burden of fear that our ever-present weakness in faith or behaviour is the crack in the hull that will sink our salvation.

Jesus Christ is Lord of the Sabbath. We rest in him, not in our own works. His love binds us to himself, and he loves us for no other reason than that he wants to! He makes us new in himself, only because he loves us and has chosen freely not to be without us. Paul wrote, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (2 Cor. 5:17).

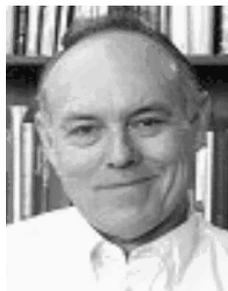
That’s good news. God has made people—including you and me—his priority. He loves us, and we can’t make him stop loving us. In that place of refuge, in the security of God’s endless love for us, we are free to make him our priority. Therein lie the unshakable peace, joy, and fullness of life we so crave. Therein lies our true rest.

J. Michael Feazell

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Book review

By Terry Akers



“Mere Christianity”

Clive Staples Lewis (1898-1963) was an intellectual giant of the last century and one of the most influential Christian writers of his day. The Oxford and Cambridge scholar wrote more than 30 books, achieving international acclaim for his contributions in literary criticism, children’s literature, fantasy literature and popular theology. His books continue to attract large numbers of new readers from the religious and secular worlds.

During World War II, when England’s national survival was threatened by Hitler’s bombs, C.S. “Jack” Lewis was invited by the British Broadcasting Corp. (BBC) to

give a series of radio lectures addressing the central issues of the Christian faith. These lectures were later published as three books and subsequently combined as *Mere Christianity* in 1952. This literary masterpiece has had an enormous effect on believers and nonbelievers alike with its forceful and rational case for Christianity.

Lewis’ original intent was simply to “explain and defend the belief that has been common to nearly all Christians at all times.” *Mere Christianity’s* vast appeal lies in its rejection of the boundaries that divide the church’s many denominations. Its uncompromising

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focus throughout is the centrality of Jesus Christ—his life, death, resurrection and the sending of the Holy Spirit.

The book makes a clear distinction between the essentials and nonessentials of historic Christian orthodoxy, re-focuses believers who have unwittingly drifted to the left or right and provides a powerful witness to those outside the faith. This book is a beautiful expression of the old Christian guiding principle, “In essentials unity, in nonessentials liberty, and in all things love.”

Despite his intellectual prowess, Lewis writes in an engaging style with wit and humour. Lewis, a converted atheist, establishes our common ground as believers in our faith in Jesus Christ. He pulls no punches when he speaks about the author and finisher of our salvation: “I am trying to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about him: ‘I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God...’”

“A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic ... or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was and is the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse.”

Mere Christianity was composed from the perspective of an educated layman in the Church of England during trying times. Writing as a professor of literature, not as a theologian or philosopher, Lewis is able to bring the bare essentials and some of the broader aspects of the faith to the ordinary person in a down-

to-earth and common sense way in terms they can easily understand.

Yet his intellectual and literary gifts add depth and substance to the thoughts contained in the book, making it the perfect launch pad for deeper theological study. Its brilliant biblical reflections and familiar style make it as current and relevant to the modern reader as it was to its original wartime radio audience.

This is a quote from Kathleen Norris’ Foreword to the HarperCollins edition: “Lewis seeks in *Mere Christianity* to help us see religion with fresh eyes, as a radical faith whose adherents might be likened to an underground group gathering in a war zone, a place where evil seems to have the upper hand, to hear messages of hope from the other side.”

This is an ideal book to share with inquiring friends who desire to know what Christians believe. It comes in economically priced paperback editions and makes an excellent resource for group discussion.

Mere Christianity has been used to make a dynamic statement for the faith for more than 50 years and continues to speak to new audiences in each generation. It is comprised of clear, concise, thought-provoking sentences in lucid, conversational prose.

Lewis’ logical arguments are eloquently expressed and are interspersed with imaginative illustrations to illuminate his points. He makes fine use of analogy and metaphor to help explain some of the deeper theological concepts. Overall, this Christian classic is a pleasure to read and serves as a splendid introduction to Christian theology and doctrine. It should not be missed.

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