

WHAT ABOUT THE BODY OF CHRIST?

WILL THE REAL JESUS PLEASE STAND UP!

PART IV

It was autumn and during the month of October when Jesus made the decision to return to Judea. You may remember that His healing of an invalid at the Pool of Bethesda on a Sabbath day and His subsequent claim to be divine had created such a firestorm that the religious establishment set itself to kill Him (John 5:1-18). So He had made a strategic retreat north to Galilee and taught people there. But His climactic hour was getting closer and closer now, and He knew it was time to return to face His accusers. He was rather secretive about His plan - keeping His intentions from His own family members (7:1-3).

The reason we know the time of year is because the Feast of Tabernacles or Festival of Booths was being celebrated. It is the third of the three annual pilgrim feasts of Judaism. It was timed to coincide with the fall harvest and was something akin to our Thanksgiving Day in that respect. Theologically it was a harkening back to the time when the ancestors of the celebrants lived in tents (i.e., tabernacles, booths) for 40 years with Moses in the wilderness. Typically there would have been no general rains like those of spring. Pools and cisterns were low. And the days were starting to grow shorter, with nighttime darkness coming earlier each day.

All these motifs came together in the festival observances. Families built lean-to shelters; the children loved it! Priests made a daily procession during the week-long event from the Pool of Siloam from whence they had drawn water to the temple where it would be poured out at the altar. They sang these words from Isaiah in the process: "With joy you will draw

water from the wells of salvation" (Isaiah 12:3). On the final day of the festival, torches were lit in the temple compound; the priests circled the altar seven times with the water from Siloam, and finally poured it out as an offering into a bowl set on the altar. Before He is through, Jesus will have picked up on all these constituents as symbols of His own identity and mission.

Midway of festival week, Jesus went to the temple and began to teach. **"The Jews were astonished at it, saying, 'How does this man have such learning, when he has never been taught?' (7:15).** They were saying, in effect, that they didn't have to listen to Jesus. He hasn't been to school. He doesn't have a doctorate in rabbinic studies. He doesn't have a mentor-rabbi to back Him up. **"Big deal!"** said Jesus. **"I am teaching on the authority of heaven itself, and all you have to do to know that what I'm saying is true is to think for yourselves. If the Law of Moses allows circumcision surgery on the sabbath, then surely it can't be wrong to heal someone's whole body on that holy day."**

If a man receives circumcision on the sabbath in order that the law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry with me because I healed a man's whole body on the sabbath? Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment (5:23-24).

Stymied by His a fortiori argument (i.e., if the lesser, then so much more the greater; note: this is commonly called "light and heavy" as a rabbinic form) about healing, they moved next to challenge His background - out of their ignorance both of Scripture and of Jesus Himself. **"We know where this man is from,"** they said, **"but when the Messiah comes, no one will know where he is from" (7:27).** Really? That was chimney-corner scripture of that day, but there is no such text in the Hebrew Bible! And did they really even know from whence He hailed? Hardly! When someone later cited the prophecy in Malachi that Messiah "comes from Bethlehem," they did so to prove that Jesus could not be the person because He was from Nazareth in Galilee (7:41-42, 52; cf. Mic. 5:2). Though raised in Nazareth, Jesus had indeed been born in Bethlehem of Judea in fulfillment of the prediction in Holy Scripture!

The people holding sway over that crowd on that day played on its gullibility. They warned and cajoled the people. They made

themselves sound believable by appealing to "the Word of God" and by passing along traditional beliefs that were altogether antithetical to the text of Scripture. They made practically everyone there skeptical of Jesus and moved them to vote to ban Him - when the very Water of Life, Heaven's Own H₂O, the Ultimate Thirst-Slaker - was standing in their midst!

To their credit, not everyone in the mob went with the prejudice and ignorance that prevailed that day. John informs us that some in the crowd had enough common sense to reason their way to faith by this simple process: "Yet many in the crowd believed in Him and were saying, 'When the Messiah comes, will he do more signs than this man has done?'" (7:31). Common - sense faith can still trump both unbelieving scholarship and uninformed prejudice.

The Gracious Offer

In spite of the context of unbelief and hostility at the festival, Jesus remained true to Himself. He acted out of His nature and mission, not out of the frustrating circumstances of that dismal moment.

On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, He cried out, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, 'Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.' "Now He said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified" (7:37-39).

The storm brewing over Jesus owes its awful, dark power to just this sort of thing. Against the purveyors of tradition-encrusted, ignorance-bounded, spirituality-vacuous, and death-dealing religion, Jesus offered something new, fresh, and invigorating.

God had given the ancient Israelites water in the desert centuries before, but it had to be given anew every day. Even so, the people who drank it ultimately died. The water that had been poured out that day at the temple altar was a community ritual whose significance as a reminder to look to God for satisfaction had, for the most part at least, been missed. Now Jesus was offering something more than a collective observance of an annual ritual. And it was not being offered to

people on the basis of their membership in a select group.

News services carried the story several years ago of a hospital in a city in the Midwest where it was discovered that its emergency firefighting equipment had never been connected to a supply source. For more than a quarter century, it had been relied upon for the safety of the patients and staff in case of an emergency. But it had never been hooked up to the city's water main. The big pipe that led from the building extended four feet into the ground - and just stopped.

It hadn't occurred to the hospital staff that anything could be wrong. Clearly marked cases held hoses in plain view. Brass valves were kept shiny. They assumed that if a blaze broke out, they could break the glass, stretch out a hose, turn the valve, and solve the problem. It was revealed to be a false security, for it lacked the most important thing of all - water.

There are denominations with beautiful cases with the glass covers, hoses, and brass hardware of church. There are clergy and budgets, ritual and prayers, history and heroes. **There's just no Living Water - no virgin-born, bodily-raised Savior and thus no gospel.** Other ministry groups can be just as guilty though. There are system and doctrine, rules and judgments, tradition and bluster. But there is no Living Water - just the dusty jars of institutional custom and control. A noble vision of the kingdom of God has been swapped for maintaining a hollow institution. As we've discussed in previous articles - Church membership doesn't save. Only Christ can do that.

"Let anyone (i.e., any individual among you) who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink," said Jesus. Such a personal, individual response of a seeking, trusting heart will meet the One who can satisfy its needs. Thus saved, the individual is permitted to be part of the larger community of seeking, trusting hearts in whom the Holy Spirit lives and through whom He acts in the world. The supply of life, power, and glory to the God supplied by His post-Pentecost presence is still available - and fresh.

I spoke earlier of a type of argument Jesus used to press His point against those who had criticized His healing activity on the Sabbath. The fact remains, however, that He ultimately presses them not to embrace arguments but mystery, not logic but Himself.

The artesian well created in believers by the Holy Spirit is not particularly logical. Oh, nothing about Christianity is irrational or nonsensical. But the deliverance, renewal, and joy Jesus Christ creates in once-thirsty, once-rebellious sinners is beyond logical categories. In logic, we cannot derive conclusions that are not somehow already embedded in the premises. As with mathematics, we cannot generate a sum greater than the total of its parts. In the matter of redemption, though, logic and human categories of understanding yield to the mysteries of imputed righteousness, spiritual power from the indwelling Spirit of God, and supernatural transformation into the likeness of Christ Himself. Something happens that is more significant than a logician's proof or a mathematician's problem-solving. Caterpillar-ugly sinners are metamorphosed into butterfly-lovely saints. That isn't logic; it is grace. It is a new creation in which the renewed whole is so much greater than the sum of its own parts (cf. II Corinthians 3:18; 5:17).

The generation waiting to hear the gospel today reminds me of the people Jesus faced at the Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem back in A.D. 29. They are more troubled by doubt than by guilt, more concerned to find meaning for their lives here than worried about life after death. Recent events in our world have shaken the confidence of many people that their psychological peace of mind had been secured by America's geographical refuge and economic security. Terrorism and recession have left those people wondering if there is something more - more secure, more satisfying, more fulfilling than our science, politics and money.

They are thirsty. They have drunk from the shallow wells of human design and are still thirsty. They need to drink Living Water - to have a personal relationship with God through Christ. And the bubbling spring of spiritual life through the presence of the Holy Spirit will evidence a continual stream of joy, peace and righteousness in their lives from that point forward. Their thirst will be satisfied.

Conclusion

We don't think much about it until we don't have it. On a hot day, nothing slakes a thirst so well. You can live for several weeks without food, but you can live only a few days - probably no more than four or five - without it. Water.

You can't live without Jesus either. He is the spiritual equivalent to your heart, soul and mind of water to your body!

In the Gospel of John, Jesus has already told a Samaritan woman He met by Jacob's Well this: "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water I give will become a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (John 4:13b-14). He has come back to that same motif here in chapter 7. And our writer John will close the final book of canonical Scripture with these words from Jesus: "Let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift" (Revelation 22:17b).