

“Ask the Pastor”

Abiding Peace Lutheran Church, Elgin, IL

February 27, 2011

1. Didn't Eve first sin by changing God's Word? He said, "Do not eat of the tree." She added, "do not touch it."

We have no indication in Scripture that Eve sinned by adding "and you must not touch it" to God's command. Might it have been sinful? Yes. But what positive construction can we put on what she said?

2. What is God's issue with yeast? Everything is unleavened.

God, of course, does not forbid the Israelites from ever using or coming into contact with yeast, but he does command the use of unleavened bread for certain occasions and even commands the people to get rid of all yeast at certain times (e.g., Exodus 13:7). God never says exactly why. In fact, he often doesn't explain the symbolism of rites and rituals, although it is likely that many of the people of that day understood the symbolism, even though it wasn't recorded in Scripture. Here are a couple of passages that give us hints about "God's issue with yeast":

Exodus 12:39, Deuteronomy 16:3, Matthew 16:11-12, 1 Corinthians 5:6-8

3. Why are the instructions on the tabernacle and its construction so detailed?

I don't think Scripture has an answer for us on this one. A few answers come to mind for me:

God didn't want any of the rich symbolism foreshadowing Christ lost.

God wants to teach us that no detail is too small, as we seek to glorify him.

God didn't want arguments on the building committee.

Other thoughts?

4. How could Joseph divorce Mary if they were not married?

"Mary was 'pledged to be married to Joseph' at the time. That pledge was more than was we commonly call engagement. It is likely that they had spoken vows of marriage in the presence of witnesses, and they were regarded as husband and wife. According to the custom of the time, the marriage celebration would follow some months later, and only then would the bride and groom begin their life together as one flesh." (G. Jerome Albrecht and Michael J. Albrecht, Matthew (People's Bible), p. 20).

5. Why, in Matthew 1, does the angel say, “You are to give him the name Jesus” and then the next paragraph “and they will call him Immanuel”?

Scripture has many different names for Jesus. “Jesus” is the name given to him by his parents and the name by which people would generally have called him. Many of the other names of Jesus are just descriptive titles. For example, my name is Tim, but people might call me “Pastor,” “Dad,” “Son,” “Brother,” “Friend,” and so on. It is good for us to pay attention to the names for Jesus, because they each teach us a little more about who he is. Use Matthew 1:21-23 to determine what the names “Jesus” and “Immanuel” teach us about him.

6. How many wise men were there, and when did they actually arrive in Bethlehem?

The term “Magi” in Matthew 2:1 is plural, so we know there were at least two. Beyond that, we cannot say. Why do you think it is often assumed that there were three?

We also don’t know the exact timing. What hints does Matthew provide for us in 2:7,11,16?

Luke 2:22-38 records the visit of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus to the temple when Jesus was at least 40 days old (see Leviticus 12:1-8), and then he writes, “When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth” (v. 39). However, the flight to Egypt almost certainly came after the purification and before the return to Egypt. (Note: the word for “when” here does not mean “at the exact time,” but just indicated a temporal succession of events)

7. Why did Jesus tell some of those he healed not to tell anyone (Matthew 8:2-4; Matthew 9:27-31)?

On several occasions, Jesus commanded people not to tell about him (Matthew 8:4, 9:30, 16:20, 17:9; Mark 7:36, 8:30, 9:9; Luke 5:14, 8:56). Sometimes they obeyed; sometimes they didn’t.

Read Luke 5:14-15. What inevitably happened, when they didn’t obey? Why might this not have been a good thing?

Read Mark 8:30-33. What did Jesus want to make sure people understood before telling anyone?

8. Why, during the confession and absolution, do you say, “As a called servant of Christ, I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit?” I thought only God can forgive sins.

Through a Divine Call, this congregation called me to be your pastor. That call includes the proclamation of God’s Word and the administration of the sacraments in a public way, as your representatives. God gives the right and responsibility to forgive sins to every Christian (Luke 17:3-4, John 20:23). This is nothing more than extending to one another the forgiveness that God has promised (1 John 1:9, Psalm 79:9). When I, as a pastor, announce God’s forgiveness, I am only carrying out the work that God has given to all of you and that you have entrusted to me—proclaiming the good news of God’s forgiveness to all the penitent.

9. Some people have talked about different "levels" for Christians in heaven. Is there such a thing?

Passages that have been interpreted this way include Matthew 10:40-41; 16:27; 18:4, Ephesians 6:7-8, and Colossians 3:23-25. None of them talk about “levels” of heaven per se, but they do talk about Christians being “rewarded” for what they have done. At the same time, the Bible is very clear that heaven is given to us as a gift, by grace alone. We sometimes call these “rewards of grace.” God gives them out as he sees fit and not because we have earned or deserved them. See Matthew 20:8,15.

These rewards do not motivate a Christian to Christian living, but the superabundance of God’s grace certainly serves as an encouragement for Christians. See Romans 8:18 and 2 Corinthians 4:16-17.

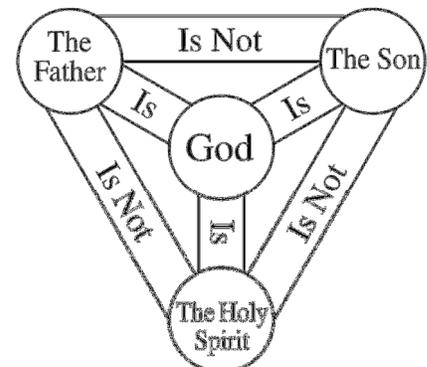
*For more on this question, see a December 2009 article in “Forward in Christ”:
<http://www.wels.net/news-events/forward-in-christ/december-2009/qa>*

10. Is the word “Trinity” in the Bible? If not, where do we get the teaching from?

The word “Trinity” is not in the Bible. It comes from a Latin word “Trinitas” meaning “three” or “triad.” “Triune” adds the Latin word “unus,” meaning “one.”

While the word is not in the Bible, the teaching clearly is. Deuteronomy 6:4, 2 Samuel 7:22, James 2:19 and other passages teach that there is only one true God. Genesis 1:1-3 (compare John 1:1-3) Isaiah 42:1, Matthew 3:16-17, 28:19, and other passages teach that God is three persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit).

We sometimes use this diagram to describe this incomprehensible truth:



11. Is December 25 the actual date of Jesus' birth? If not, where did we get the date from?

It is likely NOT the actual date of Jesus' birth (nor, for that matter is 0 A.D./B.C. the actual year for Jesus' birth). An article from Biblical Archaeology Review (<http://www.bib-arch.org/e-features/christmas.asp#>) says:

The earliest mention of December 25 as Jesus' birthday comes from a mid-fourth-century Roman almanac that lists the death dates of various Christian bishops and martyrs. The first date listed, December 25, is marked: natus Christus in Betleem Judeae: "Christ was born in Bethlehem of Judea."

The article reviews the two common theories as to why December 25 was chosen. One, the most popular (although, according to the article, the less likely), was that it was the time of a pagan feast, and so it was chosen to replace the feast and aid the spread of Christianity.

The other theory is that some have assumed that Jesus was conceived and born on the same date. Some calculations have put his death date at March 25, resulting in a birth date of December 25.

12. When people die, do angels come and take them to heaven? I've seen smiles on people who were dying.

This idea is picked up in one of our hymns: "Lord, let at last your angels come, To Abram's bosom bear me home, That I may die unfearing" (CW 434:3), and it seems to have Scriptural support. Both Elijah (2 Kings 2:11) and Lazarus (Luke 16:22) were escorted by angels to heaven. These are only descriptive passages, so we can't say with absolute certainty that it always happens this way, but it seems likely.

Does God allow people who are dying to see "angels" or "the light" before they finally die. Some people will talk about this with great conviction and talk about the comfort that "near death experience" gave them or their loved one. Finally, we can't say for certain. God could certainly use such a "miracle" to strengthen the faith of a believer. But the devil could also use something like this to deceive people. While we won't question the faith or honesty of those who claim such things and keep clinging to Christ's cross, we need to be careful about assuming such things are always from God or always happen.

13. Where did the term "Christians" come from?

See Acts 11:25-26. We don't know who coined the term and whether it was originally intended as a compliment or a term of derision. But we have every reason to be joyful in labeling ourselves (or being labeled) with Christ's name.