

Children In The Ark: Quickie Comments

by Robert Donalson

[Small world! Only a few weeks ago Bob found my Web Site and contacted me by e-mail. Even though we had not heard of each other, we grew up about seven miles apart, he at Rule, Texas and I near Rochester. He attended ACC, San Francisco State, and the University of Colorado where he received his doctorate. He taught two years at Pepperdine, then retired from Illinois Wesleyan University in 1994 after thirty years of teaching there. I am sharing his thoughts which lead you further than [my essay](#) in the last FR.]

1. I noted your interest in the absence of mention of children in the early church. Children are generally not mentioned in documents of that era because they had no effective status. Children remained under the protective umbrella of their father unless they attained “status” which, in the case of males, could almost be said to have begun only at the time of their “bar mitzvah” around age 12. That point in his life is what the story of Jesus in Jerusalem in Luke 2:41 is all about. It might interest your readers to know that the custom was for such boys to be quizzed as part of that particular rite of passage. Rabbis in the small towns served as school teachers during the week and a village Rabbi could “climb the professional ladder” by regularly producing outstanding students and thereby coming to the attention of the “officials” in Jerusalem. They are astounded that such a smart boy has appeared from Nazareth. (Can anything good come out of Nazareth?) Their surprise on that occasion is not necessarily because Jesus was saying something miraculous at that early age. And Jesus’ remark “I must be about my father’s business” may well be just the remark made by a particularly sensitive Jewish boy who has just been elevated to a status of being a “person” inasmuch as the Jewish boy was considered to now be a “covenant male” subsequent to this experience.

I’m not absolutely certain of this but I do not believe children were even counted in the ancient census taking. Of course, females remained non-entities until they married and were largely treated simply as property. Ancient Jewish parents even kept the bloody bed linen from the wedding night as proof of the virtue of a daughter. Otherwise brides could be returned and the dowry forfeited. Unfortunately, at the time they married there was often merely a transfer of “ownership” for they often continued to be “non-entities” just in the form of the wife of some other adult male. Some men still think it ought to be that way.

2. Your observations regarding the surrounding circumstances/observers of the Ethiopian eunuch, Joseph of Arimathea, and so forth call attention to our tendency to read scriptural reports as though they were something other than real life events, embedded in cultural elements and colored in many subtle ways by their cultural context. People frequently interpret all the scriptures as though the Holy Spirit had dictated the material in some form which, despite all we know about human language and its ambiguities, can be read as though it were some type of “pure” message carrier unaffected by cultural forces either then or since. We have essentially been taught this approach although it is partly just the

result of our tendency to hold rather rigid conceptions as to the nature of the “inspiration” of the scripture. These conceptions leave little room for critical examination of the text itself or of its cultural setting. And worse yet, for many people these conceptions themselves cannot be critically re-examined without seeming to issue from a lack of respect for scripture itself.

3. Your comments regarding Peter’s Pentecost sermon touch on the problem of our general ignorance of the ancient culture. Because people need to absolutize the words of Peter on that occasion and use them as proof-texts when necessary, they don’t even want to hear the evidence regarding the concept of “history” characteristic of that era. Should we take the slightest interest to inquire into the matter, it would be readily apparent that history and “historians” in the modern sense did not exist. Their versions of “historians” were a good deal more like the modern reporter whose editor only allows three paragraphs of copy to go into print. They readily condensed and paraphrased and, what is more, felt that it was perfectly acceptable to even invent a “speech” and report it as given by someone when in fact it was the writer’s understanding of what the speaker in question is known to have expressed in bits and pieces in various settings. Hopefully they cared about accurately representing the position of the speaker in question but the important thing was to capture the essence of the speech, not to capture the exact words spoken. That notion would, of course, rattle the pillars of conventional concepts of inspiration, inerrancy, and so forth.
4. Regarding your comment concerning the tendency to “overlay the image of the church of our experience” on top of the scriptural record, I experience constantly the problems of trying to extricate myself from the various “overlays” through which I filter things. That particular problem has been with us at least since the time of Immanuel Kant although Alexander Campbell seemed to be unaware of him. It’s not just church matters, of course, but that’s the immediate topic. One of the things which afflicts many of us who have clawed our way out of C of C legalism in our lifetimes is that we are sometimes still roused to passion by the same topics with which we’ve already done painful battles in the past rather than letting them BE past. The sad fact is that if you happen to find yourself in one of those “liberated” congregations which no longer toes a “brotherhood line” on everything, you still often find that you are “reactionary driven” and tend to measure your state in terms of how far you have moved AWAY from the evils of the past. It is very difficult to learn how to be “vision driven” when you are still inclined to fight old battles...at least in your psyche. The old wounds sometimes don’t ever completely heal. The intense pain fades but a tender spot remains. It’s a good exercise in self analysis to take an inventory of the topics you have been moved to write about or think about in the past year. All too often one finds that the scars left by legalism continue to control one’s thought processes even if those thoughts are only bent on re-attacking that same old dragon. Sometimes I just want to shout, “Get outta my head and leave me alone.” (Maybe that’s the modern version of, “Get thee behind me, Satan!”) In your case, Cecil, I sometimes think I can detect an ongoing stream of grief (perhaps mixed with a little guilt and anger) for all those years now past. I pray for your peace with the past, Cecil. I ask you to pray for mine too as well as others who struggle with this common problem. Forgiveness comes very hard for me...especially when it is myself I need to forgive.

5. Regarding your comments about the early elders in Jerusalem, it is probable that the office of Elder was largely modeled on similar offices in Jewish synagogues. Paul did not merely invent the concept out of thin air. I'm not aware of much research in that particular area but it would be interesting to know more of the parallels.
6. And finally, on the same topic of layers of overlay, I'd suggest you reconsider the "Freedom's Ring" approach, especially the graphics. Despite the quotation from Lev. 25, it is the American flag which links itself more readily with the idea of freedom when one enters your Web site. I'm grateful to be an American and actually think of myself as conservative, but all too often there is a tendency to overlay our faith in God with a mix of politics and flag waving. It is no coincidence that right-wing politics and right-wing religion often go hand-in-glove. If one is inclined to be attracted by simplistic solutions, they will usually be found in equal measure in your theology as in your politics. []