

Children In The Ark

Perhaps some of you were brought up with Hurlbut's *Story of the Bible* as was Lea, my wife. Her copy is ragged and musty, a revision of the original edition published in 1904. On page 41 is a picture depicting Noah's offering after the flood. There are thirteen persons in the picture! Now wait a minute! Everybody who has ever been to Sunday School knows that there were only eight souls saved on the ark (1 Peter 3:20).

When I first noticed that picture many years ago, I marveled at the audacity of anyone who would change the story so brazenly. However, time has a way of broadening our insights so that what once seemed so evident may seem less obvious. I have often wondered that there would be three couples of very mature age who were still childless, and yet they would have children later. However, it is true that all stated evidence indicates that there were no children on the ark.

In the beginning days of the church in Jerusalem, the believers were given no identification until Acts 5:14 where it says "multitudes of both men and women" were added to the Lord. There is no record in the Scriptures of anyone designated as a child, teenager, young person, or youth being among the converts! (Years later the evangelist, Timothy, is referred to as a youth.) Were none converted? Just men and women? Excluded by silence when men and women were mentioned?

Many times I have related the account of the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch, always picturing that man going alone, or with a driver, down the Gaza highway reading aloud to himself. The record mentions no one else being with him.

Everyone knows that there were only thirteen people present on the night of the last supper just like Leonardo DaVinci painted it. Perhaps no one else was there, but do the Scriptures say so?

In Matthew 27:59f it is stated that Joseph of Arimathea took the body of Jesus, wrapped it in a clean linen shroud, laid it in his own tomb which he had hewn in rock, and rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb. Would I be endangering my soul to question that Joseph did any of those things?

What I am illustrating here is the limiting template I have often laid over messages in the Scriptures to which I made the messages conform. Unless definitely limiting statements are a part of the account, there may be allowance for the indefinite. When a narrative concerned a certain person or limited number of them, focus was on them and not on who else might have been there. Unless children were a vital part of the narrative, mention was not made as to whether children were present and included or not. When we think about the Ethiopian being the Secretary of the Treasury of Ethiopia, we will realize the probability of his traveling with a retinue of attendants to whom he might have been reading. Since a meal was being served to thirteen people at the last supper, it is reasonable to think that a woman or women prepared and served the meal and stood in readiness just past a curtained entry where they could listen and peek. And John Mark could have been listening with them!

Joseph of Arimathea probably did none of the acts mentioned above! Many times it is said that a person did some specific thing when in reality he only authorized it to be done, having others to perform the actions. Joseph was a man of such distinction that he could gain an audience with Pilate, the governor. It is unlikely that he had actually hewn

his own tomb, that he individually prepared the body of Jesus, that he personally carried the body of Jesus into the tomb, or that he rolled the great stone himself even though the text attributes those actions to him.

It is to be doubted that a picture of five children supposedly surviving the flood has wrecked the faith of any child. Nor is there anything vital to faith in the other illustrations about our limited perceptions. However, it is hoped that by these examples we will be encouraged to open our minds to a wider view of Scriptural narrative. This is but another way of saying we should take into account as much of the setting as we can ascertain in creating our mental images and practical interpretations. Such an approach may help steer us clear of dogmatic hangups about trivial details. Let me ramble further.

Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount* was spoken to *crowds*, rather than a *crowd*. Perhaps, that means nothing, but it may mean that he gave more than one discourse or that parts of his teaching were to different groups. It is unlikely that he let that great throng of people go home with only seven pages (in my text) of teaching. In a huge crowd with its distractions, a terse recitation of the beatitudes would have had little chance of scoring. It is likely that we have only a concise summary of his more lengthy explanations of the points he was making with such impressive authority.

Must we believe that Peter had only three pages of script for his historic proclamation of salvation through the risen Christ on Pentecost? We have only the *nutshell* version. The preaching more likely lasted all day with other apostles participating. After the interruption by convicted hearers, it is stated that "he testified with many other words and exhorted them." Curiosity would make us wish for the full texts of sermons and detailed conversations, but we trust that the Spirit gave us all that is necessary.

It is only natural that we would tend to overlay the image of the church of our experience when we think of first century congregations. Although present-day churches in Oregon, Ohio, Arizona, and Alabama may seem to have been cut from the same pattern, they may have little outward resemblance to those in Jericho, Beersheba, Nazareth, and Bethel in Palestine, or to congregations in Antioch, Alexandria, Troas, or Ephesus in other lands. Early churches among the Jews were probably more like synagogues than churches in Texas.

The early mention of elders in the Jerusalem church would leave us to suppose that Jewish elders mentioned in the Gospels who accepted Christ retained their recognition as elders in the church rather than being selected because they met Paul's "qualifications" in letters to Timothy and Titus. In Jerusalem the disciples composed a single church though they met in many different groups (as in house-to-house) evidently under the oversight of the one composite group of elders. The only schedule suggested is *daily* and no *order and procedure of worship* is specified. The only *pattern* that might be detected is that of adaptation of their activities to fulfill their needs as Christ-centered support groups. The Jerusalem church cannot be squeezed into an overlay of the Nashville church.

Grecian Corinth must not be measured in its function by Dallas or Jerusalem. It had its own culture to deal with. Veiled women, for instance, were not forbidden to pray or teach God's message in the assembly until their rudeness (along with that of men) got out of hand and had to be corrected. No criticism of eating the Lord's Supper during a

congregational meal was evident until the disciples abused it by dividing it into separate groups based on party loyalty. These are but two illustrations out of the many available ones of how we have adamantly resisted the very *patterns* we have claimed to restore. When we apply our *Church of Christ* cookie cutter to first century congregations, we have a lot of dough left over. Preachers, elders, disciples, and congregations were no more models of perfection than they are now. Their only claim to excellence was in being in Christ.

Aside from those two illustrations, do you think the Corinthian church was like the one of which you are a part? The women wore veils. Men kissed each other in greeting. No mention is made of a treasury or collections until Paul called for a special one-time collection. No passing the baskets? No mention is made of weekly communion, and since they communed during the meal, there was no “passing the communion.” Multiple speakers! No wonder they brought their meal! Although we have tried to impose congregational singing on their scene, the text leans in favor of solos. Some spoke in tongues. I encourage you to read again 1 Corinthians 11-14 and think how much of modern experience is imposed upon the revealed message.

Because my experience has been with small congregations, my tendency has been to picture Biblical congregations as small. When you think of *the church* in Ephesus or Antioch, do you interpret that as *one congregation* in each place? When you read of the Ephesian elders, do you think of elders of one congregation the size of the average Church of Christ? When Timothy labored with the church in Ephesus, was he *the minister* for one struggling group in the city? There were many believers in those great cities.

My misdirection in legalism and restorationism warped my approach to reading of the Scriptures. Unwittingly, I was led to look for minute details of supposed law and pattern to reinforce concepts prevailing in my current religious experience rather than to look for the overall meaning of the text. It allowed me to disregard and obscure some things which did not fit and to try to make current innovations fit. I suppose that no one can ever be entirely free of such preconceptions, but it is heartening to think that most of those quibbles which we have made into issues have little bearing on our relationship with God through Christ. God did not give us a puzzle of truth to solve or demand that we become detectives to search out and piece together elusive clues. We are not rewarded because of being meritorious students.

Well, we could ramble on with other illustrations, but if I have any point in this, surely it is evident by now. As we read the Scriptures with a broader vision, we will become more perceptive, less dogmatic, less judgmental of others who do not see all we see, and softened in our attitude toward all believers. After all, what difference does it make whether there were children on the ark? And who was ever saved by having the right answers to all debatable issues? []