

CHRISTMAS INTERLUDE

Relating Rightly To Relatives At Christmas

Part III. Functioning When God's And Our Relatives' Expectations Of Us Differ

(Luke 1:57-66)

Introduction: (To show the need . . .)

Sometimes we believers in Christ have relatives whose expectations of us differ with our Lord's expectations, and those differences can create significant trials when we gather with our relatives especially at Christmas:

(1) Several of our members have told me of the difficulty they have faced while trying to comfort unsaved relatives who have lost a close family member by sitting with them in the front pew of a Roman Catholic Church. Though seated there with all good intent, the time comes in the service when the officiating priest comes down to serve the "host" to the grieving family in the front row, that "host" being the wafer that represents the body of Christ in that Church, and our Church member realizes he has put himself in the position of accepting and then ingesting the wafer in seeming approval of the idolatry of transubstantiation! He does not want to hurt the grieving relative by refusing the wafer, but neither does he want to violate his conscience!

What has usually occurred is that the member has received and ingested the wafer so as not to upset the already grieving relative, only later to feel so guilty that he calls me up the next week to ask if God can forgive him!

(2) It can happen over the issue of cremation: the Catholic Church has made new rules on this practice, and though my heritage is not Catholic, hours after we had observed Mom's graveside with her cremated remains being set by the grave in an urn, my relatives told of a big division in their church over whether a Christian should practice cremation! They asked me my view as a pastor, so I had to enter the fray though still grieving over Mom's loss!

I knew what my brothers and I had done with Mom's remains would not get us into trouble with the relatives, for they had all decided to cremate our grandparents' remains, but I can only guess what might occur in other families!

Need: *So, we ask, "This Christmas, how do I function if God's and my relatives' expectations of me differ?!"*

I. After Mary the expectant Mother of Jesus had returned to Nazareth from visiting her relative Elisabeth who was also granted of God to have a miraculous pregnancy, Elisabeth gave birth to John, Lk. 1:36-56.

II. At John's birth, Elisabeth faced a great conflict between God's and her relatives' expectations of her:

- A. Scripture directed that on the eighth day after birth, a Hebrew male infant was to be circumcised, Gen. 17:12.
- B. In Jesus' era, a new mother with her infant son and relatives and neighbors went to a synagogue or the temple where an officiating priest performed the circumcision in a ceremony, Zon. Pict. Ency. Bib., vol. One, p. 867.
- C. At the concluding part of the ceremony, the infant son would be given his name in a prayer that was said by the officiating priest, and the first son of his father whose name was Zacharias would expectedly be given his father's name with the words being spoken by the priest as follows: "Our God, and the God of our fathers, raise up this child to his father and mother, and let his name be called in Israel Zacharias, the son of Zacharias . . ." (Alfred Edersheim, The Life And Times Of Jesus The Messiah, 2004, p. 111)
- D. However, Elisabeth knew that this part of the ceremony directly conflicted with the revealed will of God:
 1. When the angel Gabriel had appeared to Elisabeth's husband Zacharias in the temple to announce the birth of Zacharias' firstborn son, Gabriel had directed that he name the infant boy "John," Luke 1:13.
 2. Also, since Zacharias had initially failed to believe the angel's words to him in the temple, Zacharias was not going to be able to speak until the day when the angel's words were fulfilled, Luke 1:20.
 3. Since the "things" the angel had predicted included not only the birth of Zacharias' firstborn son, but also his **naming**, what occurred at his circumcision ceremony the eighth day after his birth (Lk. 1:13, 20 KJV), Elisabeth also knew that unless her son was then named "John," her husband would not be able to speak!
- E. Thus, Elisabeth was caught between the expectations of her relatives, her community and the officiating priest to name the baby after his father Zacharias and the expectation of God that he be called John! However, her husband could not then speak, so going with God's will meant Elisabeth as a **woman** in a **patristic** culture had to **interrupt** the **officiating priest's prayer during** the **ceremony** to name her baby John! (Ibid., Edersheim)

III. Accordingly, Elisabeth rightly exemplified wise action, and God supported her effort to His glory:

- A. Elisabeth met the expectations of her relatives and community where Scripture let her do so, Luke 1:58-59a:
 1. Elisabeth rejoiced at the birth of her infant son along with her relatives and neighbors, Luke 1:58.
 2. She also heeded the expectations of her relatives and friends on her son's Biblical circumcision, Lk. 1:59a:
 - a. The Mosaic Law directed that Elisabeth have her infant son circumcised on the eighth day, Gen. 17:12.

- b. Accordingly, along with her husband Zacharias and her neighbors and relatives, Elisabeth went either to a local synagogue or the temple in nearby Jerusalem in accord with the practice of the day to have her infant son circumcised and named on the eighth day after birth, Luke 1:59a; *Ibid.*, Zon. Pict. Ency. Bib.
- B. Yet, where God's expectations differed with those of her relatives and others, Elisabeth heeded God:
1. When the ceremony was ending and the officiating priest came to the part in his closing prayer where he said, ". . . and let his name be called in Israel Zacharias, the son of Zacharias . . .", Elisabeth interrupted to say, "By no means! But rather he will be called John." (Luke 1:59b-60; *Ibid.*, Edersheim; U. B. S. Greek New Testament, 1966, p. 204; The Analytical Greek Lexicon (Zondervan), 1972, p. 294)
 2. Besides being shocked by her interrupting the priest's prayer in a patristic culture, Elisabeth's relatives and friends objected to her words, saying, "None of your relatives is called by this name," Luke 1:61 ESV.
 3. Those present at the ceremony made signs to the baby's mute father Zacharias to learn how he wanted the baby named, so Zacharias asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John," Luke 1:62-63a.
- C. God then supported Elisabeth's stand to gain glory to Himself, Luke 1:63b-65:
1. The officiating priest and onlookers marveled that the father would not want his firstborn son to bear his name (Luke 1:63b), but after writing what he did, the mute Zecharias also spoke, blessing God, Luke 1:64.
 2. The onlookers and priest were thus transported from shock to marveling to fear, realizing God had given a sign by Zacharias' healing, and all these events were talked about in all the hill country of Judea, Lk. 1:65.
 3. Thus, God took Elisabeth's act of interrupting the officiating priest's closing prayer to heed God over the expectations of her relatives, friends and even the officiating priest, and God glorified Himself in it!
- IV. Significantly, the name "John" highlights the ministry of the grace of God in John's future ministry:**
- A. "John" in Greek is *Ioannes*, from the Hebrew expression, *Yohanan*, "God has been gracious," [*Jahweh + hanan*] Abbott-Smith, A Man. Grk. Lex. of the N. T., 1968, p. 221; *Ibid.*, Z. P. E. B., v. Three, p. 636.
 - B. In Zacharias' expressed praise to God, he noted that John's future ministry as the Forerunner of Messiah (Luke 1:76-77) would occur by the "tender mercy of our God," Luke 1:78.
 - C. Indeed, Malachi 4:5-6 predicts John's work would be to unite the hearts of the fathers with the hearts of their children due to his turning the people to repent of their sins; Bible Know. Com., O. T., p. 1588.

Lesson: *When caught between God's and her relatives' conflicting expectations, Elisabeth met her relatives' expectations where she Biblically could do so while heeding God's expectations where she could not meet her relatives' expectations, and God used her act against her relatives' expectations to glorify Himself!*

Application: *If we get cornered between the expectations of God and that of our relatives at Christmas, (1) may we trust in Christ to become a believer (John 3:16) and be put under His "much more" care, Romans 8:32. (2) Then, may we seek (a) to cooperate with our relatives where we can Biblically do so (b) though heeding God where we cannot meet our relatives' expectations, (c) trusting God to handle the resulting tension to His glory!*

Conclusion: (To illustrate the message . . .)

To illustrate, we offer solutions to the two issues of concern we mentioned in the sermon introduction:

(1) If we seek to comfort a grieving relative in a church where the mass is being said, (a) we can sit in the row **behind** the grieving relative where we can avoid receiving the wafer while reaching forward to comfort the relative.

(b) Yet, if we have violated our conscience by partaking of the "host" in such a situation, we can heed 1 John 1:9 and find God's promised forgiveness.

(2) Regarding cremation, (a) 2 Corinthians 5:8 KJV claims that when a believer dies, his spirit is "absent from the body and . . . present with the Lord." If the human spirit that is sealed by the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:13-14) leaves the body, the body that was once God's temple (1 Cor. 6:19) is no longer that temple. (b) Also, 2 Corinthians 5:1 claims the body is "destroyed" in death, B. K. C., N. T., p. 565. Some believers have been buried at sea and others burned at the stake to where the body parts have been widely dispersed! (c) So, whether we cremate or where we place the remains of the deceased are not in themselves even Scripturally important matters. (d) However, what we do with the body at death **IS** an issue of **edification** for many **survivors**, so we must do what best edifies them, 1 Cor. 10:23! Included in the edification of the survivors may be the issue of financial cost to the survivors, heritage or culture, etc. God's concern is that whatever we do, we do in view of our need to edify toward discipling people in Christ.

May we trust in Christ for salvation, and then heed Elisabeth's example of cooperating with the relatives where we can and heeding God's expectations over those of the relatives where they differ.