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Frank W. Nelte

SHOULD UNBAPTIZED YOUTHS ATTEND THE PASSOVER SERVICE?

The Church of God has traditionally limited attendance at the Passover service to baptized members of the Church. It has been the one service in the year when not only unbaptized adults, but even all of the children and the Church youths, who regularly attend services with their families, are also excluded from attending.

Now some of the churches have decided that "responsible youths" may attend the Passover service, if they are accompanied by a baptized parent or a guardian.

So the question arises:

WHAT IS THE CORRECT APPROACH? MAY UNBAPTIZED "RESPONSIBLE YOUTHS" ATTEND THE PASSOVER SERVICE, OR SHOULD ATTENDANCE BE LIMITED TO BAPTIZED ADULTS, AS HAS BEEN THE CHURCH'S PRACTICE IN THE PAST?

Let's examine this question more closely.

THE BASIC INSTRUCTIONS FOR ATTENDANCE

These are found in Exodus 12:43-48.

And the LORD said unto Moses and Aaron, This [is] the ordinance of the passover: THERE SHALL NO STRANGER EAT THEREOF: (Exodus 12:43)

But every man's servant that is bought for money, WHEN THOU HAST CIRCUMCISED HIM, THEN SHALL HE EAT THEREOF. (Exodus 12:44)

A FOREIGNER AND AN HIRED SERVANT SHALL NOT EAT THEREOF. (Exodus 12:45)

In one house shall it be eaten; thou shalt not carry forth ought of the flesh abroad out of the house; neither shall ye break a bone thereof. (Exodus 12:46)

ALL THE CONGREGATION OF ISRAEL SHALL KEEP IT. (Exodus 12:47)

And when a stranger shall sojourn with thee, and will keep the passover to the LORD, LET ALL HIS MALES BE CIRCUMCISED, AND THEN LET HIM COME NEAR AND KEEP IT; and he shall be as one that is born in the land: FOR NO UNCIRCUMCISED PERSON SHALL EAT THEREOF. (Exodus 12:48)

Let's note the following things:

1) ALL Israelite males were to be circumcised at age 8 days old. Circumcision obviously did not apply to females. Thus, when the Passover was observed by the entire family, then it also meant that EVERY MALE in that family was circumcised.

2) No uncircumcised male, be he an Israelite or be he a "stranger" (i.e. a non-Israelite), was permitted to be present for the Old Testament Passover service. It is only AFTER circumcision that the stranger could even be present.

3) Now since the Israelites did not circumcise their male children during the 40 years of wandering (see Joshua 5:5-7), it means that they also did not observe the Passover for those 40 years! It was only after Joshua had circumcised all those who were born during those 40 years, that Israel then again kept a Passover, while they were in Gilgal (Joshua 5:10).

4) The Passover is the only observance for which God provided an alternate date (keeping the Passover in the 2nd month) for those people who SHOULD have observed it, but were prevented from doing so due to no fault of their own (see Numbers 9:10-11). There are no alternate dates for observing the Days of Unleavened Bread, or the Day of Trumpets, or the Feast of Tabernacles ... God only provided an alternate date for the Passover. This should tell us the importance God attaches to THOSE WHO SHOULD BE OBSERVING THE PASSOVER actually doing so.

5) In the Old Testament observance of the Passover there were NO OBSERVERS! EVERYONE PRESENT PARTICIPATED IN EVERYTHING THAT WENT ON! Everyone in the family ate and drank the same things the head of the family ate and drank. When ALL the males in a stranger's family had been circumcised, THEN all those males (as well as all the females in that family) were also eligible to observe AND TO PARTICIPATE in the entire Passover ceremony. Throughout the period of time that the Old Testament Passover was in force, there NEVER was at any time anyone who would have attended a Passover ceremony with only "observer status".

6) Passover observance was a family affair because every male in the family was also circumcised. If there was (hypothetically speaking) a family in which there were some males who (for whatever reason?) were not circumcised, THEN for that particular family the Passover observance would not have been a family affair ... the uncircumcised males in that family would have had to be excluded from participating in, and even from being present at, the Passover.

7) It is quite clear that God used circumcision to symbolically represent real repentance. See such Scriptures as Jeremiah 4:4; Deuteronomy 10:16; Deuteronomy 30:6; etc., which make this connection quite clear.

8) So it follows that:

A) Where for the O.T. observance of the Passover no uncircumcised people (only the males were expected to be circumcised) were allowed TO BE PRESENT ...

B) For the N.T. observance of the Passover NO UNBAPTIZED people SHOULD BE PRESENT.

9) One major difference that immediately enters the picture here is that, whereas circumcision was performed soon after birth (on the 8th day of life), baptism is not performed until a person reaches adulthood. Thus, while circumcision did not pose a major restraint for Israelites to observe the Passover (since the males were automatically circumcised almost immediately after birth, without a baby's knowledge or consent ... except for the 40 years in the wilderness when babies were not circumcised); baptism on the other hand poses a real restraint as to who may partake of the Passover, since baptism is only for adults, and since it requires the active participation of the person who is to be baptized. Baptism should never be performed without the person's knowledge and consent.

10) Another major difference that also enters the picture is that, whereas circumcision was limited to males, baptism is applicable equally to males and to females. Therefore unbaptized females should not

be present simply because all the males (all of them adults) in their family are baptized. Baptism is required equally of adult men and women.

11) These major differences also have the following effect:

The nature of the Passover has been unavoidably CHANGED from being "a family affair" (because all the males in a family were automatically circumcised) to being "a personal and individual affair" (since baptism requires a personal choice, and is not performed automatically straight after birth).

12) There is no indication in the New Testament that the Passover, as Jesus Christ instructs us to observe it, continued to be "a family affair". Rather, we see that Jesus Christ LIMITED THE ATTENDANCE at the Passover to His twelve apostles. At that time the Apostle Peter was already a family man (recall the occasion when Christ healed Peter's mother-in-law of a fever, Matthew 8:14); yet PETER DID NOT OBSERVE THE PASSOVER WITH HIS OWN WIFE (and possibly children?). [Some of the other apostles were quite likely also already married, though this makes no difference.]

Check the gospel accounts very carefully. I don't think there is any other occasion mentioned where a specific observance, or even a specific meal, was limited to only the twelve apostles. Yet the gospels make quite clear that THIS OBSERVANCE was limited to the twelve apostles (see Matthew 26:20; Mark 14:17; Luke 22:14).

WHY were there no spectators or no other "family members" present? WHY were none of THE WOMEN, WHO REGULARLY ACCOMPANIED THE GROUP (see Luke 24:22; Luke 23:49,55; Matthew 27:55; Mark 15:41; etc.) allowed to be present for the Passover observance, as Jesus Christ instituted it? They were surely present at other meals (feeding of the 5000 men besides women and children, the time when Christ ate in the home of Martha and Mary, etc.) ... so WHY were they excluded at this Passover observance?

Jesus Christ allowed Judas to be present for the footwashing, but Christ did not institute the bread and wine as the new emblems for the Passover UNTIL AFTER JUDAS HAD LEFT. So Jesus Christ was very concerned about not having certain people present for the Passover. WHY?

This is clear from the following points:

A) The footwashing took place DURING the supper (John 13:2).

B) Then after the footwashing Judas "went out" (John 13:30).

C) Christ instituted the bread and the wine AFTER the supper (Luke 22:19-20).

D) Paul had received special Passover instructions from Jesus Christ personally, as he states in 1 Corinthians 11:23. And Paul confirms in 1 Corinthians 11:24-25 that the bread and the wine were instituted AFTER supper (i.e. "when he HAD supped").

E) So since Judas went out IMMEDIATELY after an event that happened DURING supper, the only possibility is that Judas was therefore not present for an event that happened AFTER supper.

So Jesus Christ allowed Judas to observe the Old Testament part of the Passover with Him, because Judas was physically circumcised. But Jesus Christ did not allow Judas to be present for the New Testament Passover, because Judas' frame of mind at that point was not compatible with being present at the New Testament Passover.

13) Yes, it can be argued that the twelve apostles themselves had not yet come to a full repentance ... though this is obviously difficult to prove, since all of us "repentant and converted Christians" also still sin. We too might still flee in the face of danger, when we really should stand our ground. And yes, these twelve apostles did not, at the time of that last Passover which Christ observed here on Earth, have God's Spirit; that they only received about seven weeks later on the Day of Pentecost.

But we need to recognize that IN THEIR MINDS THESE MEN (apart from perhaps Judas Iscariot) HAD MADE A COMMITMENT which they sincerely INTENDED to keep. When Peter and the others said at that very Passover service:

Peter said unto him, THOUGH I SHOULD DIE WITH THEE, YET WILL I NOT DENY THEE.
Likewise also said all the disciples. (Matthew 26:35)

... Peter and the other apostles were sincere and whole-hearted. THEY MEANT EVERY WORD; but they still lacked the strength to live up to that sincerity. Even Judas Iscariot was very likely sincere in a confused sort of way ... as witnessed by his acknowledgment that he had betrayed a totally innocent person (see Matthew 27:4), for which action he then took his own life.

14) It is clear that at Christ's observance of the Passover NO SPECTATORS WERE PRESENT. How would Jesus Christ possibly have handled a "spectator situation" ... would He have also washed THEIR feet, and then instructed THEM to also eat and drink? If so, they would not have been "spectators", but "participants", right? Or would He have asked them to just sit quietly at the side and "observe" everything He was about to do? How would He have handled such a situation?

15) When God was so emphatic in O.T. times about "no uncircumcised person" being at the Passover, did God already then have in mind what "circumcision" represented? YES! When Christ changed the emblems of the Passover to the bread and the wine, did He also modify or slacken the requirement that "no uncircumcised (of heart) should be there? NO! Is there any indication anywhere in the New Testament that it is acceptable for unbaptized people "TO OBSERVE" the Passover proceedings? NO, there is not.

16) The New Testament Passover, as instituted by Jesus Christ, is NOT a spectator situation! There is no room for spectators! There is no room for "passive observers". It is strictly a "participant situation" ... you either TAKE PART in everything OR YOU SHOULD NOT BE THERE.

It is also THE ONLY OCCASION in the Church calendar when every person present is required to do MORE than just listen and sing and say "amen".

17) A spectator would actually be totally out of place at a Passover ceremony! Allowing spectators to be present also misses the real focus of the occasion!

We don't attend a Passover service in order to listen to the Scriptures the minister will read; we don't attend for the purpose of having someone read long sections from John 13 through to John 17 to us; we don't really attend in the hope that the minister will once again this year instill in us a sense of awe and respect for the occasion.

WE ATTEND THE PASSOVER IN ORDER TO VISIBLY REAFFIRM OUR UNCONDITIONAL
COMMITMENT TO ALMIGHTY GOD!

All the rest is a filler, intended to create a proper atmosphere and attitude for the occasion. Yes,

certainly, it IS right and proper that the minister expounds to us the symbolism of the foot-washing and the significance of eating the bread and drinking the wine; but that significance is the same as it was last year ... and the year before ... and the year before that. The symbolism and the significance don't change from year to year.

Don't misunderstand what I am saying here.

It is right and proper to have a reading of the Scriptures before and after the three main events (the footwashing, eating the bread, drinking the wine) in the Passover service. And they DO help in creating an appropriate focus for the occasion. But their only purpose is to provide a framework for our visible reaffirmation of our unconditional commitment to God! That is why it is not in the slightest degree any less significant if a baptized member of God's Church observes the Passover on his own, because he happens to live in an area which is isolated from other members of God's Church. [And certainly, where this is possible, baptized members of God's Church should plan to observe the Passover together with other baptized members.]

18) Understand this also: without active participation in the three main parts of the service (washing feet, eating, drinking) the whole service loses its meaning. It has no meaning apart from active participation. Without active participation the whole ceremony is only an empty shell. It is THE COMMITMENT, expressed by participating in everything, that gives meaning to the service.

Making provision for "non-participating observers" at the Passover CHANGES THIS FOCUS COMPLETELY! Instead of the unconditional commitment of all those present being the real focus of the occasion, THE CEREMONY ITSELF becomes the focus ... it becomes something worthy of being "observed" without participation, with observers possibly being "impressed" by the occasion. It opens the door to evaluation-type of comments, like: "That was really a beautiful and very inspiring service." Such comments might at first glance seem very desirable ... but they aren't really desirable at all, because they miss the real point of the whole service. The focus should not be on how beautifully the minister handled the whole occasion; the focus should really be on how YOU, a baptized member of God's Church, brought your own unconditional commitment to God into sharp and precise focus; YOUR COMMITMENT to God should become stronger with each successive Passover you observe! And THAT is what the minister's handling of the whole service should facilitate.

But it is not a spectator-occasion.

19) In the absence of any clear proof that unbaptized "youths" were permitted to be present at the Passover in the New Testament Church, it is not really valid to base a decision to permit such "youths" to attend on a parallel to the observance of the Passover in the Old Testament. While it is still the observance of "the Passover" (and assuredly not a "Lord's Supper"!), the New Testament Passover observance differs in major ways from the observance instituted at the time of the exodus from Egypt.

As already pointed out above:

A) Circumcision took place 8 days after birth, but baptism is only for adults.

B) Circumcision was limited to males, but baptism is for both, men and women.

C) The Old Testament observance of the Passover WAS A MEAL, and meals by their nature are family occasions; the Passover Jesus Christ instituted is NOT A MEAL, and also not a family occasion. The Apostle Paul very clearly told the members of God's Church in Corinth to eat their meals AT HOME BEFORE COMING TO THE PASSOVER (see 1 Corinthians 11:20-22).

D) Jesus Christ instituted something totally new at the Passover service which He commanded His followers to observe ... the footwashing. The footwashing was intended to convey an attitude of voluntary humility ... but Christ did not intend that expression of humility to be "observed" by people who themselves do not participate in this service.

Let me make something very plain here!

I believe that having non-participating "observers" at a Passover ceremony detracts from the real sense of humility which the footwashing is supposed to portray. For example, when certain people of high standing in this world (such as the Pope, etc.) go out and wash the feet of some beggar or some common peasant, that is not an expression of REAL humility; that is nothing more than a publicity occasion, which is likely to make news headlines in some areas of the world. Expressions of real humility are always less susceptible to wrong motivations if there are fewer "spectators" present to witness these acts of humility. That's precisely the principle of Matthew 6:1-4 (don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing).

20) It should be quite clear that this is only a starting point for the churches that have decided to allow unbaptized youths to attend the Passover. These churches will have to make MORE decisions in the future. For example:

A) What do the "responsible youths" do during the footwashing? Do the girls go out with the ladies and REALLY "observe" at close quarters ... or do they stay in the hall where (usually) the footwashing for the men is performed and just look straight ahead while the men engage in the footwashing at the back or to the one side? Or do they just keep their heads down and read their Bibles while the footwashing takes place? Exactly what are they there for to "observe" during the footwashing?

B) What is the definition of "a responsible youth"? Is it an 18-year-old ... or does a 13-year-old also qualify as "responsible"? What criteria are parents to use in deciding whether THEIR youths are "responsible"? Parents are sure to be more subjective in deciding about the "responsibility status" of their children than the local pastor would be inclined to be.

C) Will this not lead to parents phoning other parents and asking: "Are YOUR kids coming to the Passover? Well fine, then I think I'll also let my kids come." Or to kids pressuring their parents with: "Well, Jim Brown told me he's going ... and he's a year younger than I am. So why can't I also go?" Or the reasoning: "We couldn't find anyone to stay with our youngster, so we just brought him along to the Passover service." And the objective assessment of "responsibility status" is totally ignored.

It is really just like the use of make-up: You can introduce it with the proviso that "ONLY THE MODERATE AND DISCREET USE of make-up is permitted in the Church." But having made that statement it is almost IMPOSSIBLE to object to even the grossest misuse of make-up. When you give someone your little finger it is extremely difficult to not also give that person the whole hand! THE PROVISIO THAT ONLY "RESPONSIBLE YOUTHS" MAY OBSERVE THE PASSOVER IS MEANINGLESS! It sounds good on paper, but it has absolutely no value. It is inevitable that there will also be youths who will subsequently PROVE that they were not really "responsible" at all.

D) What about "responsible youths" who attend Church without their parents or a guardian. Can they come to the Passover? If not, why not? WHO decides in such cases ... the youths themselves?

E) How long is a "youth" classified as a "youth" ... till he has finished high school, or till he finally asks about baptism at age 26 years? Is there a point where you draw the line and say: "Sorry, but you are too old to qualify as a "youth"? Or do the parents decide that their 28-year-old unbaptized son is still "a youth"?

F) What biblical foundation is there for stipulating that only "RESPONSIBLE" youths may also "observe" the Passover? That requirement is based on nothing more than human reasoning. Attendance at the O.T. Passover had nothing to do with being a "responsible" person or not ... boy babies were automatically circumcised on the 8th day of their lives, and even if they were not really "responsible" individuals in later life, they were still eligible for Passover attendance, based solely on their circumcision status.

Here is the danger in allowing youths to attend the Passover:

GOD requires us today, since the time of Christ's ministry, to be repentant and committed to Him before we can ... "THEN COME NEAR" (Exodus 12:48) to observe the Passover. Without such commitment we are in danger of "observing" the Passover in an unworthy manner (see 1 Corinthians 11:27, 29).

Allowing unbaptized youths to attend the Passover has changed this godly requirement! Since "youths" are not really repentant and ready for making such a commitment to God, therefore this decision (to allow "responsible" youths to attend) has exchanged the repentance-and-commitment requirement in favour of the vague and undefined and very subjective requirement of being at least "responsible". But that opens the door for many hundreds of individuals to attend who will in fact not be "responsible" at all.

Don't be fooled by the word "responsible"! It may sound good and right; but it is not the same as "repentant and committed to God". It represents a lowering of the requirement which God lays down in the Bible. The word "responsible" is very subjective, and it has no absolute standard by which it can be evaluated. It is a word that can easily create a false sense of security.

The subjective status of the word "responsible" is acknowledged by those churches that leave it totally up to the parents to assess this "responsible" status of their own children, and no two parents will use exactly the same criteria in deciding this. That can create confusion.

G) What about mature adults who attend regularly but are not baptized, yet are "very responsible" ... why should THEY be excluded from "observing" the Passover if "responsible" youths are permitted to "observe" it? Or should such mature "responsible" adults also be allowed to attend the Passover? If so, then the Passover will become even more of a spectator ceremony.

H) It is only a question of time before EVERY unbaptized person, who attends church services with a church that allows spectators at the Passover, will want the right to also "observe" the Passover. That is the inevitable end-destination of the present decision by some churches to allow "responsible youths" to "observe" the Passover. After all, can the pastor really tell anyone who regularly attends services that he or she is not "a responsible individual"? Thus the biblical requirement will have been circumvented.

Go ahead, take a look down the road. That way you'll see more clearly where this is all heading.

Anyway, for the above reasons I feel that the decision by some churches to allow "responsible youths" to "observe" the Passover is not wise. I believe it is not sound. I believe it is biblically incorrect, and I don't believe that it is what God desires us to do.

Frank W. Nelte