

Hebrews 12:14 in the Navajo Bible

Copyright (c) 2009 by Frank W. Hardy, Ph.D.

Diné t'áá ałtso bił k'é da'ahidoh'níi dooleełígíí, áádóó diyingo dahinohnáa dooleełígíí bidadoołkaal. T'áá háiida doo ákójít'ígóó éí Bóhólníihii doo yizdoołtséel da. (Hebrews 12:14)¹

Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. (Hebrews 12:14)²

Introduction

I have heard that some Christian Navajos no longer practice *k'é*. There might be a reason for this that I don't understand, but, if so, it comes across to me as being most unfortunate. For English only readers, *k'é* is the custom of exchanging clan information when two Navajos greet other. The purpose is to establish ties between people who might not otherwise know each other. In my view, if there's any part of traditional Navajo life that deserves a prominent place in Christian practice on the reservation, it's *k'é*.

The second part of the verse requires comment too. We'll have to take a close look at the wording in the Navajo and in the original, because there's a subtle difference of which readers should be aware.

The First Clause

K'é

Four clans are generally identified when two Navajos greet each other in the traditional manner. It's not just a matter of saying hi. First there's one's mother's clan, then the father's clan, then the mother's father's clan, then the father's father's clan. "An individual Navajo has two basic descent identities which signify both his maternal and his paternal origin."³ For purposes of meeting strangers both of these identities are traced to two ascending levels. Thus, the mother's clan is one's own, he or she is "born for" the father's clan, and one always includes the clan identities of both grandfathers in the greeting formula.⁴

I think this is a beautiful practice whose effect on the society is entirely positive. But does Scripture require Navajo Christians to do this? That depends on our understanding of the verse

¹ Navajo Bible quotations are from *Diyin God Bizaad. The Holy Bible in Navajo*. Revised edition. New York: American Bible Society, 2000.

² English Bible quotations are from *The Holy Bible: New International Version*®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House.

³ Gary Witherspoon, *Navajo Kinship and Marriage* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1975), pp. 42-43.

⁴ For further information on this complex kinship system see Witherspoon's entire fifth chapter, pp. 37-48. It is masterfully written by a person who speaks the language and has himself married into the tribe.

and, since we're working with translations, it depends on how we translate both the first clause ("Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy") and the second clause ("without holiness no one will see the Lord").

Holiness

The author not only says "to live in peace with all men" (clause 1a). He also says "to be holy" (clause 1b). So there are two things here. What does it mean to be holy? The first place in the Bible where this word is used has to do with the Sabbath.

And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done. (Genesis 2:3)

When people are holy they live good lives, but how can a day be holy? If this seems like a difficult question, it is also an important question which brings us the heart of what holiness means in the Bible. The holiness of the Sabbath does not reside in the hours of the day. It resides in its relationship with the Lord. This also is what makes people holy. It is their relationship with the Lord.

What does it mean that God "blessed the seventh day and made it holy"? It means He claimed it as His own; He reserved for Himself. The Sabbath is not holy because the day is there, but because God is there. In the same way we are holy when we live our lives for God. A holy person cannot look within himself or herself and point to holiness. It's not there. Holiness only resides in one place in our universe, and that is Christ. The Father and the Son are holy. We become holy if we live our lives for God. It's not in us; it's in our relationship to God.

In the case of the Sabbath things are a bit more complex. There's God, and a person, and a day – three things, not two. Not just a person and God. When a person spends the seventh day in a way that focuses on God, in response to the command of God, s/he is keeping the day holy. (Notice, when we do this we are not making the day holy. God made it holy. We are merely commanded to keep it holy.) The relationship is between a person and God, but this relationship expresses itself by thinking and living especially for God on this particular day.

Can we express this same type of relationship by thinking and living for God on some other day? If we won't do what God says the way He says it, that's not the type of relationship I have in mind. Alternatively, can we express the same relationship by thinking and living for God every day? It's true that we should live for God every day, but doing this is not the same as Sabbath keeping, because the commandment doesn't just tell us to rest one day. It tells us work the other six days. So if you're keeping the Sabbath every day, you're not keeping it at all. The idea is to make the one day different from the others. That one day is holy, because God claims it, while the others are for common use. We have not kept the Sabbath holy until we treat the other six days as common and thus establish the contrast between them that God has in mind.

Which one day is that? If only God had told us! As it is, it looks like we'll have to decide for ourselves. Right? Wrong! God did indeed tell us which day is His. It's not that He left us in doubt, but that we don't want to believe Him. The seventh day is the one He set aside. Following His example, we work six days. Then, again following His example, we rest the seventh day – the day that follows our six days of work.

Let me say one more thing about this before going on, since it's an important point and one on which people disagree. Hold your right hand out in front of you with the palm up. The thumb is on the right. Now turn your hand over so what you see is the back rather than the palm. The thumb is on the left. When we change Sabbath into Sunday, for whatever reason, the result is that we're not just making Sabbath come one day later. We're reversing the sequence. Saturday is the last day of the week. Sunday is the first day of the week. There's a difference between last and first. The two are not merely different; they are opposites.

I've used the Sabbath as an illustration here, but the same principle applies to any example of holiness. We are holy when we live our lives for God. Human holiness does not reside in humans; it resides in the God they follow. It's similar to being married. When a husband keeps himself to his wife alone, that's the type of relationship we're talking about. The human relationship between a man and wife is only an illustration, but it might help us see what holiness means on a spiritual level. Holiness describes a special relationship.

There's more to say about the text of our first clause, but we'll introduce these points as we come to them below.

The Second Clause

What is at issue?

Now we come to the second clause. NIV translates interpretatively here, giving us a noun ("holiness") instead of a pronoun ("which"), but the meaning is correct. In NIV the author says, "without holiness no one will see the Lord." It is true that without holiness no one will see the Lord. But translating more literally, what the Greek says is, "without which [*hou*] no one will see the Lord." The word "which" is a pronoun – a pointing word. It doesn't carry any meaning itself, but points back to another word in the first clause which has the meaning we need. We'll need to go there to get the right word. Once this pronoun points us back to the first clause, which word should we take? Here's the verse again.

Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness [*hou*] no one will see the Lord. (Hebrews 12:14)

Does "which" point back to the part about living in "peace" with all men? Or does it point back to the part about being "holy"? Perhaps it includes both words. Exactly what does it point to? What is the scope of its reference? In order to be sure, let's repeat the verse again, adding some further information.

The Greek text

Before I do this I need to mention two things. First, in NIV the author is telling us to "live" and to "be" ("live in peace," "be holy"). Words like "live" and "be" are verbs. The Greek, though, does not have verbs where these words occur. Instead it has nouns. That's one point. The second point is that Greek nouns are of different kinds. They can be masculine, feminine, or neuter. Navajo nouns don't have gender like this, and for that matter English nouns don't either. But Greek nouns do. Knowing that in the original we're dealing with nouns instead of verbs at certain key points and that Greek nouns can be of different kinds will help us understand what

the author had in mind as he wrote. So now we're ready to repeat the verse. A fairly literal translation of the Greek would be,

Pursue peace with everyone and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord. (Hebrews 12:14; literal gloss from the Greek)

Both "peace" and "holiness" are nouns. You knew that. But what kind of nouns? Are they masculine, feminine, or neuter? Or perhaps the two nouns are not the same. Does the gender of the one disagree with the gender of the other? Actually it does. Now let's repeat the verse, showing what gender the nouns are in the first clause and what gender the pronoun is in the second clause.

Pursue peace [feminine] with everyone and holiness [neuter], without which [neuter] no one will see the Lord. (Hebrews 12:14; literal gloss from the Greek)

The word "peace" (*erēnēn*) is a feminine noun in Greek and "holiness" (*hagiasmon*) is a neuter noun. Now, notice that the pronoun "which" (*hou*) is neuter. So what word does "which" point back to? Does this neuter pronoun point back to a feminine noun, or to a neuter noun? It refers back only to the neuter noun "holiness," not the feminine noun "peace." This does not mean that living in peace with people is unimportant. It just means that, when he wrote down the second clause of this verse, what he was thinking of was the part about "holiness."

The Navajo text

All of this could be misunderstood. When I say Christians should practice *k'é* (this is what NIV translates as living "in peace with all men") and when we then read – in the Greek – that without this (without "which") no one will see the Lord, does this mean that Navajo Christians must practice *k'é*? Is the author telling us that if we don't practice *k'é* we won't see the Lord? Does the salvation of Navajo Christians depend on continuing the practice of *k'é*? No! It doesn't. I personally think that *k'é* is a good idea, but our salvation does *not* depend on it.

I say these things, and take a good bit of time doing so, because the Navajo translation seems to imply otherwise. A fairly literal first pass translation of the Navajo would be,

Live in peace with everyone, and make every effort to be holy. Whoever doesn't do so [*doo ákójít'ííggóó*] will not see the Lord. (Hebrews 12:14; literal gloss from the Navajo)

If we translate the key terms of the first clause using verbs, it's important to translate the second clause correctly, because if we don't some people could feel that it condemns them for doing what their consciences tell them is right. There's nothing in the Navajo of the second clause to tell us what part of the first clause this expression refers back to. If we can't make such a distinction, the safest assumption would be that it refers back to all of it – both to living in peace *and* to being holy. Even this is alright. But do the words *k'é da'ahidoh'ní* really mean "live in peace"? Or do they mean "practice *k'é*"? You could take it either way.

Discussion

Whichever way we go with this, the implications are huge. We won't see the Lord if we don't "live in peace with everyone"? This sounds reasonable, but is it really true that we will not see the Lord if we don't practice *k'é*?

Practice *k'é* [*diné t'áá attso bit k'é da'ahidoh'ní*], and make every effort to be holy. Whoever doesn't do so [*doo ákójít'ííggóó*] will not see the Lord. (Hebrews 12:14; literal gloss from the Navajo)

If we translate with verbs in clause 1, and if we apply the words *doo ákójít'ííggóó* to both parts of clause 1, and if we interpret clause 1a in such a way that it mandates the practice of *k'é*, then the words *diné t'áá attso bit k'é da'ahidoh'ní dooleetígíí* could be taken as a command to practice *k'é*. Such an interpretation would go beyond the author's intent.

Conclusion

The author does not have in mind the traditional Navajo practice of exchanging clan information when greeting each other as he writes. I think practicing *k'é* is a good idea. It's something Navajo Christians should do. That's my opinion. But if someone feels differently – for whatever reason – Scripture does not condemn that person. What the author is saying in the second clause of Hebrews 12:14 is closer to the way NIV has it ("without holiness [clause 1b] no one will see the Lord") than the way the Navajo has it (*T'áá háiida doo ákójít'ííggóó éí Bóhólníihii doo yizdootséeł da*, "Whoever does not do so [clause 1a and clause 1b] will not see the Lord"). The focus in clause 2 is on the second part of clause 1, not the first. The neuter pronoun he uses can only refer back to a neuter noun. Thus, in the present case it can only refer back to the word "holiness" (clause 1b).

The bottom line is that whatever we feel about *k'é* is a private matter. We should pray about it and reach our own decision. God will lead each one as He sees fit. For Navajo Christians, practicing *k'é* is the sort of thing Paul had in mind in Romans when he said,

So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves. (Romans 14:22)