The Tabernacle

Michele and I had new cabinets installed in our kitchen 3 years ago and we chose Shaker style cabinet doors. This style was developed by the Shaker religious sect that settled in the northeast in the late 1700’s. The Shakers were an offshoot of the Quakers who were founded in England during the 1600’s. Many fled to the colonies in the 1700’s to escape religious persecution. The Quakers practiced an austere type worship with no music or preaching although any who felt led by God could speak. The Shakers began in England in the mid 1700’s by former Quakers who preferred worship accompanied by singing, shouting and trembling and were thus known as “Shaking Quakers”. As many cults, their beliefs were focused on one person, in their case Mother Ann Lee who was recognized as the second coming of Jesus. The formal name of the Shakers is the United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing. Their practice of celibacy required that families who converted were separated with men and women living apart in dormitories while their children became wards of the community. It is not surprising that the Shaker religion is all but extinct today. What does remain are their techniques of excellent craftsmanship in construction, most notably cabinetry. As Bob Villa put it *“Their devout beliefs that simplicity, order and neatness surpassed ornateness served as the foundation for their no-frills designs.”* I once read that they sometimes used raised panels on the inside of cabinet doors because they did not want such an adornment to show on the outside. In Exodus chapter 26, God continues giving Moses instructions for building the tabernacle. In chapter 25 God started with the innermost furnishings working outward. That continues in chapter 26 as God tells Moses how the tabernacle itself is to be built.

The interior boundaries are described first. They were to be curtains made of twisted yarns of blue, purple and scarlet with cherubim worked into them. The 3 colors are symbolic of Jesus. Blue is thought to represent peace with God through Jesus. Purple was the color of royalty representing His identity as King of Kings. Before Jesus was crucified Roman soldiers mocked him and dressed him in a purple robe (see Mark 15:17 and John 19:2). Scarlet is symbolic of His blood shed for our sins.

Next God gave instructions for the covering of the outside of the tabernacle. While the inside materials were fine and delicate, the outside were to be plain. The outside curtains were to be made of goat hair which were covered with ram skins overlayed with hides of sea cows (badger skins in KJV). Sea cows are thought to be large porpoises that could have been harvested from the Red Sea, obviously much different from the smaller land-dwelling badger. I will leave it to biblical scholars well versed in Hebrew translation to solve this mystery. The plain, rough coverings had the practical purpose of protecting the finer interior from the elements.

The frames holding up the structure were described in detail then God returned to the inside to instruct Moses on the curtain to separate the Holy place from the Most Holy Place and a curtain for the entrance to the tent. Just as the other interior curtains, these curtains were to be made of yarns of blue, purple and scarlet.

Despite the shortcomings of their religion, the Shakers belief in a simple outside appearance is consistent with the teachings of Jesus. On the outside He was a plain, rough carpenter yet He was the Son of God. He rebuked the Pharisees for their devotion to outward appearances. He said that everything they did was for show including their ostentatious dress, offerings and fanatical cleaning of the outside of cups and dishes. He described them as whitewashed tombs, beautiful on the outside but full of dead men’s bones on the inside (see Matt. chapter 23, 7 woes). In the tabernacle, God wanted a plain exterior with the glory reserved for the inside where He would dwell. This is a reminder that our inner devotion to God is much more important than the exterior we display to the world.