

# *NEW* Horizons

*Vol 12 No 2*

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*addressing the important issues for today and tomorrow*

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*inside...*

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**CGOM**

Churches Of God Outreach Ministries

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in the clearest of terms - and  
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that truth has been buried,  
dug up, buried again. Our  
desire is to restore the sim-  
ple apostolic message. We  
hope you will be excited  
by what the Scriptures re-  
veal about life, and the  
horizons beyond**

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# new Horizons

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**Jesus is risen! Scholars scoff.  
Most of mankind ignores the fact.  
But it should turn your world  
upside-down**

Imagine you are an eyewitness in Jerusalem when Jesus was crucified. You go to his tomb to scoff on Sunday afternoon with a crowd of sceptical companions. There you are confronted with the fact that the tomb is empty, that the Roman and Jewish authorities can't explain it, and that there is incontrovertible evidence that Jesus is walking and talking with his disciples. What is your reaction? Will you believe - or will you still scoff? Will you deny the evidence and behave 'as normal'?

Down the centuries countless men and women have faced this dilemma. Most simply turn their back. *Will you?*

## Unknown Jesus

Recent surveys suggest that Jesus is a virtual unknown to many in the UK. 'Isn't he that little man on a cross?' 'Something to do with churches'. Where he was born and when is a mystery to many, as is the purpose of his life on earth.

In fact, Jesus of Nazareth is the most significant person to have walked our planet. If you haven't yet encountered him - *you will!*

The real Jesus is obscured by centuries of tradition and myth. Even his birth is celebrated at the wrong time of year and in a grotesque manner and accompanied by lies. Out of ignorance his resurrection is celebrated - how weird! - with rabbits and coloured eggs. His message has been so

distorted as to become unrecognizable. Eyewitness testimony to his life, death and resurrection are derided. Yet by any measure Jesus is remarkable, towering over any Nobel Prize winner.

## Some Facts

The true story of the life of Jesus has been reduced to a fairy tale by scoffers. Every aspect of his record has been torn apart and minutely dissected. Christians have been criticized for using the Bible to 'prove itself' - circular reasoning. And indeed the *detail* of his life are recorded only in the texts of the New Testament. Yet it has been said there's more evidence to corroborate his life story that there is for Julius Caesar.

## Jesus - myth or reality?

We know, for example, that the Emperor Nero - just thirty-three years after the death of Jesus - blamed Christians for the Great Fire in Rome. (To compare: thirty years ago Margaret Thatcher was about to become Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, and Jimmy Carter President of the United States.) The number of Christians mushroomed, spread through the Empire and appeared in contemporary records.

The Jews claimed that the Christians had disrupted the Empire [Gk *oikoumene*] (Acts 17:6), and are known to have opposed this Way from its beginnings. The Empire also experienced the impact of Jesus from the beginning in the early thirties. The

Egyptian (Coptic) church was founded around 40-45AD, according to the 'Father of church history' Eusebius (late third century). It may well have sprung from the work of the 'Ethiopian eunuch' (Acts 8:26-39). India received the message around 52AD, Europe and China during the first century.

Only the ignorant and the willingly blind and sceptical will deny the existence of Jesus! And in face of the evidence for his return from the dead after three days and nights in the grave, only the spiritually dead will not respond to the challenge of his resurrection.

## Resurrection Fact

Perhaps the most disputed 'incident' in the record of Jesus is his resurrection from the dead. Not surprising, for it challenges every one of us - irrefutable evidence for the existence of the sovereign God. And that fact challenges us to assess our relationship with Him. Without the resurrection - as said the apostle Paul: '*...unless Christ was raised to life, your faith is useless, and you are still living in your sins. And those people who died after putting their faith in him are completely lost*' (I Corinthians 15:17-18 CEV). Without the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth we live, we die. And that's it.

Centuries before Jesus walked the earth the Psalmist predicted: '*For you will not leave my soul in hell [Heb. sheol - the grave]; neither will you suffer your Holy One to see corruption*' (Psalm 16:10). Jesus was dead. For three days and three nights he lay in the tomb, only to pass through his grave-clothes and walk through the massive stone sealing the

tomb's entrance. [Request the article *The Empty Tomb* for more evidence]

### Did Jesus Live?

The Christian faith is firmly rooted in fact, in history. There is no 'Christ myth', but solid evidence of his life, his death and his resurrection. Note the following documentary and historical evidence:

- Recent scholarship considers the Gospels were written before 70AD. They are eye-witness testimony
- A fragment of papyrus from Matthew 26 has been dated to around 40-50AD
- Christians experienced persecutions for their belief in Jesus under several early Emperors: Nero, Domitian, Decius, Galerius
- There were Christian assemblies in Rome within twenty years of the resurrection
- Christianity had reached the Atlantic and India before the first century expired
- The New Testament letters, written in mid-first century, are held to be authentic by scholars, and they bear witness to Jesus
- The *Didache* ('Teaching') testifies of Jesus and the church, and is dated to around 70AD
- The first Christians were willing to be killed for their belief in Jesus - not sane, if they knew he was fraudulent and did not rise from the dead
- The 'church fathers' (ie before 400AD) wrote extensively and in detail concerning him
- There are references to Jesus in non-Biblical sources, including the Jewish *Talmud*

### Was Jesus Resurrected?

Internal (Bible) evidence for the resurrection of Jesus is consistent and is considered by legal experts to be unassailable evidence that will stand in Court:

- His impalement on a Roman

### Predictions

*Here's some of what the Bible predicted concerning Jesus*

Since mankind was created his existence was foretold (Genesis 3:15).

Indeed the original prophecy has with gross distortion fuelled the mythology of nations. Minutely the details of his life and death were predicted: the time and place of his unique birth, his rejection by his fellows, his mission, his betrayal, his suffering and death - and his resurrection. Written into the Scriptures is type after type depicting his remarkable life - the nature and purpose of his sacrifice and the unnecessary brutality of his execution. Even the precise length of time he rested in the grave was predicted

stake ensured that he well and truly died

- The tomb was guarded by a detachment of Roman soldiers. Neglect of duty could mean death
- It was officially sealed (*cf* Daniel 6:17) - to tamper with an Imperial seal incurred severe penalty
- The massive stone 'lid' was rolled away, the seal broken
- The grave-clothes included 100lbs of spices *etc*, cementing the 'bandages' together
- Jesus passed through the grave clothes, leaving them undisturbed - and empty
- The head wrapping was separate, retaining its shape (No 'Turin Shroud' here!)
- The tomb was proven empty, and didn't therefore become a 'shrine' for the apostles
- The Jews' attempts to explain his disappearance confirm the tomb was empty

- The authorities were unable to produce the body of Jesus
- It was impossible, given the guard, for the disciples to have 'stolen' his body
- The risen Jesus appeared to many, including a group of over 500 - most still alive when Paul wrote
- Initially the disciples disbelieved he was alive. They were transformed within days from cowardice to boldness
- The resurrection is the persistent theme of early evangelism

The death and the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is history - living history. He was '*...declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead*' (Romans 1:4). By divine energy he burst the chains of death, and perfectly fulfilled his own prediction that he would rise again.

It is only because of the resurrection of Jesus that mankind has the hope of life beyond the grave.

### Your Future

Here's what Jesus said:

The evidence that Jesus of Nazareth

*'For as the Father has life in himself; so has he given to the Son to have life in himself; And has given him authority to execute judgment also, because he is the Son of man. Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation [judgment]'* (John 5:26-29)

lived, died, and rose in a spirit body is incontrovertible. It's a challenge to all. We can choose which resurrection is for us: to *life* or for *judgment*.

*Choose life!*

**Ω**

### STUDY THE WORD

*Be sure to enroll for our free 32-lesson Study Course. It's a key to what is for many a 'Book of Mystery'*

**Christians give. But how? How much? Is 'tithing' the way?**

## Tithing - is it for Christians?

Every Christian realizes that 'the church' needs financial support and we are happy to provide it. Some churches pass round the collection plate (or a bucket!) Others insist on the giving of a *tenth* of income (the 'tithe'). What does the Bible teach?

Tithing is barely discussed in the New Testament, and this raises questions as to the role of tithing for the Christian. In the Old Testament it was, of course, an established practice for the people of Israel.

The details of the tithe - who by, who received it, what was tithed and what was excluded, were there multiple tithes, gross income or net, what is 'increase' *etc*? It has led to much head-scratching. (And indeed privation and misunderstanding!) But as we shall see, the fine detail is largely irrelevant for the Christian.

### Jesus and tithing

The tithe is indeed referred to by Jesus. As a Jew, 'made under the Law' (Galatians 4:4), he would personally have tithed as the Law required. This tithe of produce was conveyed to the local Levites who in turn tithed to the Priests. Jesus complied with the Law in every aspect, and so taught (though his main concern was with its 'spirit' - which went beyond the letter of the Law - see Matthew 5-7).

For example, he directed the healed leper to 'go to the priest' for clearance (Matthew 8:4). He taught his hearers that the Law was there to be obeyed. And he told the Pharisees to be diligent in tithing (Matthew 23:23). This isn't surprising as the Law was the God-given pattern for the Israelite's worship of the LORD.

With the destruction of the Temple and all its services in 70AD the priesthood was suspended. Aspects of the Law (eg the sacrificial system)

became obsolete, fulfilled in him.

### Royal Priesthood

The role first offered to Israel of becoming a '*...nation of priests and a holy nation*' (Exodus 19:6) devolved on Christians. (There was no Priesthood other than heads of families.) Wrote the apostle Peter: '*...you [Christians] are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation*' (I Peter 2:9). That is, all those in whom resides God's Spirit are part of God's Kingdom or nation. So in the Christian dispensation it would be surprising if there were no changes.

### Jesus and Melchisedec

No-one has ever been saved by observance of the Law - a matter made clear in the book of Hebrews. Every aspect of that Law has reference to, looks forward to, and is fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah. Salvation comes only through belief in him and submission to him. He alone is the way, having 'bought us' - the price being his suffering and death. This is no less so in the matter in hand - *tithing*. No amount of giving - large or small - can buy salvation.

The reference in the book of Hebrews to Melchisedec is often cited in regard to the tithe. The writer (chapter seven) is intent on proving that in all things Jesus is superior in every way to the Levitical priesthood. But who was Melchisedec? The inspired Scripture is silent as to his origins. [see side-bar, p.4]

In Hebrews 7 Paul is simply showing why Christ can be our 'High Priest', though from a different tribe than was assigned to the Priesthood.

He draws the analogy that Jesus had no *legal* right to the priesthood, coming as he did from Judah and not Levi (Hebrews 7:14). His priesthood was, *is*, superior - and perpetual. Jesus, however, is an everlasting priest by virtue of *God's oath* (Psalm 110:4)

### Law of Tithing

Tithing in this passage is an incidental reference to show Melchisedec's greatness: '*...the less is blessed by the better*' (Hebrews 7:7). So great, says Paul, that even the 'father of the faithful' gave him a tenth of the spoils - and in a sense Israel's Priests, too, tithed to Melchisedec.

Note that it's not a '*law of tithing*' here under discussion but a '*law of priesthood*' - that's what was changed. At the time of writing Paul recognizes that the priesthood was still collecting the tithe for the Temple service (*ch* 7:5). He would not therefore (and had no right to) advise the church to divert it from the priesthood.

How, then, was the work of the early church financed, if not by the tithe - a newcomer in the sixth century of our era?

### New Testament Example

The Scriptures provide clear teaching on how the early church was supported. Paul - on principles derived from the Law (I Corinthians 9:9) and from Jesus - claims the right to financial support:

*'...it is written in the law of Moses, Thou shall not muzzle the ox when he treads out the corn. Is it for the oxen that God cares, or says he it assuredly for our sake? Yea, for our sake it was written: because he that plows ought to plow in hope, and he that threshes, to thresh in hope of partaking. If we have sown spiritual things for you, is it a great thing if we reap*

*Each quotation from the Bible in New Horizons is from the translation which most clearly expresses the original language*

*your material things? If others are partakers of this right over you, are we not even more? Nevertheless we have not used this right*

(I Corinthians 9:11-14)

Paul's bio shows he did not wallow in luxury! To give to him was to give to 'the work' - there was no TV, no printing press. The apostles - and the local church - were the work.

He gives this illustration of his approach to financial arrangements:

*'...I robbed other churches by taking money[']...took wages' KJV] from them to serve you. Even when I was in need, I still didn't bother you. In fact, some of the Lord's followers from Macedonia brought me what I needed' (II Corinthians 11:8-9 CEV). He adds: '... I have coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. These hands have provided for my necessities, and for those who were with me' (Acts 20:33)*

(He worked as a tent-maker to keep body and soul together: Acts 19:3.)

Jesus taught the same, sending out the disciples dependent on the voluntary support of their hearers (Matthew 10:9-14). He and the disciples were supported, for example, from the possessions of a number of followers (Luke 8:2-3). There's no suggestion that they 'tithed' to him; that would have been illegal - tithes were for the Levitical Priesthood.

### Attitude Counts

Even among believers there is sometimes a reluctance to part with hard-earned cash! Paul, writing to Corinth, therefore lays down the principles of Christian giving:

*'...He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for*

## Melchisedec

Jewish tradition says Melchisedec was a son (or grandson) of Peleg (Genesis 10:25) and lived 113 years (Suidas 10th C.AD).

Biblically we know only that Melchisedec was one of God's priests in the time of Abraham (Genesis 14). He is a type, a pattern, for Jesus; *'...Jesus, made an high priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec [ie King of Righteousness]' (Hebrews 6:20). He was a priest '...of the most high God', but also '...king of Salem' [ie. Jerusalem - Psalm 76:2] (7:1). He was '...without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days, nor end of life'.*

The passage here referred to by Paul (Genesis 14:18-20) describes this mysterious person and Paul compares him to Jesus. His name and title are symbolic and so, too, is his genealogy - or, lack of one.

The concept that Melchisedec was an incarnation of Jesus is speculative (cp John 8:58). He was a *type* of Jesus. That is, the recorded words in Genesis are a reflection, a 'prophecy', of the higher fulfillment in Jesus

Note that at that time the true faith still had its followers. The post-Flood culture did not cry out - yet - for cleansing (cf Genesis 15:16). Even centuries later in Moses' day JHVH was worshipped outside Israel (eg Numbers 22:8).

.It should not be overlooked that righteous Shem was alive (Bible chronology) in Abraham's day.

*every good work. For if there is first a willing mind, it is accepted according to what one has, and not according to what he does not have' (Corinthians 9:9-16)*

### In sum

The tithing law pertains to the Priest-

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**The Small Church  
Be a Good Steward**

hood, to the - now defunct - Temple and to its service. As Christians, we give willingly and cheerfully - not from coercion but out of all our resources of time and energy, out of a grateful heart and according to our means. Each gives *'...as he purposes in his heart'*. It's a personal decision as to *who* we support, *how much* we give and *when*.

### Old Testament Pattern

The (three-fold) tithe system in the Old Testament can, however, be used as a *pattern* for our giving (cp I Corinthians 10). We support our *local church* (financially and with our time and prayers and our interaction with the brethren); we save so we can worship and rejoice at *God's festivals*; and we are generously aware of the *material needs* of others - especially our family and the brethren (I Timothy 5:8, Galatians 6:10).

Add to this the 'tithe principle'. Determine a regular amount to contribute to your local church (in return for the services it provides), and/or . to a ministry which you trust. But do ensure transparency by means of a financial report.

### Our Part

Throughout the Christian centuries 'church' has sought to shackle the members with a strict system of tithing to finance an obese, profligate and self-serving bureaucracy intent on amassing power over the people.

The work of the church does indeed need to be financed - but out of the hearts of those dedicated to serving our Saviour in his mission: *'...Share every good thing you have with anyone who teaches you what God has said' (Galatians 6:6 CEV).*

Jesus had said: *'...the labourer is worthy of his hire' (Luke 10:7).* And Paul, echoing these words of Jesus, tells Timothy: *'...Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and* **cont'd p.8**

**‘Remember me’, said Jesus. How?  
Is there an alternative to Easter?**

*Easter!* New hats and frocks. The Easter parade. Rolling coloured eggs. A Sunday sun-rise service. Great fun for the kids. A focus on life renewed: the resurrection of Jesus, triumphant over the grave.

The season, though, began less joyously. Friday - ‘Good Friday’ - is a day of sadness. By tradition that’s when Jesus suffered an ignominious death on a Roman stake. In some Christian societies it’s a day for self-flagellation - literally. Some individuals submit themselves to a mock crucifixion. The steps of Jesus along the *Via Delorosa* in Jerusalem are traced in pageantry.

**Death and Resurrection**

But such remembrance is far removed from actuality. The spring festival known as Easter - as most Bible students know - did not originate with the death and resurrection of Jesus, pre-dating him by centuries. The ‘death and resurrection’ of a Saviour is a concept well-known in the Old Testament.

Some scholars see it implied in the Genesis description, in Eden’s garden, of a ‘promised seed’, a suffering Messiah: “*He will crush your [ie Satan’s] head and you will crush his [the Redeemer’s] heel*” (ch 3:15). Job, one of the earliest of the Bible writers, also understood it: “*I know that my Redeemer lives, and at last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has thus been destroyed then out of my flesh I shall see God*” (Job 19:25).

The Psalmist sings: “*Therefore my heart was glad and my glory [soul, life] rejoiced; my body too will dwell securely. For you will not leave my soul in [the grave] nor allow your holy one to see corruption*” (Psalm 16:8-10).

Jesus, too, recognized this teaching -

in the life of the prophet Jonah, drawing from there the analogy of his own death and resurrection (Matthew 12:40). Examples of this could be multiplied!

It isn’t surprising, then, to find that early in man’s history the concept had crept into the religion of those who had rejected God’s revelation - men who *‘altered God’s truth into falsehood, and revered and served the creature rather than the Creator’* (Romans 1:25).

That a Saviour would die and be resurrected is a concept known widely in the ancient world - even apart from the Bible revelation. It gave rise to the various mythical cycles in which the ‘god’ dies and is miraculously restored to life.

Any substantial *Encyclopaedia*, of course, will detail how these various rites were absorbed into the Christian church from around the fourth century. They include the forty days of

**Pagan Mythology**

One such myth is that of the Egyptian *Isis and Osiris*. Then there’s *Cybele and Attis*.

Another - mentioned by the prophet Ezekiel is that of *Tammuz and Ishtar*. The apparent ‘death’ of nature in autumn and subsequent ‘resurrection’ in spring also contributed to the Babylonian myth. Every year Tammuz, the god of the underworld, was mourned by his worshippers. Ezekiel found him - an abomination to God - being worshipped in God’s Temple where “*...women sat weeping for Tammuz.*” (ch 8:14). This was for forty days leading to the last week of March when he was ‘resurrected’. Tammuz was the husband of his mother - some say sister - Ishtar. (*Ishtar* - also called *Astarte* - has a familiar

# The Easter Story

Lenten abstinence, the now popular sun-rise service on Easter morning (*ie* facing east), the rolling of coloured eggs. Ezekiel 8:16-17 is instructive: “*... I was then led into the temple’s inner courtyard, where I saw about twenty-five men standing near the entrance, between the porch and the altar. Their backs were to the LORD’s temple, and they were bowing down to the rising sun. God said, “Ezekiel, it’s bad enough that the people of Judah are doing these disgusting things...”*”.

Such practices replaced the ‘death and resurrection’ festivals instituted by God and observed by Jesus, the apostles and the first Christians.

**Worship - God’s Way**

Having initiated human life, the Creator gave us guidance on how to live and how to worship Him. One aspect was a series of annual reminders of His plan - seven recurring annual festivals each of which highlights an aspect of that plan, and each pointing to Jesus Christ. The Spring festival consisted of the sacrifice of the *Passover*, followed by the seven *Days of Unleavened Bread*, the whole being loosely termed ‘Passover’ (Ezekiel 45:21).

In harmony with God’s perfect timing (eg Galatians 4:4), Jesus died late in the afternoon of Nisan 14\*. At this time, between 3pm and 4pm (‘evening’), the Passover lamb was ceremonially sacrificed in the Temple. Paul refers to Jesus as ‘*Christ our Passover*’ (I Corinthians 5:7).

Many Christians today observe it as the ‘Night to be remembered’, investing it with Christian significance. It begins a week of rejoicing known in the Scriptures as *Unleavened Bread*. To the Corinthian brethren - largely Gentile - Paul in that same passage

acknowledges that the brethren were observing these days (vv.6-8). Passover is to be observed 'throughout your generations' - and will continue to be observed after Messiah returns.

Jesus, however, introduced a further observance which is to continue *until* he returns.

### Lord's Supper

This remembrance is a solemn memorial of his night of betrayal, anguished suffering and subsequent crucifixion on a Roman stake. Called by Paul the *Lord's Supper*, it is held annually 'on the night in which he was betrayed' - the beginning of Nisan 14\*.

At the evening meal on that pre-Passover night he introduced the simple everyday symbols of bread and wine as representative of his broken body and shed blood:

*"For I have received from the Lord what I have also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and said, 'Take, eat. This is my body broken on your behalf. This do in remembrance of me'. Similarly he took the cup after they had supped saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood.. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me'. For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup you shall proclaim the Lord's death till he comes"*

(I Corinthians 11:23-26)

### A Lesson in Humility

Further, Jesus enjoined the practice of 'foot washing', having himself set the example to the disciples at that last meal before he suffered: "...if I, your Lord and Teacher, wash your feet you surely ought to wash one another's feet; for I have set you an example so that you might do just as I did to you.... If you grasp these truths, blessed are you if you practice them" (John 13:12-17).

### A Pure Heart

The *Unleavened Bread* festival, also observed by the early church (I Corinthian 5), was a period of seven days starting with the Passover during which no 'leavened bread' - ie yeasted, raised, fermented bread - was eaten. In Christian use it is symbolic of a pure life, energized by the risen Christ through his Spirit.

[It was during this festival that Jesus was resurrected.]

### 2008 Spring Festivals

**Lord's Supper:** April 18 (Friday evg)

**Unleavened Bread:** April 20-26

**Pentecost:** June 8

Physically, leaven is cor-

ruption, but spiritually it signifies *hypocrisy* (Luke 12:1), and *false teaching* (Matthew 16:12). This festival thus encapsulates the concept of *resurrection, a pure heart and pure truth*. The Scriptures therefore give no specific day - eg 'Easter Sunday' - to commemorate this momentous event. Rather it is an entire week of

celebration during which Christians live without this symbolic corruption (leaven) in our bodies or our homes. By our eating daily of *unleavened* - 'sweet' - bread we are reminded that throughout life we 'feed on *that bread which came down from heaven*' (John 6:51).

The Bible festivals (the 'appointed feasts of the LORD' - Leviticus 23:2 - not of Moses) are free from the leaven - hypocrisy and false teaching - that permeates most of Christianity by the observance of days which are plainly from idolatrous sources.

This year, why not commit yourself to the observance of those days God has set aside for His people! **Ω**

*\*This on the calendar widely used throughout the then known world. On the current, Gregorian, calendar it falls sometime in March/April. A calendar linking the old calendar and the new is available from any of our addresses.*

## The Lord's Supper

This is a simple service of remembrance instituted by Jesus himself at the 'last supper' (Gk: *deipnon* - dinner, described in John 13-17).

Within the Christian religion it assumes many forms ranging from a simple meal through to the elaborate Roman Catholic Mass, and is held at varying intervals from daily or more often (the Mass) through weekly, quarterly - and annually. It is variously called *Mass, Lord's Supper, Passover, Communion, Lord's Table*.

The *Churches of God* observe it as an *annual* memorial '...on the night in which he was betrayed' (I Corinthians 11: 23). Some in Corinth had confused it with Passover which for the Jews was a joyous festive celebration. Paul told the brethren to restrain themselves - pointed out to them that it was a solemn memorial occasion and they should eat their meal at home.

The service is held at the beginning of the 14th day of the Hebrew month *Nisan* in early Spring (ie the evening after sunset on the 13th). In accord with Jesus guidance, the brethren wash one another's feet, and bread and wine are passed round. Prayers are said, and appropriate passages of the Scriptures read.

*An outline service is available from any of our addresses*



The stomach-churning events on the world stage contrast vividly with the longed-for Utopian Golden Age envisaged by sages of old. And longed-for by every sane man and woman today.

Who wants to be ruled by despots such as President Mugabe in Zimbabwe? Who would voluntarily slaughter their fellow-citizens in a bloody civil war as recently in once-peaceful Kenya? Who would wish to live in a waterless desert or live with devastating disease or see our newborn wither and die before they reach five?

Even in prosperous nations there's inequality, chronic illness, criminal activity and overflowing prisons, corruption in business and Government. The pursuit of riches is marred by financial fraud affecting all of us.

Not the world we want or hope for! Our world is indeed in turmoil - and history tells us it won't - under the hand of man - change. Since records began mankind has experienced prosperity and plague, peace and war, life and death. We devise strategies for prosperity - and reap financial crises, strategies for peace - and yet we plan war.

The human mind, it seems, is incapable of sustaining success.

### Ancient World

Introduce into a business a product which proves defective. Wisely, you ditch it, and if there's a part that's worth saving you build on that. That's what God did.

God created mankind with purpose - to share in His spirit universe. He didn't want automatons so He allowed free-will, knowing well the risk of failure. But He had a plan in place - a Redeemer through whom He could salvage His fallen creation - Jesus, the Messiah.

Our record proves God's wisdom. Time and again - failure; failure so abysmal at one period that all but one family had to be eliminated for their wickedness to preserve the plan (Genesis 6). Time and again whole nations failed - the Amorites, for example (Genesis 16:15), or Sodom (*ch.* 19).

JHVH then selected Abraham and his descendants through Isaac, forming the nation of Israel. Time and again they too

failed, but - a l m o s t uniquely - were willing to return to God when they hit rock bottom.

Jesus came - on time and on message into a world fuelled by licentiousness . [see *side-bar*] He fulfilled the prophetic writings about the Messiah. He built his church, and over the centuries its influence changed those who had ears to hear. Whole societies shed the dead hand of false religion.

### Ban the Book

The sixteenth century witnessed the birth of a slow return to ancient Biblical values as the Scriptures were translated into the language of the people. The corrupt formalism of the mediaeval church was replaced by religious freedom, and the Gospel message proclaimed worldwide.

The Sunday School movement initiated the young into 'the way of righteousness'

#### '...as in the days'

Only a little above the slaves stood the lower classes, who formed the vast majority of the freeborn inhabitants of the Roman Empire. They were for the most part beggars and idlers familiar with the grossest indignities of an unscrupulous dependence. Despising a life of honest industry they asked only for bread and the games of the Circus and were ready to support any Government, even the most despotic, if it would supply their needs. They spent their mornings lounging about the Forum or in dancing attendance at the levees of patrons for a share in whose largesse they daily struggled. They spent their afternoons and evenings in gossiping at the Public Baths, in loosely enjoying the polluted plays of the theatre, or looking with fierce thrills of delighted horror at the bloody sports of the arena.

Immeasurably removed from these needy and greedy freemen, and living chiefly amid crowds of corrupted and obsequious slaves, stood the constantly diminishing throng of the wealthy and the noble...

...a whole population might [starve] while the upper classes were squandering a fortune at a single banquet.... Gluttony, caprice, extravagance, ostentation, impurity....The Romans had entered on a stage of fatal degeneracy

Farrar: *Early Days of Christianity*, 1882

## World in Turmoil

ness', and Christian values derived from the Bible dominated the Anglo-Saxon nations. *Not any more.*

On every side the Bible is discarded even by the churches. Prayers may open each Parliamentary day but the Almighty is not consulted on proceedings. Sound principles of living are despised in our legislation opening a Pandora's box of uncontrolled lawlessness.

The world, of course, has often tipped towards rock bottom. Whether the world before the Flood, or Sodom, or ancient Rome, or the dark depths of the Middle Ages, or the Black Death man has often plunged towards extinction.

Our present crises may indeed be just another downward lurch - a fall to be again recovered from by human ingenuity or by God's mercy. (But don't bank on it!)

### Time Limited

God has a plan. Over the millennia He has taken note of those who respond to His Word, those who have His Spirit. These men and women - many martyred for their faith - will in His good time reign on earth alongside Jesus the Messiah.

From the Biblical perspective man's tenure of Earth is limited. We have been given sufficient time to test our ability for successful self-rule. That time is - just like the six-day working week - scheduled to end. In God's time and when He determines enough is enough.

But there will follow a Sabbath of rest. Man's day will, as day follows night, be followed - on Earth - by the reign of Jesus Christ. It will be a time of peaceful co-existence among nations. One God. One faith. One benign Government. One world Constitution.

When that prophesied end of human rule hits us it will be unexpected, sudden, destructive. Nations will collapse. Earth itself will shake. Billions will die. The warning of Jesus is '*...be vigilant*'. Stay faithful. Live your life - no matter how long - to reflect the grace of God. **Ω**

## The Bible

### ... West v. East

Simple sceptics have a horse-laugh at some sayings of the wisest man who ever walked our planet - Jesus Christ. Didn't he realize camels can't go through the eye of a needle? Or that you can't move a mountain by praying? Isn't it unproductive to forgive someone 'seventy times seven', as Jesus urged his disciples? And what philosopher would encourage disciples to cut off their hands or pluck out eyes for offences? (Some overzealous Christians have done this! And it is 'justice' under Sharia law.) Or give away all your clothes because asked? Or '...give to him that asks you'.

Of course, if you believe every word of the Bible is to be understood literally you may have cause for concern. For it says '...holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit' (II Peter 1:21). Indeed some believers almost worship the King James version of the Christian Scriptures, and even view its archaic English as 'sacred'.

Given our modern western use of language this approach is understandable. In modern English every word has a precise meaning. In general we mean what we say. With, of course, exceptions - *idioms* and *metaphors*. What about the 'storm in a tea cup'

### Tithing...cont'd from p.4

*doctrine. For the scripture says You shall not muzzle the ox that treads out the corn. And, the labourer is worthy of his reward' (I Timothy 5:17-18).*

As one of the 'royal priests' each of us is enrolled to do our part by willingly and actively deploying our spiritual gifts, our material resources, and our natural talents in God's service and in accordance with our circumstances.  $\Omega$

or 'kick the bucket' or something costs 'an arm and a leg'? But we don't usually - except as children - tend to exaggerate. And we don't take such expressions literally.

### Picturesque Language

Not so in times past in Bible lands!

Language was colourful, over the top, picturesque. What was important was the *impression* of your words. One writer recalls his early life (early twentieth century) in Palestine. On a visit the host insisted his home was yours. You could burn it down if you wished to. Or do as you please with his wife and children. (Remember Lot!) And before you stayed for a meal you refused several times - before, inevitably, accepting. No-one believed the form of words. It was the harmless, courteous cultural form. And it was the background for the text of the Scriptures - Old Testament and New.

So everyone understood, for example, the meaning of the parable of the 'mustard seed and the removable mountain': the smallest contrasted with the largest. But not literal! Nor - until Islam and Sharia - would any-

one expect literal removal of hands and eyes for offences. Nor to forgive four hundred and ninety times for a repeated offence. 'Seventy times seven' simply means an indeterminate number (*cf* Genesis 4:24).

The invisible God (I Timothy 1:17) himself is similarly described. He chooses to appear to man in human form - but it is also said that '...he shall cover you with his feathers, and under his wings shall thou trust' (Psalm 91:4 and see Deuteronomy 32:11-12)). It's what we call *metaphor*. Then there's the 'eye for an eye' principle. All it means is balanced justice - the punishment (usually monetary) is to be proportionate to the crime, tempered by mercy when judged appropriate.

Much of the 'distress' in our Bible study is alleviated by an understanding of this simple principle. We inhabit a vastly different world, a different culture from Biblical Palestine, we use a very different language.

Take this on board and much of the aggravation between brethren can be dissipated. Minor disputes on interpretation can thus be avoided.  $\Omega$

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MiniStudy**Church - or cult?**

*'More than anything else the people of Athens and the foreigners living there loved to hear and to talk about anything new' (Acts 17:21 CEV)*

*'...for having found this man ... a ringleader of the Nazarene sect' (Act 24:5)*

Some years ago a survey located around two thousand 'unorthodox' Christian groups in the UK, with a half-million adherents. They were labelled as 'cults', sects. How do you identify a 'cult'? Could your church be one, or become one? Do you belong to one?

- Words change meaning, and cult and sect are no exception. Cult derives from the Latin *cultus*, signifying simply a form of worship. A sect (or section) is just that - a division, smaller part. In the New Testament it translates the Greek word *heresis* and is applied, without condemnation, to Christians (Acts 24:5), Pharisees (ch 15:5), Sadducees (ch 5:17). Recent meaning of both terms, however, is derogatory, and focuses on those religious and secular groups viewed as unorthodox, different, even weird
- *heresis* itself has taken on a different meaning, now applied to serious false teaching that places its believers outside orthodoxy. And, of course, 'heresy' is a charge directed from the mainstream at cults and sects
- What, though, is 'false teaching'? Every religion harbours those who are considered to teach falsely, not least Christianity. Examine Christian belief, however, and there's a dilemma. Which denomination should we choose as orthodox? What, indeed, is orthodoxy, or correct teaching? Wrote Jude: *'...[I] exhort you to contend earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints'* (v.3). Clearly, there is a discernable core body of teachings to which all true Christians ought to adhere
- Every Christian denomination, cult, sect claims to place the Bible at the centre of its teachings. So why such wide variation of belief? There's a 'supermarket of ideas' from which a seeker after truth can choose. The teachings of Catholic Rome are far removed from those of Protestant Belfast or the 'Bible Belt'. And within each there are doctrinal conflicts - some of which, if you please, are considered 'heretical'. Cults? Sects? The dividing lines are blurred
- If, then, the Bible is central to orthodoxy - what identifies a cult? *'Believe the Bible, not me'* is a common Christian cult leadership pronouncement. But inspection of their teachings uncovers a very personal interpretation. Added to - and distorting - the Scriptures (read Jude 3 again) are visions, tradition, unique textual translations, infallibility, personal encounters with God, visits to heaven, association with angels, special revelations, new Bible translations. *'Doctrines of demons'* the apostle calls them: *'But the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, cleaving to deceiving spirits and teachings of demons'* (1 Timothy 4:1)
- So - are you in a cult? Or, is your 'mainstream' church in reality a cult? No matter how venerable or respectable or how large? Here are some more keys, some cultic techniques and principles of which to be aware:

**authoritarianism.** Any church or local assembly (or indeed secular association or club) needs structure. A cult will use this essential to impose a hierarchy of control. You were, in fact, recruited to serve the leadership, not *vice versa*. It's an informant network by which the membership is closely monitored to ensure conformity

**exclusivism.** 'We' alone have the truth, the cult teaches. All other churches are 'of the devil'. Don't contaminate your spirituality by associating with 'the world', they say. Shun those who depart the group. Avoid family contact, *we* are your friends now

**manipulation.** You are educated to conform to the group image. Fine, if that image is Christ-like living. So powerful is this manipulation that once 'in' members fear to leave. It's like leaving God behind

**financial pressure.** There's a heavy, regular claim on your income (to your last penny) for 'God's work', while the leadership is likely to live in luxury 'to the glory of God', to reflect His lifestyle

**total commitment.** To the detriment of your family your time is consumed by endless meetings, Bible studies, evangelism, prayer meetings, fastings. Historically it has led to voluntary mass suicide

**love-bombing.** You are recruited by a superficial display of intense interest in your personal well-being accompanied by the promise, in the bosom of the group, of inner peace, success, future reward, friendship

**secrecy.** You won't know the 'depths' of the cult's requirements and teachings at the beginning. First comes commitment (*eg* in baptism) - then comes the hard stuff, the secret stuff. A 'true church' is up-front **Ω**

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