

new **Horizons**

Vol 14 No 2

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addressing the important issues for today and tomorrow



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CGOM

Churches Of God Outreach Ministries

With around two thousand Christian denominations vying for your attention, it's easy to miss the important issues of life and religion. It's our hope that through *New Horizons* our readers will come to understand the true meaning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Gospel was proclaimed by Jesus and by His apostles in the clearest of terms - and recorded for us in the Scriptures. Over the centuries that truth has been buried, dug up, buried again. Our desire is to restore the simple apostolic message. We hope you will be excited by what the Scriptures reveal about life, and the horizons beyond

Who We Are

The *Churches of God Outreach Ministries* is an international association of independent local assemblies - Christians who meet together for worship, instruction in the faith and fellowship. Each assembly is self-governing according to Bible principles, but co-operates through our Conference with other like-minded assemblies to work towards agreed evangelistic goals

These goals are within the framework of the commission set for his church by Jesus: "...going, therefore, disciple all nations, baptising them...and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20). He further commanded that we "...Shepherd...[and] feed my sheep".

To these ends we publish Bible-based literature - eg our bi-monthly Newsletter OUTREACH, NEW HORIZONS magazine, the BIBLE BASICS on-line home study course, and the 32-lesson Study Course. The *Outreach Ministries* also supports a network of independent fellowships and scattered brethren

We cordially invite all independent fellowships of whatever size - and individuals - to associate with us in this worldwide ministry. Our *Statement of Beliefs* and a *Publications Catalogue* is available from any of our addresses or from our web site www.cgom.org. We are pleased to offer you, without charge, any of our publications

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If you would like a copy of our *Statement of Beliefs* please request it from any of the addresses listed

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Why did Christ question the faith of modern day followers?

John Morton (NZ)

That is exactly what he did when he said, "...when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth? (Luke 18:8). Surely, when thirty two percent of the world's current population claim to be Christian, faith abounds? Did he underestimate the power of his ministry and the success of his message, or is there something wrong with faith today? Is it possible that many have been deceived and perhaps their faith is in vain? What will he find when he returns?

Deception

Christ knew that after he departed false teachers would enter the church, "For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them." (Acts 20:29-30). He warned of them to "Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves." (Matthew 7:15).

He said that many would be deceived by people teaching in his name: "Jesus said unto them, Take heed that no man deceive you. For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many." (Matthew 24:4-5). They are false prophets, "And many false prophets shall rise, and shall de-

ceive many." (verse 11). They would even perform miracles in his name, "For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect." (v. 24).

Christ said they would work iniquity, "Not every one that says to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that does the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in your name? and in your name have cast out devils? and in your name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, you that work iniquity." (Matthew 7:21-23).

Questionable Faith

The faith of these men and their followers is questionable because they resist truth, "...so do these also resist the truth: men of corrupt minds, reprobate concerning the faith." (II Timothy 3:8). God is working with people from all walks of life who when they discover the truth embrace it - not like these who resist it. They are, "...ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth." (II Timothy 3:7).

Paul said that their iniquitous work had already begun in his time, "For the mystery of iniquity does already work" (II Thessalonians 2:7). That work of iniquity was the preaching of lawlessness. False teachers have turned the grace of

God into lasciviousness, "For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ" (Jude 1:4). Lasciviousness is another word for wantonness - it means living without restraint, unruly, indulgent, undisciplined, unmanageable, thoughtlessly cruel, insolent, arrogant and unjust.

They say that those under grace are no longer bound by the law. They teach that Christ nailed the law to the cross, that he fulfilled the law and there is no need to obey. But if the law is not taught and practiced then sin abounds and love waxes cold, "And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many. And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold" (Matthew 24:12).

Christ Confirmed the Law

If Christ had done away with the law as they claim, why did he say to the young man, "...if you will enter into life, keep the commandments. He says to him, Which? Jesus said, Thou shall do no murder, Thou shall not commit adultery, Thou shall not steal, Thou shall not bear false witness, Honour your father and your mother: and, you shall love your neighbour as thyself" (Matthew 19:17-19)? He made it very clear that he was talking about the ten commandments.

Christ also confirmed the two over-riding concepts from which the ten commandments extend, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first

Will He Find Faith?

and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, You shall love your neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:37-40).

The first four commandments define how to express love toward God and the remaining six, how to express love toward neighbour.

The love toward God and neighbour has waxed cold in this day and age because of the iniquity taught by false teachers. Paul predicted that the prevailing nature in the ‘Christian’ community of our time would be self-focussed: *“This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, Without natural affection, truce-breakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, Traitors, heady, high-minded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away.”* (II Timothy 3:1-5).

They have an outward appearance of Christianity, but love the pleasures of this world more than they love God.

Iniquity Abounds

As a result of false teaching they do not believe that they need to do anything to overcome sin - therefore sin (iniquity) abounds. Because they do not believe they need to stop sinning and change their lives, they deny the very power that can help them to make those changes. That is why Christ questioned their faith. Paul said that only those who keep the law that will be justified, *“For not the hearers of the law are just before God,*

but the doers of the law shall be justified.” (Romans 2:13).

On the other hand there are those who promote God’s law only to the extent of those commandments that Christ verbally confirmed during his ministry. They say he did not confirm the Sabbath commandment so that is the one commandment they can ignore. But what they are ignoring is the fact that Christ confirmed the Sabbath commandment by example, *“...as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, and stood up for to read.”* (Luke 4:16). He was lord of the Sabbath, *“And he said unto them, That the Son of man is Lord also of the sabbath.”* (Luke 6:5). And by example cleared the Sabbath of the restrictions the Pharisees had burdened it with. He said, *“The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath.”* (Mark 2:27). It was made for man - not just the Jews.

Contrary to what many believe it was not a ‘Jewish Sabbath’. The seventh day (Saturday) was ordained by God to be kept by man back in the time of Adam, *“And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it: because that in it he had rested from all his work which God created and made.”* (Genesis 2:3).

It was incorporated into the law at the time of the creation. It was included in the ten commandments voiced by God at Mt Sinai which were used as the basis of the Old Covenant.

Traditions of Men

The Old Covenant was an agree-

*there’s more to
faith than just believing...*

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ment by which Israel was to keep the commandments. It was eventually replaced by a new covenant which is an agreement by which individuals are still bound to keep those same ten commandments. The Sabbath command is one of them. God did not change the Sabbath from the seventh day (Saturday) to the first of the week (Sunday).

Men who entered the early church unawares (Jude 4:1) took authority to themselves and changed the day that God had ordained, sanctified and incorporated into law. They resisted the truth and taught believers to follow traditions of men.

Christ castigated the Jews for following traditions of men, *“Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition?”* (Matthew 15:3) because they negated the commandment of God, *“Thus have ye made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition.”* (verse 6). He said, *“... in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.”* (verse 9). Christ also said, *“Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven”* (Matthew 5:19).

This does not imply that those who break the law, or teach others to break the law, will be in the Kingdom - it is simply saying that they will be referred to as least by those who will be in the Kingdom. Unless they repent and teach the truth, these false prophets shall not enter God’s Kingdom, *“And there shall in no wise enter into it any thing that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination, or maketh a lie”* (Revelation 21:27).

Nor will their followers, *“... in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; Speaking lies in hypocrisy”* (I Timothy 4:1-2). *cont’d p.4*

**A new Government in the US.
An election in the UK. Will
their policies lead to a nation
peaceful and prosperous?**

The elements of Israelite religious practice—revealed to them by God—were temporal. That is, they were rituals that focused attention on the LORD in contrast to all other belief systems—but imparted scant knowledge of eternity. Only the spiritually enlightened saw beyond the ritual of sacrifices and holy days to their true spiritual significance. As wrote Paul, the rituals of the divine Law were a schoolmaster, laying the building blocks of the true faith—just like teaching the alphabet to a child.

The sacrifices were imposed ‘...until the time of reformation’ (Hebrews 10:6)—until Christ came in fulfilment. They were added to the pre-existing worship system (eg the holy days: Exodus 23:16) because of Israel’s disobedience: ‘...At the time I brought your ancestors out of Egypt, I didn’t command them to offer sacrifices to me. Instead, I told them, “If you listen to me and do what I tell you, I will be your God, you will be my people, and all will go well for you”’ (Jeremiah 7:22). The prophet refers to the Covenant God made with Israel: ‘...if you will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then you shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation’ (Exodus 19:5)

Each sacrifice expressed some

aspect of the life and sacrifice of Jesus.

Jesus (‘...born under the Law’) was careful to follow God’s revealed pattern for worship—but without the Pharisaic legalism and tradition common to first century Judaism. His example was followed by the apostles and the early church of God. They observed the Biblical worship but acknowledged that salvation comes through faith and not by works.

Gentile Practice

The religions of the nations distort versions of that revealed pattern. They diligently observe religious days and seasons, and their sacrifices, unlike those inspired by God, often ended in human sacrifice—even of children. The Bible records widespread instances in Canaan and elsewhere. The Mayan culture is noted for it, and it has been documented in modern Africa—ongoing to this day in Uganda and Haiti—Europe and the United States.

The observance of special times of worship other than those in Scripture is anathema to God. In the pagan world, familiar to the first Christians, notably Rome, there were few days on the calendar not dedicated to some deity or planet *etc.* The year began on January first—as today!—with a day dedicated to Jupiter and Janus.

Such were meticulously observed—often with penalties for non-observance. Different religious seasons, too, were noted—*Saturnalia*, for example,

Freedom...to Obey

Sacrifice is today considered to be a barbaric, useless and obsolete ritual fit only for ‘primitives’. Yet believe the Scripture record and its purpose becomes clear.

We are informed that the LORD Himself introduced the practice, making the first ever sacrifice and giving guidance as to what was appropriate (Genesis 3 & 4).

- as witnessed by modern queasiness in regard to animal killing, sacrifice involves a certain revulsion at the death of innocence
- such a death illustrates vividly the horror that should be inspired by our sin
- each sacrificial animal was to be unblemished and from a domesticated species (eg a lamb) expressing innocence and purity
- as such it is a fitting symbol of the One who is sinless, harmless, meek and who ‘...takes away the sin of the world’ (John 1:29)—Jesus, the Messiah
- the necessity for animal sacrifices at this time is indeed obsolete, for they point to Jesus and in him their multifaceted symbolism is fulfilled
- the Scriptures tell us that the sacrifices will be re-instated under the reign of Jesus as LORD of lords (Ezekiel 44:15)
- sacrifice implies the giving of something precious to us; it is also an expression of thanksgiving for the blessings poured out on us and a recognition of the sovereignty of God
- true sacrifices—of whatever kind including financial—are a matter of *faith* and not imposed by coercion
- heathen sacrifices degenerated to human sacrifice and were offered from fear and to appease their god

Quotations from the Bible in New Horizons are from translations which clearly express the meaning in modern terms

from December 17 to 24, followed by the ‘*birthday of the invincible sun god*’ on December 25.

Converts in Bondage

The apostle Paul took the Galatian Christians to task (*ch* 1:6). As Gentiles in a Roman Province and with the populace dedicated to the goddess Artemis (Diana)—described as ‘violent fanaticism’—they had revelled in the contemporary pagan religions, had been in bondage to their abominable rituals. Through the Gospel they had been freed from such spiritual chains, practices that could never bring salvation.

Good Works

Now they were listening to Pharisaical influences—men who while professing Christianity yet still believed that salvation required meticulous observance of their additions (‘traditions’) to the ‘Law of Moses’. In addition they especially insisted on the rite of circumcision (*see* Galatians 5:3). [The rite itself isn’t wrong (Acts 16:3)—just the perception that it is essential for salvation.]

A portrait of the Pharisees’ ‘works’ may be read in Matthew 23, They imposed heavy spiritual burdens, were themselves burdened by ritual and sidelined the ‘good works’ of true religion. The apostle Paul may well be referring to their hypocrisy (and not to Jews in general) in Romans 2.

It is clear, of course, that Paul isn’t condemning the ancient (and only) authentic Way of worship revealed by God—see how he promotes the holy days of Scripture in I Corinthians 5, and his own recorded observances of them in the book of *Acts*.

He objects, rather, to viewing their slavish observance as essential for salvation—and not a joyous desire to worship God as *He* pleases. Religious observances which shed light on the plan of God (*eg* the weekly Sabbath and the annual holy days) are proper for Christians as they reflect God’s will—but must not become ‘...a yoke of bondage’ that negates the essence of the Gospel—salvation through faith as manifest by our personal ‘...fruit of the Spirit’.

to observe the holy days is not a ‘yoke of bondage’ but a joyous expression of our desire to worship the Creator

Salvation cannot be earned by any form of religious works whether pagan or Jewish. In Christ we are free from such a yoke. We grow up to Christ-likeness as we *voluntarily*—without coercion from any man or organization—make personal choices based on the inspired revelation in the Scriptures.

The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments define God’s way of life—which we grow into as we apply ourselves to the Word of God. It is ‘...*our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus*’ (Galatians 2:4). Christ-like character is formed through our free personal choices and not by imposed slavish obedience.

The Galatians were being seduced—deceived—and by professing Christian teachers) into again accepting a ‘yoke of bondage’. They are, states Paul, now through Christ *children of the Living God*—no longer slaves to a religious system. It’s a lesson for Christians today.

Ω

Faith...cont’d from p.2

Satan detests the commandments because they epitomise God’s divine nature and His way of life. That is why he is in conflict with those who keep God’s commandments, “... *and (the dragon i.e. Satan) went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ*” (Revelation 12:17).

Satan works through false teachers to draw people away from the love of God, “*And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their works*” (II Corinthians 11:14-15).

Be on your guard, “*Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour*” (I Peter 5:8) because Satan has deceived the whole world, (Revelation 12:9). And he wants to prevent you from entering God’s Kingdom.

Just as he seduced Adam and Eve into believing a lie that led them to disobey an express command, Satan has through the lies of false teachers deceived many to ignore God’s commandments. Faith is the confidence we have in what we believe. If what we believe is based on lies, then our faith is misplaced. Faith misplaced is faith in vain.

Is it any wonder that Christ questions the faith of modern day ‘Christians’? How many of the thirty-two percent of the world’s current population who claim to be Christian have a faith based on truth? How many have been seduced into believing lies? What will Christ find when he returns?

Ω

All too many marriages in our Western society are crumbling. Whatever this portends for national stability, it's clear that it means heartache for thousands of couples - and their extended families. It means distress for uncounted children. What begins as an exciting dream too often ends in heartbreak.

Is there a way to avert such tragic loss through divorce? What steps can you take to ensure your marriage is fruitful and not merely hanging by a thread “for the sake of the children” or the relatives - or even the church? (Marital distress isn't limited to non-Christians”!)

[A previous article explored the foundations of a good marriage. If marriage—or divorce—is on your agenda, be sure to write for a copy of *Spend A Lifetime - Together*.]

Personal Responsibility

Of course there are external factors that tend to tear marriages apart—friends, relations, careers, children, pressures of society. But when a marriage begins to go wrong, most couples start blaming one another or blaming circumstances—or God! - for their situation.

It must be accepted, however, that at the heart of every marriage break-up lies *sin*. Not a fashionable word, but nevertheless true! And sin is personal. That means each of us has *personal responsibility* for our marriage. Usually, but not always, there's sin by both partners. It may be a mix of infidelity, self-centeredness, ignorance, anger, violence, sloth, alcoholism, sexual perversion, an unforgiving spirit, hate, insensitivity, drugs, immature responses, financial mismanagement. The list could be expanded.

(*Stop and think!* Are any of these “qualities” at work in *your* marriage?)

In time, life for one or both partners

The Edge Of Divorce

becomes intolerable. And divorce seems the only answer.

Divorce is terminal. It's an end to hopes and dreams. Months or years, perhaps decades, of shared experience evaporates. Two lives once entwined in common purpose, intent on founding a dynasty, sparkling with romance, based on mutual caring have slowly fallen apart. Somehow the challenges of life have overwhelmed shining hopes for a lifetime together. *And we are each responsible.*

Bitter Roots

Look at your own marriage. Are the seeds for its destruction already extending their bitter roots through every aspect of your life? Are there niggling concerns about fidelity? Angry outbursts or simmering resentment? Long silences? A parting of interests? Cooling of affection? Biting sarcasm? Loss of mutual respect? If so, be aware that your marriage is on the slippery slopes to divorce!

But—does it matter? Can't you just start again with a new partner? Despite the relaxing of divorce laws, it isn't that easy. The evidence is in: *divorce solves little.*

There's heartache often lasting years, even when divorce has put an end to prolonged physical or psychological abuse. Children generally do less well at school. New partners are elusive. The economic and emotional legacy can be hor-

rendous. And the same destructive habits are often carried on into the next marriage with the same unsurprising result—further misery and another divorce.

Our personal destructive habits spawn a host of unstable relationships, serial marriages, unhappy children, upset parents and friends, disillusioned men and women—and burdensome taxes to pay for it all.

But the cause is not divorce!

Is Divorce Sin?

Divorce is often the inevitable result of a fractured marriage. It's the result of ignorance of or blatant disregard for “the rules” of marriage. A result of immature emotional reactions, of selfish pursuits, of indiscipline, of improper desire, of failure to cope with the inevitable challenges of married life. But divorce isn't of itself always sin! (Though in certain circumstances it is.)

Don't get it wrong. Divorce is awful. It is failure. It hurts. It is the mutual tearing up of a contract. It is destructive. *God hates it* (Malachi 2:16). And it can indeed be sinful.

On the other hand God allowed Moses to *permit* divorce (Matt. 19:8). He even Himself “divorced” Israel whom He had “married” (Jeremiah. 3:8)! And both Jesus and Paul recognized the possibility of divorce.

Because divorce isn't usually of itself sinful most people who have before conversion been divorced and have remarried can be converted and become a part of the Church of God without “continuing in sin”. If such divorces were sin, couples would have to separate to express their repentance. But when someone repents there can be no dispensation to continue to sin!

The sin, rather, lies in *those months*

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unsigned articles are by the Editor

and years that led to divorce. It lies in the acts of flirtation and adultery. It lies in the failure to “submit one to another”. In the nurtured resentments that fester into hate. In the lack of the practical concern—”love”—that must undergird every enduring marriage: love for your husband or wife, love for your children, love for your extended family.

Sin lies in the refusal to forgive, in uncompromising rigidity, in the unwillingness to share the burdens of marriage, in the contempt bred by a lack of mutual respect, in secret lustful thoughts, in the neglect of the spiritual. Sin lies in the failure to “love your neighbour” (in this case your spouse!) as yourself.

Do you see this pattern in your own marriage? Sadly, all too many Christian families fall into such sin.

Christian Marriage

If the signs are there then seek wise counsel. For it usually is sin for two Christians, two baptized people in whom is the Spirit of God, to divorce!

An editorial in a Christian periodical indicted the leaders of the mainstream churches for their wholesale adultery—that is, divorcing their Christian spouse and re-marrying [*Prophecy Today* July 1991]. *Christians must be reconciled.* In Christian marriages, divorce with remarriage is usually a godly option only when one partner refuses the discipline of the Word of God and His Church. One partner—and not always the original “offending” one—reverts to being an “unbeliever” through implacable unforgiveness.

That’s a frightening thought. On the matter of forgiveness, and just before a discussion on divorce, Jesus said to the disciples “...So also shall my heavenly Father do to

you [i.e. withdraw forgiveness] if you from your hearts forgive not men their trespasses (or, offences)”. Read all of Matthew 18:15-35. A forgiving spirit is an attitude we must cultivate daily throughout life—especially in marriage. So, *get the forgiveness habit* and help save your marriage!

Let’s be grateful that our loving Father is merciful and, upon our repentance, generously forgiving of our trespasses!

For the people of God, *marriage is a lifetime commitment.*

Change Is Essential

No marriage is perfect. For each of us is unique—but imperfect. We come to marriage with a suitcase full of entrenched habits and ideas and prejudices built during our years of being single. Social and educational backgrounds are often diverse. Each of us has his or her own vision of the future. There’s a clash of wills on endless minor and major disputes.

But in a godly marriage we are to “become one flesh”. Our thoughts are to blend in unison. Over the years we must learn to harmonize our dreams, cope with each other’s emotional Pandora’s box, discipline our personal aspirations. Each of us is responsible to accommodate to the partner’s irritating quirks. And to get rid of our own!

And each must learn to forgive.

If you are divorced or on the edge of divorce or contemplating remarriage - have you conquered those sins which were *your* part in the breakdown of your marriage? Is your anger now properly disciplined? Are your thoughts in sexual matters now submitted to the will

of God? And have you quit fuelling those thoughts by censoring your reading and viewing? Have you, with God’s grace, put away your illicit desires? Are you willing to bear your proper responsibilities, willing to shed inappropriate self-interests (hobbies, even business), willing to be forgiving, willing to bear one another’s burden?

Maybe your special sins aren’t listed here. But whatever they are you need to work out with your partner, your minister, your counsellor, your God how you are going to lick them! *YOU* need to change!

Rules of the Game

Marriage was instituted by the Creator as the best possible way (with a few exceptions) for two separate human beings to live. It is based on the in-built physical, mental, psychological, emotional traits of male and female. *We need one another.* Man is incomplete without woman, and *vice-versa!* Said God: “...*It is not good that the man should be alone*” (Genesis 2:18).

And marriage can work!

In the melding of two separate lives as one is the true fulfilment of each. Indeed marriage is designed by God as a reflection of the perfect relationship that is to develop between Jesus Christ and His Church. Wrote the apostle Paul: “...*The marriage relationship is doubtless a great mystery, but I am speaking of something deeper still - the marriage of Christ and his Church*” (Ephesians 5:32).

For most young couples, however, marriage is no more than a game. When you tire of it you quit. When you’re losing you go. But marriage is *much more* than a game. It does indeed, like any game, have rules. And like any game, any living being, any device, it must abide by them to function properly.

The first rule is — *marriage is no game!* *cont’d p.8*

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**Reap a Destiny
Spend a Lifetime—Together**

Even in our secular age churches bulge at Easter. Will you be celebrating?

Easter is perhaps the most pivotal of all the Christian festivals. Fail to observe it and you would not be considered Christian. Wasn't Jesus crucified at that time of year in early Spring? Didn't he hang on the cross for many agonizing hours? Was he not placed in a rock tomb at Easter? And on Easter morning did he not rise from the dead?

That in a nutshell is the "Easter story". On Easter Sunday Christians everywhere don their best attire ("put on their Easter bonnet") and go to places of worship - to mighty cathedrals, to lowly chapels, to churches made of mud, to open spaces. Millions rise before dawn for a sunrise service in honour of the Saviour of mankind. Surely Easter is a festival central to the faith of all Christians.

Yet many Christians do not observe it. *Why?*

These same Christians are as convinced as the others that Jesus died and rose again. That by these acts they have been freely redeemed and given eternal life. That through Jesus they are placed as sons and daughters of the Almighty. *But they do not observe Easter.*

First Observation

You may be surprised to learn that neither did the apostles. Nor any of the first Christians!

In fact it was not for over a century after the resurrection of Jesus that its observance began to enter the Christian Church. Indeed the very word "Easter" is found nowhere in Scripture except in one gross mistranslation in the King James Bible (Acts 12:4) - corrected in later versions.

Anyway, what on earth do you mean - "Easter"?

Says the *Oxford Companion to the Bible*: "Easter: From *Eostre*, a Saxon goddess, celebrated at the spring equinox". The goddess was also known as *Astarte* and *Ishtar* - the name used in ancient Babylon. Her son was *Tammuz* (called Nimrod in the Scriptures) who died violently. Her "weeping" was deemed to bring about his resurrection in the spring.

This same idolatrous practice crept into the worship of ancient Israel - see Ezekiel 8:14. It later gave rise to the practice of "Lent" - the forty days of partial fasting prior to Easter - by apostate Christianity.

Strange Customs

As the Christian Church abandoned God's revealed precepts it thus began to wear the religious garb of the idolatrous religions that surrounded it.

Ishtar was also worshipped idolatrously as *Venus* and *Isis*, and one of her symbols was the egg. Hence the modern - and ancient - custom of coloured eggs at Easter. The egg symbolized her fertility. This strange notion also accounts for the "Easter bunny" - rabbits and hares,

The Easter Story

too, being seen as fertility symbols in ancient idolatry.

Strange, isn't it, how "modern" man can lapse into silly and idolatrous worship, ascribing it to the one and only pure and righteous God, Creator of all things!

Ancient Festival

How then did the first Christians mark this pivotal historical event of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ?

The truth is they continued to observe one of the most ancient of religious festivals the origins of which go back to just after man's creation. From it derives all the sacrificial rituals used by mankind in whatever religious guise. When our first parents sinned God showed them that they must sacrifice an innocent victim to cover that sin. In ancient Israel it was known as "*Passover and Unleavened Bread*". You can read about it in Leviticus 23. This spring festival marks the sacrificial death of the Lamb of God - and his resurrection as the firstfruits of mankind into the Family of God. That same mistranslation in Acts 12 served to hide this observance. It should read *pascha* - Passover.

That the first Christians continued this form of worship is verified by both the Scripture record and by secular history. The *Oxford Companion*, for example, goes on to admit the late arrival of Easter as a festival on the Christian calendar - mid second century. After the death of the apostles the Church caved in to the pressures of the surrounding pagan society. To avoid persecution and to achieve political clout - and more converts - the religious practices of the day were grafted on to Christianity.

Does It Matter?

God reveals Himself as "Jealous". So

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jealous for how He wishes to be worshipped that the “people of God” - the nation of Israel - were evicted by God from the land of promise for embracing strange worship. Read, for example, the fierce condemnation of Israel for “Easter sun-rise services”! The account is in Ezekiel 8:16.

A further example is Israel’s failure to worship God on the *Sabbath* -the seventh day of the week (Ezekiel 20). Another is the abandonment of God’s annual *Festival of Tabernacles* - the notorious and oft-mentioned sin of King Jeroboam (I Kings 12:32-33). Read, too, the account in Jeremiah 10:1-5 of God’s condemnation of what looks suspiciously similar to a Christmas tree! Here God warns Israel: “*Learn not the way of the heathen [ie idolatrous worship]...for the customs of the people are vain*”. Israel “...*forsook the Lord and served Baal and Ashtaroth [ie the goddess Easter]*” (Judges 2:11-13).

Nowhere in the writings of the Old or the New Testament Scriptures did Jesus Christ authorize a change to the worship prescribed for mankind. Clearly, the religious worship surrounding Easter is in direct conflict with that prescribed by God.

For God, it does matter how we worship. He remains “jealous”. In no way does this compromise His deep and enduring love for His creation. But to add practices from the depraved religions concocted by the perverted imaginations of devil-inspired humans is an affront to the Creator. Such practices cloud God’s beautiful plan for mankind revealed in His holy days.

Too many Christians ask: “How did the heathen worship their gods? Even so will I do likewise”. And what is God’s response? “*You shall not do so to the Lord your God...What things soever I command you, observe to do it: you*

shall not add thereto, nor diminish from it” (Deuteronomy 12:29-32).

Judgment

What will you do when, facing Jesus Christ, you plead for admission to the Kingdom? You may say, Didn’t I religiously attend worship every Easter - and Christmas and Sunday - from childhood? Didn’t I dress up and roll eggs and for years diligently worship you at our annual Easter sunrise service? Didn’t I give up smoking for Lent? And didn’t I teach my children that the Saviour was honoured through the Easter bunny and by rolling eggs?

His reply may well be: “...*In vain [uselessly] did you worship me, teaching for doctrines the traditions of men*” (Matthew 15:9). Simply because you call Jesus “Lord” is not enough. You must “...*do the will of my Father which is in heaven*”. Otherwise Jesus Christ may say to you in that day: “...*I never knew you; depart from me you that work iniquity [ie you do not in your Christian walk express the law of God]*” (Matthew 7:21-27).

To go through life thinking you were diligently serving God and then to at last find out He hadn’t noticed you is an awesome thought.

Is that what you want?

Ω

For a survey of the true worship revealed in the Scriptures you are invited to request the titles
God’s Holy Days
The Faith Once Delivered

Some sceptics are in such denial that they claim Jesus is a human construct—that he never existed, that he was not raised from the dead.

For one piece of evidence you are invited to read the article
The Empty Tomb

Divorce...cont’d from p.6

Marriage is not for children. Not a playtime to be disrupted when you’re bored, or not winning, or find the going too tough for you, or when the glitter wears thin. Marriage is for real men, real women. It takes courage to commit to a lifetime of sharing. It takes courage and emotional maturity to reject the easy way of “living together” with its convenient bolt-hole of abandonment when the going gets tough. It takes courage and strength of character to face the heavy and numerous challenges of married life. Marriage needs commitment. Marriage *thrives* on commitment.

Plan of Action

So if you are on the edge of divorce—what can you do? Here’s an outline of some steps you can take:

- Commit yourselves to staying together—for life
- *Accept that you share the responsibility for the distress in the marriage*
- Identify the positive reasons for staying together
- *Recognize that sin is the basis of the failure of your marriage*
- Work together to identify the problems, perhaps with a counsellor, or your pastor
- *Map out clear plans to tackle the main challenges*
- Discipline yourselves to win each challenge
- *Commit your marriage to the Creator God, exercising faith daily*
- Remember—there is always a way to meet each challenge!

Above all, model your marriage on the way of life revealed in the Scriptures, especially laying the foundation of faith in Jesus Christ.

In light of its awesome function and purpose, every marriage—your marriage—deserves the best effort you can give to make it reflect the hope that God has for it.

Ω

MiniStudy**The 'Lord's Supper'**

'...this do in remembrance of Me' (I Corinthians 11:24)

Christians are united in the desire, in some manner, to remember the death of Jesus. Indeed he himself asked us to remember his death, and together with his resurrection such a remembrance is at the heart of the Christian faith. Yet there is much confusion surrounding this memorial.

- The remembrance is known by a variety of names: Lord's Supper, Communion, Passover, the Mass, Eucharist, Memorial. It is, too, varied in its timing. Some observe it 'anytime', others daily or weekly or quarterly
- The apostle Paul places his authoritative stamp on an *annual* observance. He states the time of the observance: '*...the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread* (I Corinthians 11:23). It is a perpetual observance for all Christians until he returns in person in glory
- For Christians, the Memorial is a solemn remembrance of the suffering and death of Jesus as the only sacrifice for our sin, and our example of holy living. '*This do in remembrance of Me*', Jesus said when introducing the observance to his apostles. Paul adds: '*...as often as you may eat this bread, and drink this cup, you solemnly proclaim [announce publicly] the death of the Lord, until he shall come*' (v.26)
- The observance is an annual renewal and confirmation of the agreement (covenant, compact) we made at our baptism. As such it is observed only by those who have been 'born anew' through repentance and baptism, those in whom dwells the Spirit of God (*cp* Hebrews 10:29)
- As for any memorial service, the Lord's Supper is a solemn observance. The Corinthian brethren had turned it into a raucous drunken 'party' and Paul had to correct their behaviour (vv.20-22). It was not a meal - for they ought to satisfy their appetite at home. This should be a solemn occasion, he tells them (vv.27-29): '*whoever should eat this bread, or drink the cup of the Lord, unworthily, that one will be guilty of the body and of the blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread, and let him drink of the cup; for he eating and drinking unworthily eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the body of the Lord*'
- We may indeed be 'unworthy' to eat at the same table as Jesus. But this - '*unworthily*' - refers to the manner in which we approach the service. With reverence, in other words, with due regard to its meaning. It's a personal responsibility to '*examine ourselves*', to discern our attitude to the awesome sacrifice of our Saviour. A careless observance of this solemnity is reflected in our bodily health, for the Lord will chasten us in this life (Hebrews 12:6). In Corinth, the brethren were guilty of 'respect of persons', the affluent ignoring those who had little. They '*despised the assembly of God*' (v.22) - the Body of the Lord
- There are, then, the elements of bread (Gk *artos*) and 'the cup' (the content is not specified). As we partake of the material, by faith we absorb the endless spiritual benefits of his sacrifice (*see* John 6:33-40). To this Jesus himself had added a further element. He '*...put water into the basin and began to wash the feet of the disciples*' (John 13:5). It was an expression of the respect and duty of care all of us have to one another (Galatians 6:2, 10). Jesus added: '*...you also ought to wash the feet of one another. For I gave you an example, that as I did to you, you also should do*' (vv.14-15). It is still, today, an integral symbolic part of the service
- This 'last supper' of Jesus and the disciples took place on '*the night in which he was betrayed*' by Judas Iscariot, the evening prior to his death on the cross. John tells us it was '*...before the feast of the Passover*' (John 13:1). This refers to the seven-day *Feast of Unleavened Bread*, which began the next evening - a festival observed by even the Gentile Christians in the early church (I Corinthians 5:1-8), and by many in the church of God to this day
- Jesus is '*...the Lamb of God, taking away the sin of the world*' (John 1:29). He is '*...our Passover, sacrificed for us*' (I Corinthian 5:7). The night and day following the supper he was cruelly mistreated by the religious (Sanhedrin) and secular (Roman) authorities (Acts 2:23). They impaled Jesus on a wooden stake and he died - sacrificed by a Roman spear - at the time of the evening sacrifice, which, on that day (Nisan 14 on their calendar) was the sacrifice of the Passover lamb. In Jesus was fulfilled all the sacrificial types of the Old Covenant
- This solemn observance is an annual remembrance of our essential need to be spiritually nourished by the body of Jesus, and our total dependence on his shed blood for the forgiveness of our sin Ω

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