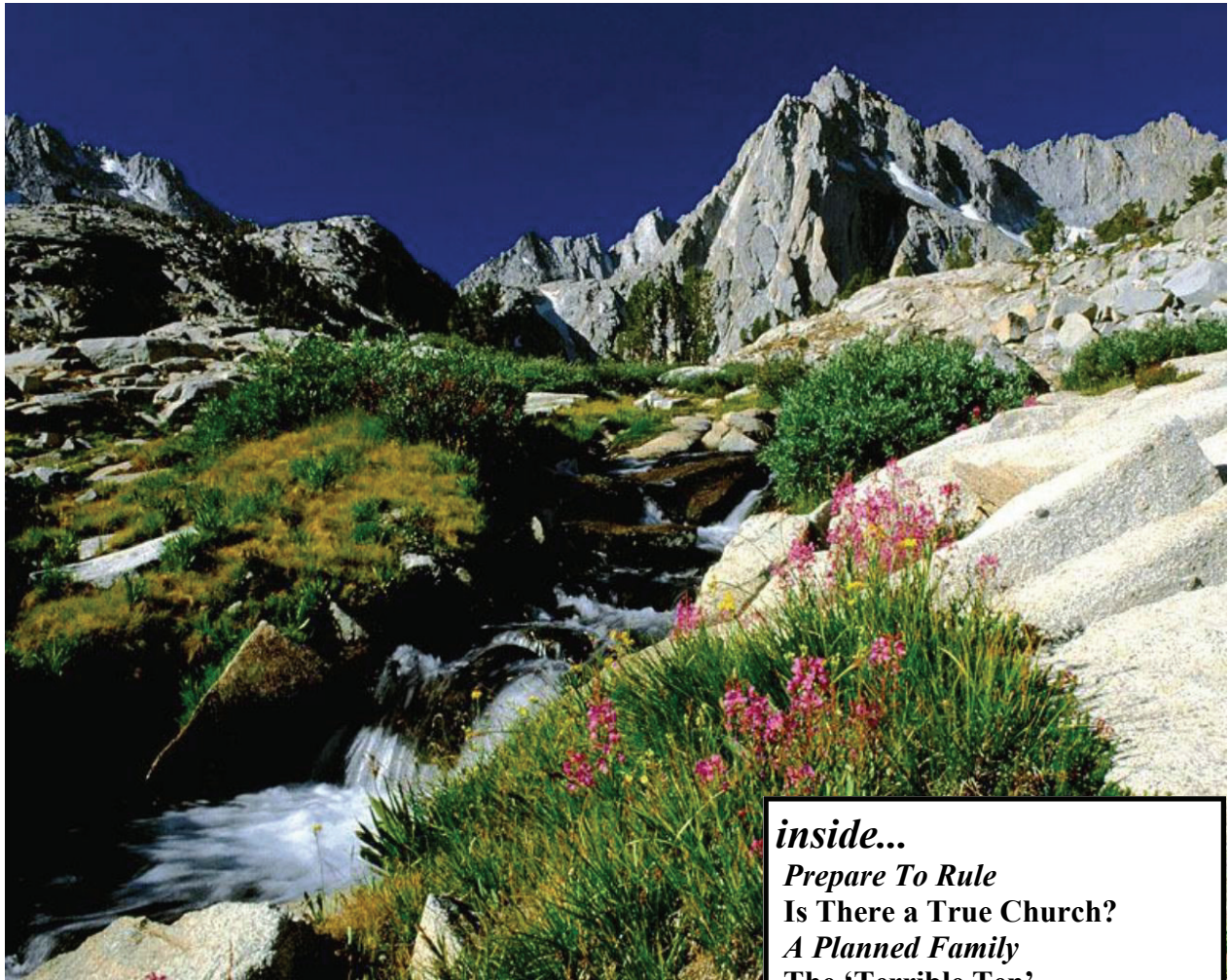


new **Horizons**

Vol 17 No 4

July/August 2013

addressing the important issues for today and tomorrow



inside...

Prepare To Rule

Is There a True Church?

A Planned Family

The 'Terrible Ten'

The 'Last Days'—When?

God's Grand Design

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 e-mail Newsletter OUTREACH, the 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

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New Horizons is published by the *Churches of God Outreach Ministries*, an association of independent churches, to make known the good news of the soon-coming Kingdom of God

It is distributed free on request, being a co-operative voluntary effort financed by the members and friends of the *Churches of God*. We also welcome the financial support of all who benefit from our publications and who wish to labour with us.

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

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new Horizons

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What is the purpose of 'salvation'?

Few in our world doubt there will be an 'afterlife', that death is the end. What life then will be, of course, has an endless variety of scenarios. But for most who profess Christianity it means instant transport to 'heaven', or heaven after a sojourn in an intermediate state (Purgatory).

Christians in general—especially those who see themselves as 'born again'—believe that upon death and after a 'good life' of service to God their soul will immediately upon death and forever 'be with the LORD'. In the meantime their material body will decay in the grave to be reunited with their soul after a resurrection.

In traditional Christian thought, Heaven is where God is, His power base. But what happens when the soul arrives there is subject to debate—nobody knows for sure, beyond an eternity of praising God, or the proverbial 'playing on a harp'. The Judaeo-Christian Bible—the Old and the New Testaments—however, is clear, specific, detailed. It spells out for our understanding exactly what lies in store beyond the grave. It depicts a view contrary to that of most Christians. And its a view that is logical, in step with reality—and more fitting for a future life that will extend through eternity.

When We Die

It is the lot of all of us to 'return to dust'—to blend with the elements of which we are formed. The human spirit then '*...returns to God who gave it*' Ecclesiastes 12:7—preserved until re-united with a body following a restoration to life. And that, for the Christian, is when life really begins.

For, as we are told in the book of Hebrews, the saints of old have not yet received the promise—the promise of an eternal abiding place: '*...On this earth we don't have a city that lasts forever, but we are waiting for such a city*' (ch 13:14). That will happen when Messiah—Jesus the Christ—returns to take over the reins of the world's government from incompetent man. And don't we deserve it, after six millennia of abject failure!

At that time, when Jesus returns,

PREPARE TO RULE

the spirit of all the saints from every century since Adam will be clothed with a spiritual body. Symbolically, the grave will spill out its dead. Christians—those in whom dwells God's Spirit—'*...God will also bring with [Jesus] all those who have fallen asleep [died] through Jesus*' (I Thessalonians 4:14). And Christians still alive at his return?: '*...we who are alive and*

Death Is Death

Despite overwhelming and almost universal human tradition the Scriptures reveal that when we die we will no longer have conscious thought, but are what the apostle Paul—and Jesus (John 11:11)—call 'asleep'. We no longer can praise God: '*...the dead are silent and cannot praise the LORD*' (Psalm 115:17).

Nor, when dead, can we even remember God, writes King David: '*...If I die, I cannot praise you or even remember you*' (Psalm 6:5). And when man dies: '*...His breath goes forth; he returns to the earth; in that very day his thoughts perish*' (Psalm 146:4). Wise King Solomon adds: '*...the living know that they shall die; but the dead do not know anything*' Ecclesiastes 9:5.

remain until the coming of the Lord shall not go before [precede] those who are asleep' (v.15).

The apostle Paul describes that resurrection spiritual body:

'...So also the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body' (I Corinthians 15:42-44). Equipped, that is, not subject to decay, perfect, powerful—perfectly adapted for the momentous task of

reconstruction of a world torn apart by man's profligacy and greed.

Christian Aid

What a momentous task! Ravaged by a Satanically motivated secular State and powered by religious deception, millions will be stricken by famine and disease, the world with mass depopulation. Those remaining will be confused, starving, fearful. Infrastructure—houses, roads, bridges *etc*—will be in ruins. Civil institutions—government, justice, health, military, transport, financial—all will be disrupted. Religious faith undermined.

It is into such a world that the resurrected saints, equipped with spiritual power, will be deployed. Under the direction of King Jesus, the longed-for Messiah, they will begin to shepherd the remnant of mankind, to restore Earth, to rebuild the waste places. Fundamental to all their actions, however, will be the restoration of the divine Way of life, the one and only true faith.

As in the building of Israel's Tabernacle each will then be gifted with the skills essential to the task assigned them: '*...I have called by name Bezaleel...And I have filled him with the spirit of God, in wisdom, and in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all workmanship, to devise designs; to work in gold, and in silver, and in bronze, and in cutting of stones, to set them, and in carving of timber, to work in all workmanship. And behold, I have given to him Aholiab...And I have put wisdom in the hearts of all the wise-hearted, so that they may make all that I have commanded you*' (Exodus 31:2-6).

Prepare to Rule

There is, however, a vital principle, amply explained to his disciples by Jesus.

Seeking to disillusion the disciple from their belief that the Kingdom was imminent, he related a parable. No—he would leave them for a time, and then return. In the meantime each was given 'ten pounds' and told to trade. When he returns each is to give account, their reward depending on how well they have done. All received the same amount—probably representative of the gift of the Holy Spirit which begets each at baptism.

Jesus in another parable adds a further dimension: '*...to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one; to each according to his ability*' (Matthew 25:15). He doesn't, in other words, ask from us more than we are capable—but does expect us to do our best!

That means that as Christians we are to diligently apply ourselves to 'good works' as an example, a template, mentors for those we will be serving throughout the thousand year rule of Jesus. That

READ:
A Message of Hope
...The World of tomorrow

is, we train ourselves to follow God's will as revealed in His Word, the Scriptures. We don't

You should put on the new man, who according to God was created in righteousness and true holiness. Therefore putting away lying, let each man speak truth with his neighbor, for we are members of one another. Be angry, and do not sin. Do not let the sun go down upon your wrath, neither give place to the Devil. Let him who stole steal no more, but rather let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good, so that he may have something to give to him who needs. Let not any filthy word go out of your mouth, but if any is good to building up in respect of need, that it may give grace to the ones hearing. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you are sealed until the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and tumult and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake has forgiven you Ephesians 4

merely learn God's ways—we do them. Writes Paul to the Roman brethren: '*...do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, in order to prove by you what is that good and pleasing and perfect will of God*' (ch 12:2).

That will is spelled out in the Scriptures. It is that primarily we develop the di-

vine character of Jesus, clearly explained by the apostle Paul.

That's not all, though. For true Christianity is a practical way of life, affecting every aspect of daily living—what we eat, when we worship, how we spend our time, our care for others, our relationships. All such are grossly distorted in our present world. It will be an awesome—and hugely-satisfying—task to deal with those who all their life have ignored God's revealed way—and suffered as a result.

Those called in this life—invited by the Father—are urged, in preparation, to diligently apply these principles. In so doing they will receive just reward (Matthew 16:27).

So—prepare to rule!

Ω

Does one true church exist? If so, where is it? what is it? who belongs? what does it do?

Is There A TRUE Church?

The Christian church has persisted down through two millennia. It is a fact of life. That 'church' has diverse forms from the majestic to the bizarre. Is any one of them 'the one true church'? Or, does it matter, as there are supposedly 'many ways to God'?

All churches unite in claiming that Jesus is the founder of Christianity and that the Bible is its text-book. But that is about the height of agreement! Who Jesus was, what was his mission, what did he teach—are in dispute. And there are as many differences as to the Bible's overall teaching. So—buried in all that theological debris is there 'one true church'?

Origins

We begin from what we believe is an unassailable fact—Jesus lived. He was the Creator God's representative, sent from the heavenly realm to further the age-old divine plan for mankind. And he said '*...I will build [construct] my church*'. (Matthew 16:18). Jesus is building [Gk *oikodomeo* = house-builder] his church using the 'living stones' selected by the Father from every historical age, the 'Israel of God' (I Peter 2:5).

Jesus, the longed-for Messiah, physically impacted the world some two thousand years ago. His mighty works were known throughout the land raising hopes of the overthrow of the Roman

domination of Judaea and the establishment of an independent Kingdom under his kingship. It wasn't to be, for that wasn't his purpose. Rather Jesus came to gather those whom the Father would select as His future sons and daughters—the key personnel for His future rulership of mankind. These are 'the church'.

A Spiritual Body

Look around our world—there are some two billion professing Christians, nearly one in three of mankind. There are the 'saintly', of course, and there are the rogues. There are the moral and the immoral. There are those who take up arms against fellow Christians. There are those who see no harm with adultery or with neglect of the elderly or with 'keeping up with the Joneses'—tenets of the 'Ten Commandments' of which Jesus said: '*...Heaven and earth may disappear. But I promise you that not even a period or comma will ever disappear from the Law. Everything written in it must happen*' (Matthew 5:18). All fundamental tenets of the Christian faith. And yet they claim to be followers of Jesus Christ. Again the question: *where is the true church?*

Clearly, there has to be a uniting factor that identifies that 'true' church. The apostle Paul pinpoints that factor: '*...if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his*' (Romans 8: 9). The

mind-set of Christ. The attitude of Christ. The behaviour of Christ. As he himself said: '*...You shall know them by their fruits*' (Matthew 7:16). And that fruit? '*...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law. And they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit*' (Galatians 5:22-25).

The perfect Christian, of course, has yet to come—all err, all from time to time fail, all depend on God's bountiful compassion and His mercy. The apostle Peter outlines the way to receive that Spirit: '*...Turn back to God! [KJV: repent] Be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, so that your sins will be forgiven. Then you will be given the Holy Spirit*' (Acts 2:38 CEV). He later adds: '*...Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name [ie Jesus] under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved*' (ch 4:12). And '*...we are his witnesses of these things; and so is also the Holy Spirit, whom God hath given to them that obey him*' (ch 5:32).

'Obey' equates with those words of Jesus (Matthew 5:18f) in regard to the vital importance of the divine Law. It was at the heart of the apostolic teaching from the beginning. Paul, for example, claims: '*...I have committed nothing against the people, or customs of our fathers*' (Acts 28:17), and

unsigned articles are by the Editor

before the Governor Festus: *'...Neither against the law [ie, the written and not the 'oral' Law] of the Jews, neither against the temple, nor yet against Caesar, have I offended any thing at all' (ch 25:8).* Indeed John defines sin as *'...the transgression of the Law' (I John 3:4).*

God, then, will give His Spirit, the essence of His Being, to those who are willing to make this change of direction, to those who turn from all those false faiths that flood our world.

Are You Called?

The church assembly, as we have noted, can be compared to a household. There's the 'head of the house', the parents, the family members, the callers (friends *etc.*). So in the church, the Christian household, there is Jesus Christ, the Head. There are the parents whose assigned purpose is to nurture the 'children' to maturity. There are the baptized family members at varied levels of development. And in any local assembly there are the visitors—the curious, the interested friend or acquaintance, the sometimes disruptive hangers-on.

In marked contrast to some closed Christian groups in our day, there are others attending the assembly—non-Christians who 'drop in' out of curiosity, friends and acquaintances of the brethren *etc.* The regular Sabbath meeting becomes an evangelical tool whereby the unconverted may be drawn by the word of God to repentance: *'...if the whole church has come together, and all speak*

in languages, and if uninstructed ones [Gk idiotes—ie not familiar with the language, the unskilled], or unbelievers come in...and falling down on his face, he will worship God' (I Corinthians 14:23, 25).

The church 'family' is composed

of those who have heard the message of Jesus and—perhaps over some years—have come to the point of commitment to Jesus Christ and

have been baptized, receiving God's Holy Spirit. Having heard the Gospel call they responded and were drawn to Jesus, encouraged ('drawn') by the Father: *'...No one can come to Me unless the Father who has sent Me draw him' (John 6:44).* And in Christ they will find total acceptance, for: *'...All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will in no way cast out' (John 6:37).*

Purpose Driven

There is wide confusion as to the proper function of the Church. By many it is viewed as God's way to 'change the world' with the expectation that mankind will 'come to Christ'. Indeed Jesus told his disciples they are *'...a city that is set on a hill',* visible to all, *'...a light to all who are in the house'.*

Christians, that is, are to be a living example of the divine way of life. While each should within their means relieve need when encountered it is nowhere presented as a corporate function - too often a distraction from our real purpose.

The apostle Paul (I Corinthians 3) likened the church collectively to a protected system—a farm, a household, a temple into which the brethren are drawn, a contrast to the surrounding world. In this age the Father is inviting responsive individuals to prepare under Jesus to be part of His world-ruling Kingdom. Within the church household they are nurtured towards holiness, into the character of Christ, by Bible-savvy teachers.

The 'true church', then, does exist. But it is composed of those chosen by the Father, and in whom abides His Spirit. They are scattered around the globe and drawn from every era of man. The 'family members' are all known to the Father and kept in His care. Ω

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The true purpose of 'the church' is often misunderstood. That purpose is safely on track

We don't have to delve far into the Christian Bible to learn that the Creator is big on families. He told our ancestor Adam, for example to take a wife and have kids.

God, however, doesn't lock man in a straitjacket. There were no 'forced marriages'. He provides the guidelines for a successful family to continue through many generations and it is for us individually to apply those guidelines. We have, that is, freedom to choose.

A Spirit Family

It's no surprise, then, to discover that this is a mirror image of His own desires. He, too, is planning a family—a spirit Family. The plan was laid before mankind existed, and indeed man was created for that very purpose.

A foundation guideline for the family is compatibility—we are to become '*...one flesh*', united in our life's goals. Writes the prophet Amos '*...can two walk together if they don't agree?*' Amos 3:3). And Paul reflects this message for Christians: '*...don't be unequally yoked with unbelievers*' (II Corinthians 6:14).

Another foundation principle for the family is total commitment: '*...he that endures [perseveres] to the end shall be saved*' (Matthew 24:13). Those who will join Jesus at the first resurrection are '*...called and chosen and faithful*' (Revelation 17:14).

God applies these same compatibility guidelines to His own 'marriage', and to the planning of His own children. For they will be '*trained up in the way they should go*' to reflect His standards, His goals. (Remember—He will be working with them throughout eternity!)

A Divine Plan

Man, to fulfil the divine plan, was created in God's image (Genesis 1:27)—uniquely with an indwelling human spirit capable of a relationship with Him.

Humans, of course, have little choice in their children. But the all-wise God does have a choice, for out of the multiple billions of men and women born on earth over six millennia He is careful *at this time* to select only those who will be compatible, and who will remain committed.

Divine Template

God's firstborn—Jesus the Christ—was the perfect reflection of God's desire. He was sent from heaven having first created all that is, including mankind. In the flesh he set the perfect example, the template for a child of God. This he taught to his disciples—the Twelve and others—by word and deed through several years of intimate face-to-face training. They are the nucleus of 'the church'—the means by which the Father would issue His invitation to sonship, actively drawing to Jesus those who respond in the manner He prescribes (Acts 2:38).

For those who do come to Christ, life becomes 'boot camp', the training ground for the co-heirs with him of the Father's eternal Kingdom. Setting out the programme, Jesus says: '*...Go in through the narrow gate, for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and many there are who go in through it. Because narrow is the gate and constricted is the way which leads to life, and there*

So...what about everyone else? Has God simply discarded the billions He has passed over since He created us? Are they 'lost' because they didn't 'accept Jesus'? A coming article will address this vexed question.

A Planned Family

are few who find it' (Mathew 7:13-14). It's no easy 'believe and be saved' message.

In the 'womb' of the church that 'few'—selected by the Father—are nourished in the ways of the Kingdom, the same Gospel handed down from Jesus through the apostles and those who followed (II Timothy 2:2). It's '*...the faith once for all delivered to the saints*' (Jude 3). It is still the standard!

Purpose Driven Church

A common fallacy is that the ongoing purpose of the church is to 'save the world'. While the example of Jesus has hugely impacted the world for the better (Isaiah 55:11)—often in spite of the organized church!—that is by no means the fundamental purpose of its divinely-appointed commission.

That commission is to herald Christ's message: '*...go and teach all nations, baptizing them...[and] teaching them to observe all things, whatever I commanded you*' (Matthew 28:19). Those who respond are selected by the Father to train as His sons and daughters, '*...partakers of the divine nature*' (II Peter 1:4).

We stand—or sit!—amazed in face of the energetic commitment to this commission by the apostle Paul. He understood that being Christian is a direct calling by the Father (I Corinthians 1:23-31, John 6:44). But that didn't stop him facing incredible hardship, even death, in his dedicated presentation of Christ to the whole world (I Corinthians 2:2).

A telling example for the Church of God today! **Ω**

Ignore them—and nationally and personally we suffer. Why are the Ten Commandments so despised?

To their detriment, governments and individuals deride the Ten Commandments—at the heart of the Christian Bible—as a decayed remnant of a long-past primitive era. Parliament opens daily with prayer to the God who proposes them—and proceeds to pass laws that fly in their face.

But are the Commandments obsolete? Are they an offence to atheists - as has been claimed? Would we be better off without them? Why so much opposition to this body of law? Is it indeed even 'religious'?

The Ten Commandments, of course, are in the Bible - listed, for example, in Exodus chapter twenty. Most in our western society have heard of them. And as they are termed 'commandments' few obey them!

But just because they are in a religious book, are they merely religious? Can even secular society at large just ignore them? If we are of a faith that doesn't use the Bible should we be any less governed by "the Terrible Ten"?

Lawless Consequences

Even a superficial look at this concise body of law must stir some measure of agreement - whatever our religious faith, or lack of it. Consider these examples.

Would you, for example, quarrel with 'You shall not steal'? All of us do our best to protect our per-

sonal property. We spend multiple millions on security! If

this law were removed from the nation's statute book there would be massive insurrection.

Then there's 'Don't covet'. If it were not human nature to covet another's possessions or to indulge in conspicuous spending, look at the cost savings! So - is this a "religious law"?

Then there's the instruction 'Do no murder'. What would your reaction be to the abolition of this law? Consider the heartache engendered and long-term consequences when a family member is murdered. Should that law be abolished? 'Do no murder', the law demands. Is it 'religious'?

And what about the commandment that forbids *perjury* ('false witness')? How much more smoothly would our justice system run if nobody lied in court, or received the just Biblical punishment if they did so! Again - is it "religious"?

How many husbands and wives

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The 'Terrible Ten'

have longed for a strengthening of another of those 'obsolete Bible laws': 'Don't commit adultery'? Vast heartache would be saved if wife-swapping, secret trysts, open adultery and all forms of sexual aberration were outlawed - and dealt with. Imagine the huge benefits to society: divorce would plummet, one-parent children would be rare, greedy lawyers would diminish, sexual diseases reduced, billions of pounds redirected to productive use.

Then there's that law the breaking of which has caused endless heartache: 'Honour your father and your mother' with its direct promise that if this instruction were honoured the nation would thrive. Today? The elderly are despised and often abused, abandoned, murdered - even by their own children!

But what of the *first four* commandments? How do they relate to a secular society?

The Sovereign Creator

These four say: No gods before the Lord. No images or worship of other gods. No distortion of the divinely-revealed religious practices and form of worship. No violation of the seventh day Sabbath. Surely this is *religion*? Only if you don't believe there's a Creator God! With Him, religion and life - the nitty-gritty of day-to-day affairs - are intertwined. A whole, unified, seamless.

Imagine if all mankind followed these instructions! Doesn't relig-

ion defile our world? Doesn't it disrupt community relationships? But if all were united under the one God - the JHVH of the Christian Bible whose instructions these four Commandments are; wouldn't that stop fanaticism in its tracks?

Look at the destructive effects of the clash between diverse religions within a nation. India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Nigeria - and increasingly our western democracies - are rent by religious disharmony. Unity of belief - *if* it is God's revealed faith - unifies a nation. (Wherever a false religion is *imposed* on a nation it tends toward a totalitarian regime.)

Failing to recognize His sole authority, His sovereignty - as outlined in the first four Commandments - over every aspect of our being destroys the individual, the family, the nation - and ultimately the world.

One Way

The blight of multiculturalism now grips most nations—especially in the West. It invariably introduces a vastly different mind-set as to the nature of society. It introduces, in other words, a different god with different priorities.

In the West, however badly mutilated, it is the way of the God of the Bible—the one and only Creator God whose mind is perfectly reflected through Jesus and his teachings.

Operating Manual

All ten commandments originated when man was first created. They are the basis of the

'Manufacturer's Operating Manual'. We were created by God with a specific physical, mental and psychological profile. His Law (Heb *torah* = instruction) was the optimum way for us to live out our lives.

God's Law is not "religious"! In reality there's no conflict whatsoever between law and true religion. Yet our nation's leaders show a strong distaste for it. And perhaps surprisingly many of our *religious* leaders are intent on doing away with the divine Law!

So - no religious bias in any of these laws. Just plain common sense. Just sound regulation of human society. Indeed that's what 'The Ten' are. These Laws were imparted to humanity as guidelines for life at our very beginning. Observe them and we will live in peaceful harmony. Transgress them and we get hurt, because we are designed to function best as we live within them.

The End of Civilisation

Why on earth, then, are these practical laws - perfectly designed to regulate society - so opposed!

Today we face the end of human civilisation. Man has ignored the Manual and cocked a snook at the Maker. The "machine" is disintegrating and is ready for the scrapheap. Until the time that the United Nations, the Taliban, the Northern Alliance, our various national governments, our Local Councils, our families base our laws on the Ten Commandments society will continue to decay - and will experience serious consequences. **Ω**

PLAN B

Adam - mankind - chose a different path, deviated from the Creator's plan.. Before long he began to walk his own way - a downward path we have ever since followed. With foreseen disastrous results. Happily, our merciful Creator has a 'Plan B'.

God foresaw human unwillingness—and ultimate inability—to follow the Manual. The 'egg was scrambled' and could not be restored by human ingenuity! Hence the repeated failure to establish an earthly paradise. Only a divinely-conceived plan could reconcile us to our Creator. It was a plan made ready even before man was created.

A transformation of the human mind is at the heart of that plan. Generation after generation we have individually rejected the Creator's instruction — the Bible term is *sin*, for which we will each face judgment. It accounts for all our human misery, but crucially it separates us from Him.

God's remedy was to Himself become human flesh and, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, to live a sinless life—yet to pay the 'wages of sin', death, taking on Himself the penalty for our sin on a Roman cross.

Through the work of His church the message of the cross is widely proclaimed. Those who hear it and who have a consciousness of their need for God's forgiveness of their sin are invited to come to Jesus Christ in repentance. Upon our baptism God then imparts His Spirit, begetting us as His precious sons and daughters—heirs of His everlasting Kingdom. **Ω**

The ‘Last Days’ - *When?* *dreams’* (Acts 2:17).

Questions surround the timing of ‘the last days’ of Scripture. When are they?

The ‘last (or ‘latter’) days’ is mentioned many times in the Old Testament, and in the New. It’s a term beloved of Bible prophecy students—yet to pin-point the era referred to raises questions.

In fact, it is a catch-all term understood only within the context of a particular prophecy.

- For example, the first occurrence—Genesis 49:1—refers to a prolonged period from the entry to the promised Land (*eg.* v.7) until the appearance of Messiah (v. 10)
- In King Nebuchadnezzar’s dream (Daniel 2:28) ‘*latter days*’ covers millennia of history from this King’s reign to the Millennium.
- Balaam’s prophecy (Numbers 24:17) refers to the second coming of Messiah.
- Again, the reference in Isaiah 2:2 and Micah 4:1 is clearly to the period of the Millennium.

Peter and Joel

One occurrence of the term has generated several interpretations—that by the apostle Peter in Acts 2:17) ‘*...And it shall be in the last days, God says, I will pour from My Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy; and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream*

Does Peter refer to the time just before Christ’s return? Or after? Or to the ‘church age’? Perhaps even to the *end* of the Millennium. As perhaps does Ezekiel (*ch* 38:16)?

The modern Pentecostal church refers the apostle’s words, on the first Christian Pentecost, to *our* time, prior to Messiah’s return. So his reference to Joel’s prophecy is used to justify their theology.

But Peter doesn’t make clear as to *when*, pointing merely to ‘*...in the last days*’. However, clarity returns when we turn to the source of his quotation—Joel 2:28-32.

From the context of Joel’s prophecy we learn that he refers to the time *after* Jesus returns—the beginning of the Millennium.

Selective Call

It is clear that God’s Spirit has *not* been ‘*...poured on all flesh*’. Not yet. For at this time the Father is *selecting* individuals from among mankind—Jew, Israelite, Gentile—to receive His Spirit, in preparation for that future ‘pouring out’ of the Spirit on all mankind: ‘*...No one can come to Me unless the Father who has sent Me draw him*

(John 6:44, 17:6).

Peter quoted from the prophet Joel, and the context (Joel 2:14ff) is the *early days of the Millennium*, just after the return of Jesus as King of kings.

It will, writes Joel, be a time of global turbulence, a time when judgment has been upon the unrepentant of mankind, a time of famine. But also a time when God is about to intervene, when the nations of Judah and of Israel have turned to God, when God

has ‘had pity’ and is restoring prosperity and peace, when He will be in their midst in the Person of Messiah.

In this instance, then, Joel’s (and Peter’s) prediction will have its perfect fulfillment only in the ‘last days’ when Jesus Christ reigns over all human government.

And it shall be afterward, I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh. And your sons and your daughters shall prophesy; your old men shall dream dreams; your young men shall see visions. And also I will pour out My Spirit on the slaves and on the slave women in those days. And I will show wonders in the heavens, and in the earth, blood and fire and pillars of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the coming of the great and awesome day of Jehovah. And it shall be, whoever shall call on the name of Jehovah shall be saved; for salvation shall be in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, as Jehovah has said, and in the remnant whom Jehovah shall call.

Joel 2:28-32

Until then, gifts of the Spirit are in the gift of the Head of the Church: ‘*...the one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing separately to each as He wills*’ (I Corinthians 12:11. *See also vv.1-11*).

At Messiah’s return the institutions of our ‘*...present evil [corrupted] world*’ (Galatians 1:4) will be overthrown. The Spirit of God will for the first time become universally available. **Ω**

MiniStudy

God's Grand Design

The Spirit Himself witnesses with our spirit that we are children of God.

And if children, also heirs; truly heirs of God, and joint-heirs of Christ, if indeed we suffer together, that we may also be glorified together. For I calculate that the sufferings of the present time are not worthy to compare to the coming glory to be revealed in us (Romans 8:16-18)

Death and taxes. They are considered to be the only certainties of life. It's what *follows* death that's a concern for all of us - the odd atheist excepted. We can assume that death ends all, and perhaps strive to leave a positive inheritance to the world. We can seek to lead 'a good life' with the expectation that we will return to a physical life higher in the grand scheme of things. Or, we can tap into the divine plan for man. What the Creator has in mind for all who so desire is unimaginably more dramatic, more exciting, more satisfying than all the weird and wonderful scenarios dreamed up by philosophers and theologians.

- Of course, if there is no God the matter of an afterlife doesn't arise (*but see* Psalm 14:1, Hebrews 11:6), so—to start at the beginning: *'God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them'* (Genesis 1:27). Such a plan implies purpose, design
- Through human choice that image was marred, and man embarked on the long journey to an extinction that God alone can prevent. The divine purpose is to enable us to become part of His Family (Romans 8:16-18), and as a practical illustration of God's step-by-step plan, He instituted a series of weekly and annual festivals. They are showcased in the religion of the Israel nation, and detailed in Leviticus 23
- Since the beginning of the Christian church it has been understood that the *seven day week* is a model. There would be six 'days' - each of a thousand years - when mankind would have (almost) a free hand to conduct his affairs. It is followed by a millennial 'day of rest' for which the *seventh-day Sabbath* is a model
- The 'day of rest' is known as 'the Millennium'. Jesus will return to reign over all political and religious entities: *'King of kings and LORD of lords'*. The annual *Day of Trumpets* pictures this momentous event. Pictures, too, the resurrection to unending life of all in whom is the Spirit of God - the *'first resurrection'* (Revelation 20:7) It will initiate a time of rest from war, freedom from ill-health and disease, economic stability, abundant resources, pure religion. The Devil's influence will be temporarily removed and mankind will be universally reconciled to God - for which the annual *Day of Atonement* (Yom Kippur) is a type
- The annual *Festival of Tabernacles* sums up human frailty. It has many layers of significance: thankfulness for God's provision in the harvests, a commemoration of Israel's wilderness sojourn (when they lived forty years in 'tabernacles' - temporary dwellings), the human body (it is temporary and wears out), the millennium, the general resurrection. Overall it spans the whole time of sinful human existence in the flesh
- The final day of the seven-day Festival of Tabernacles - termed 'the *Great Day of the Feast*' (John 7:37) - represents the general resurrection to judgment of *'the rest of the dead'* (Revelation 20:5). All those from all ages of man hitherto excluded from the true faith will be resurrected in the flesh and have opportunity to embrace the Gospel - the 'good news' of salvation: *ie* becoming a part of the everlasting Kingdom (Family) of God.
- But there will come an end to this present era and *'the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall be dissolved with fervent heat, and the earth and the works that are therein shall be burned up'* (II Peter 3:10). This is 'the second death' (Revelation 20: 13-15), known as *Ge'henna*, 'Hell'. The symbolism of the *Festival of Tabernacles* - mankind in sinful flesh - will then be fulfilled, completed
- All who then remain will be spirit - truly children of God. It is *Eternity* - the culmination of God's grand design. Appropriately, it merits a special festival, the seventh holy day of the festival year, and immediately follows Tabernacles. It completes the festival year and marks a new beginning - to spirit life. The purpose of God in creation will be complete and mankind will truly be *'in the image and likeness of God'* Ω

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