

new **Horizons**

Vol 17 No 6

November/December 2013

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 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

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

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

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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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new Horizons

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Must you keep the Laws of God to be saved?

Within some Christian communities there's an aversion to the concept of any need to observe the laws handed down to man by God Himself. And certainly with so many laws in the Bible (it has been estimated as 631) it does sound burdensome. Must we obey them in order to achieve salvation?

To suggest this is, rightly, branded as 'legalism', for no action of ours will in any way guarantee for us a place in the Kingdom of God. Yet there lurks at the back of the mind the idea that some of those laws sound pretty useful. Take the much maligned Ten Commandments: which of these can we safely ditch?

Hear the apostle Paul: '*...Do you*

not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor abusers, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God' (I Corinthians 6:9-10). That covers most of the maligned Ten!

Add in what Jesus tells John: '*...outside [of the New Jerusalem, the Kingdom of God] are the dogs, and the sorcerers, and the fornicators, and the murderers,*

and the idolaters, and everyone who loves and makes a lie' (Revelation 22:15), and there's no escape from obedience to law. So why the antagonism?

Back in the days of the apostles this was also an issue. Warning the young Timothy about those teachers who misuse the Law, Paul says: '*...we know that the law is good if a man uses it lawfully, knowing this, that the law is not made for a righteous one, but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and for sinners, for unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for man-slayers, for fornicators, for homosexuals, for slave-traders, for liars, for perjurers, and anything else that is contrary to*

sound doctrine' (I Timothy 1:8-10). You do not need these laws, in other words, if your lifestyle is already law-abiding, if you follow these precepts..

A Bit of History

When man was created his body, mind and spirit were in harmony only as he conformed to God's revealed 'programme'. Re-code that programme—that's called 'sin'—and we, as did Adam, fracture our relationship with the divinity. The heart of that code is *law* (Heb. *torah*, instruction). Writes John: '*...sin*

is the violation of Law' (I John 3:4).

So we find Abraham, for example, praised because he '*...obeyed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My Laws'* (Genesis 26:5). Even a Canaanite king, in the time of Isaac, recognized this divine instruction (v.10), and Joseph recognized adultery as '*...a sin against God'* (ch 39:9). Centuries before the time of Moses!

John notes: '*...the Law came through Moses'* (John 1:17), and Paul adds that the Law came into being (*ie*, under Moses) 430 years after Abraham. But the Law, this divine instruction, has always been in existence, and until the model nation of Israel was self-enforcing.

The divine programme became legally enforceable, in other words, when God established His physical nation of Israel around 1500BC. Penalties were enforced on an earthly nation for infractions of the Law, and—because divinely appointed—are a pattern, a template for governance, for every nation.

The modern world, while only pretending to recognize the validity of the Ten Commandments for an orderly society (at least the last six Commands!), experiences the disastrous effects of weak enforcement.

Is God's Law Mandatory?

Christian and Law

For Christians, Paul sums up our attitude to the Law: ‘...*All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any*’ (I Corinthians 6:12). In Christ we are willingly law-observant—but not as an essential for salvation which is wholly through God’s mercy and grace. All our sin, past and present, is forgiven through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, when that is personally embraced.

To be observant of the Commandments is an essential step to the restoration of that broken relationship with the Father—broken in Adam. As says the apostle, ‘...*I delight in the Law of God according to the inward man*’ (Romans 7:22). Or, ‘...*Shall we not much rather be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live?*’ (Hebrews 12:9).

Flee Idolatry

You will notice that in the lists of behaviours cited by the apostles as excluding mankind from the Kingdom is—*idolatry*. It is an error to assume that idolatry is limited to bowing before an idol—‘*the work of man’s hands*’.

Anciently, Israel ‘...*despised My judgments and walked not in My sabbaths; and they profaned My sabbaths; for their heart went after their idols*’ (Ezekiel 20:16). Observance of the seventh-day Sabbath, God’s ‘sign’, is a restraint from turning to

non-Biblical religious practices. (Though some break free from the restraint!)

For this Israel wandered in the wilderness forty years, being denied their inheritance in the land of promise. And, sinking into the same pit of idolatry eight centuries later, their descendants (v.30)—the

Throughout the ancient Middle Eastern world, in Babylon and in the Roman Empire, *Sunday*—via Mithraism—was the almost universal day of worship, Judaism being the exception.

‘Flee from idolatry - Escape from the service of idols; from the feasts celebrated in honor of them.’
Albert Barnes: *Notes on the Bible* (I Cor 10:14).

northern House of Israel—experienced exile from the land—to which they have not yet returned. Over a century later, the House of Judah experienced a similar fate, being exiled for seventy years in Babylon (II Chronicles 36:20-21). *Why?*

For both these nations the reason for their exile is clearly stated – *idolatry*. It can be defined as the negation of the first four of those Ten Commandments. Jesus defines this part of the Law as ‘... *you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. This is the first commandment*’ (Matthew 12:30, Deuteronomy 6:1-5).

Specifically, God highlights their neglect of His *Sabbaths*. It is the *seventh-day* Sabbath that differentiates God, JHVH, from all other so-called ‘gods’ ‘...*keep My sabbaths holy; and they shall be a sign between Me and you, that you may know that I am Jehovah your God*’ (Ezekiel 20:20). It has ever been so—for Adam, for Abraham, for Israel, for Judah.

Christians, too

And for Christians, as summed up by the apostle Paul:

‘...*Therefore, my dearly beloved, flee from idolatry*’. This pagan idolatry involved sacrifices and feasting on special days in honour of the god (*eg* Galatians 4:10). [The Galatians Christians had been converted from ‘...*the weak and beggarly elements*’ of religion—never a description of the holy days appointed by God.]

Observance of pagan worship forms and days has deadly repercussions as it *dishonours* the true God of all.

The instruction of the Law is integral to the nature implanted first in Adam, and marred through disobedience. Harmony with God is achieved by each of us only to the degree that we willingly and joyously submit ourselves to His revealed will. **Ω**

Some related titles, free on request:

**What Do You Mean—‘Repent’?
Should You Be Baptized?
What Do You Mean—Born Again?**

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unsigned articles are by the Editor

Will the horrors of Syria lead to a regional war? Will it spread globally—World War III? Will the nation of Israel experience a deluge of missiles from Iran, from Lebanon? The situation is deadly serious, and far surpasses the local wars and rumours of wars to which we have become accustomed.

In recent years we have been primed by movie after movie concerned with ‘the end of the world’. Deadly plagues, earthquakes, calderas, tsunamis, asteroids. Most scenarios end happily when the hero thwarts the destructive force. What is the reality?

In religious circles there is heightened expectation that we are indeed facing ‘the end’. For some Christians, the hope is to be whisked off to a place of safety—to heaven or to a physical location on earth. Some in Islam seek martyrdom and to be rewarded in heaven. There is no doubt that religious texts forewarn that human civilisation will one day grind to a halt in global disaster.

[Note: In Bible terms the ‘end of the world’ (more accurately, the ‘consummation of the age’) refers not to complete extinction of mankind but to the end of our misrule and the imposition of divine rule.]

End-time Scene

The Christian Scriptures have spawned a wide range of end-time scenarios, based largely on the book of Revelation and with reference to many other prophecies from Old and New Testaments. Most common is that the mysterious events there depicted refer to the time from the resur-

rection of Jesus until his promised return.

Others [see box], including this writer, assign the various events to the years just prior to the return of Jesus. But whatever scheme is selected, interpretation is anything but unanimous. It is useful to recall Deuteronomy 29:29: ‘...*The secret things belong to Jehovah our God, but the revealed things belong to us and to our sons forever, so that we may do all the words of this Law!*’

The safest guide through the maze are the words of Jesus to the disciples in the so-called Olivet Prophecy—Matthew 24, Luke 21. Indeed this prophecy gives credence to our inset outline, and provides a helpful structure to what Jesus reveals to John in the book of Revelation.

Prophetic Scroll

John (Revelation 6) saw the future depicted on a scroll sealed with seven seals, the first six of which equate, as outlined by Jesus in Matthew 24:4-13), to religious deception, wars, famine, disease, religious persecution (called by many, ‘the tribulation’), and signs in the heavens and on earth.

The final, 7th, seal comprises seven symbolic ‘trumpets’ (ch 6:17) including: ‘...*the wrath of God*’. We find a description of the effect of the first four of these

Waiting for Armageddon

judgments in Revelation 8. *Trumpets* five, six and seven are well-named as ‘woes’ (ch 8:13) given the cost to unrepentant human life and to the planet. Two *woes* are described in chapter 9-10.

[It is recommended that you carefully study all these texts!]

Jesus Returns

Note that up to the point of the blowing of the seventh *Trumpet* Jesus Christ has not yet returned! Earth is in chaos. The ‘great tribulation’ is history. Mankind

remains unrepentant. It’s time for the seventh angel to sound his warning trumpet—the ‘*last trumpet*’ (et) of I Corinthians 15: 52.

Bible students will recognize this as the time for all the faithful down the millennia to be resurrected

from their graves or, if still alive, to be transformed as spirit into the Kingdom of God.

And, of course, this is the time Jesus will return, at the ‘...*last trumpet*’ (I Thessalonians 4:16). It is, too, the time of that ‘third *woe*’. The surviving humans—despite all that God has been doing—will *still* be worshipping the powerful dictator (the ‘Beast’) who has ruled earth in recent years. This *woe* is known in Scripture as ‘...*the seven last plagues*’ (Revelation 15:1), which are ‘...*the vials of the wrath of God*’ (ch 16:1). (Their effect is described in chapter sixteen.)

Key to Revelation

Seals 1-6
Seal 7 comprising
...Trumpets 1-4
...Trumpet 5 known as
.....Woe 1
...Trumpet 6 known as
.....Woe 2
...Trumpet 7 (‘the last’)
.....Woe 3: heralds the
return of Christ
.....The 7 last plagues

Note that at this point Jesus has now returned, for the plagues are delivered ‘...in the presence of the Lamb’ (ch 14:10). The resurrection of believers takes place at this moment and they are now, as spirit beings, born again family members of the Kingdom of God—and not physically affected by the horrors on earth.

Syria

We must ask, in light of these prophetic indicators, where the on-going Syrian (Heb. *Aram*) crisis fits in our depiction of the end. It may, of course, fall into the period of ‘wars and rumours of wars’ (Matthew 24:6), when, says Jesus, ‘...the end is not yet’. There have been such wars since mankind’s infancy! The Syrian conflict may just be one of those repeated mad inter-faith battles (between Sunni and Shia Muslims) that have pock-marked history, spitting Satanic venom at the innocent bystanders. Or, it may spill over into a destructive war between major nations.

Caution

Moving forward to the ‘Seals’, the second of which also depicts wars—we ask, what marks the opening of the Seals? Or, have they already been opened? Certainly religious deception abounds—the first of the seven Seals. But that was also encountered by the apostles two millennia ago. As to the remainder of the Seals (two to six—wars, famine, disease, religious persecution, amazing activity in the heavens and on earth—Revelation 6), they too are reflected throughout human history.

Especially in the light of failed

prophecy after failed prophecy (*human* failure, that is, to correctly interpret, not *God’s!*), caution is urged. Ultimately the time for the return of Jesus is determined by the Father. He is in complete control of world events, using mankind’s incompetence to further the unwavering divine purpose.

One clear sign of the approaching end of man’s rule is ‘...the abomination of desolation’ (Matthew 24:15), interpreted, perhaps, by Luke as ‘...when you see Jerusalem compassed with armies, then know that its destruction has come’ (ch 21:20). It applied in 70AD (when Titus was proclaimed Emperor in God’s Temple), and may again apply at the end. Could this be a guide for us to the time of the time of the prophecy?

Prophesied is an end-time universal religious dictatorship intent on the destruction of Israel—false Christianity leading to global warfare, and an enactment of Psalm 83: ...Come, and let us cut them off from being a nation, so that the name Israel may be remembered no more’.

Whatever the outcome of this festering sore in Syria—and elsewhere—Christians can remain calm with the assurance of God’s loving care, and knowing His sovereign power to protect (Psalm 91).

We should each don our spiritual armour, as outlined in Ephesians chapter six, ‘... that you may be able to withstand in the evil day [in adversity], and having done all, to stand’.

Global Warning...cont’d

mankind in general His warning to ancient Israel. [See side bar]

Without a return to God, to national and individual repentance, Earth will continue to display her displeasure. Ω

‘All these blessings shall come on you and overtake you, if you will listen to the voice of Jehovah your God. You shall be blessed in the city, and be blessed in the field. The fruit of your body shall be blessed, and the fruit of your ground, and the fruit of your cattle, the increase of your cows, and the flocks of your sheep. Your basket and your store shall be blessed.

Jehovah shall open to you His good treasure, the heaven to give the rain to your land in its season, and to bless all the work of your hand. And you shall loan to many nations, and you shall not borrow.

BUT...

If you will not listen to the voice of Jehovah your God, to observe and to do all His commandments and His statutes which I command you today, all these curses shall come on you and overtake you. You shall be cursed in the city, and cursed in the field. Your basket and your store shall be cursed. The fruit of your body shall be cursed, and the fruit of your land, the increase of your cows, and the flocks of your sheep.

Jehovah shall send on you cursing, vexation, and rebuke, in all that you set your hand to do, until you are destroyed, and until you perish quickly, because of the wickedness of your doings by which you have forsaken Me. Jehovah shall make the plague cling to you until He has consumed you from off the land. And your heavens over your head shall be bronze, and the earth that is under you iron. Jehovah shall make the rain of your land powder and dust. It shall come down from the heavens on you until you are destroyed. Jehovah shall cause you to be stricken before your enemies. You shall go out one way against them, and flee seven ways before them. And you shall be a trembling to all the kingdoms of the earth.

Deuteronomy 28, selected

Global Warning

Mother Earth is in trouble. Is there a link to our behaviour?

The state of the planet's health has been diagnosed by global scientists as dire, with warnings of droughts, floods, rising temperatures and sea levels, melting ice, tsunamis, pandemics. And mankind, it is said, is possibly '95%' responsible for at least half of the problem.

Our contribution is attributed to industrialization, with tons of noxious gases rising heavenwards from millions of factory chimneys, from our use of tons of fossil fuels, from surplus cattle on a thousand hills, from too many breathing humans, too many vehicles.

This may well be the case. But is it the whole story? Do the Christian Scriptures shed any light?

Of the Earth

Mankind, science tells us, is 'of the earth, earthy' - a fact echoing the apostle Paul (I Corinthians 15:47), and of course first stated at mankind's creation: '*...Jehovah God formed man of the dust of the ground*' (Genesis 2:7). Every element of our physical body derives from the soil, is nourished from the soil. So we can surely expect some connection, however remote.

Fragile Planet

It's not unusual for natural disasters to be attributed to 'the wrath of God', and it is appropriate to ask—if this is so—why God made our Earth, our Universe, so volatile. For the Scriptures clearly link natural disasters to divine

displeasure. The Flood that almost wiped out humanity over four millennia ago, for example, or the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. In both instances the cause was *sin*. Mother Earth clearly cannot tolerate her self-destructive children!

In the Beginning

Time travel back several millennia and it was different. Earth was at rest, abundantly productive, mankind in harmony with both heaven and earth. It was perfect—and in a condition, straight from the hand of the Creator, that we can barely imagine.

We may catch a faint glimpse of those pristine conditions by taking a forward look to what God reveals of the future. Under the thousand-year reign of Jesus the Messiah, Mother Earth will be at rest. Man—and beast—will live in harmony, nature no longer 'red in tooth and claw' (Genesis 1:30, Isaiah 11:7, 65:25).

But even this is but a glimpse of that endless time when there is '*...no more death*', when Satan's evil influence is finally quenched, when the LORD completes His mission and the Father comes to dwell among us (Revelation 21-22).

Judgment

But this was before sin entered by the first man, and earth suffered

catastrophe. Before the soil lost its fruitfulness (Genesis 3:17). Before disrupted seasons—restored only after the awesome Flood of Noah's day (8:22). Before death entered the human race. Before Earth veered from its original orbit (with a 360 day year) with who knows what consequences. Before earth experienced '*...the bondage of corruption*' (Romans 8:21).

Mankind has since spent his energies to combat this 'curse' through technology. But we fail to tackle the root cause: *sin*. Records the Psalmist: '*He [the LORD] sets rivers to a wilderness and water-springs to thirsty ground; a fruitful land to a salty desert, because of the wickedness of those who dwell in it* (Psalm 107:33-34). Judgment.

The Creator made a finely-tuned Universe, not least planet Earth on which to place the pinnacle of creation—man. Its physical systems work harmoniously when we are in tune with Him, when we 'go with [His] programme'. The effect doesn't need God's direct intervention but responds automatically to our relationship with Him. Hence the observation of the Psalmist.

So—global warming, drought, floods, famine, disease, earthquakes, economic chaos—all are a reflection of man's wickedness. All are a response of Mother Earth to our sin, the inevitable consequence of our failure to harmonize with God and the planet..

Cause and Effect

God is no respecter of persons, so we can apply to *cont'd p.4*

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'

from Alpha...to Omega

Two million or more enquirers world wide have 'done Alpha'. Will it stick?

A good supper, a talk, a group discussion and a 'Holy Spirit week-end'-that's the popular format for the Christian outreach craze that is sweeping Britain and spreading worldwide. It is a 'relaxed and non-threatening' introduction to the Christian faith and, according to a British TV series, was a success in 'changing lives'. The Alpha course has been fulsomely praised by such luminaries as the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, the former Roman Catholic Archbishop Basil Hume and church leaders from across the Christian spectrum.

The course is running in some 7000 United Kingdom locations and in thousands more worldwide. There has been a million pound bill-board campaign to advertise Alpha in the United Kingdom, and wide media exposure. In its London-based 'home church' (the Anglican Holy Trinity Brompton - HTB) up to one thousand young - the average age of participants is twenty-five - and old and from every walk of life enroll for each eleven-week course. Many have little past exposure to Christianity. In view of the decline of religion in Britain (fewer than ten percent visit church), its undoubted success is a surprise.

Participants are exposed to the basics of the Christian faith, with such topics as *Who Is Jesus?*, *Prayer*, *Healing*, *the Church*. Each talk is followed by opportunity for small groups of a dozen or so - one-third of whom are 'veterans' of the course - to discuss the current topic, individuals openly expressing opinions and doubts.

has proven to be a huge success. The *Alpha News* features accounts of individuals who have 'found God' or had their dying faith invigorated.

Critics

Understandably, Alpha has its critics. Some evangelicals are concerned about the 'loose theology'. In contrast it has been castigated for 'too high a view of the Bible!' Others are worried that Roman Catholicism is broadly accepted as a legitimate expression of the Gospel. Indeed the course has been sponsored in Catholic churches and run by the local priest - often in co-operation with Protestants and to the chagrin of some evangelicals.

Also criticized is the strong charismatic flavour of the course, especially in its 'Holy Spirit week-end'. The HTB has long been associated with the 'Toronto Blessing' and was the focus of media attention when congregants were falling down, quaking, barking like dogs, tongue-speaking, laughing uncontrollably in the aisles *etc* - supposedly manifestations of the Holy Spirit.

'Converts' from each Alpha course are directed to 'the church of their choice'. Of concern to many is that no distinction is made as to that church's theology.

Undoubtedly, Alpha is raising the religious consciousness of many who never gave much thought to religion. Jesus Christ is being talked about without embarrassment in offices and banks and building sites - and in churches! Legitimate questions, however, must be asked.

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

The format, developed over twenty plus years,

No Easy Road

A gentle easing into faith may be one acceptable approach to proclaiming the Gospel message. Yet the Christian faith is extremely demanding. Jesus requires total allegiance to himself and to the revealed will of God - even unto death. He said his message would *divide!*

It can, too, be legitimately asked if the person and message of Jesus is, in Alpha, accurately presented. We ought to ask with the crowd on the first Christian Pentecost *What must we do to be saved?* The answer of the truly Spirit-filled apostle Peter: *'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit'*.

Repentance - *change* - isn't an easy option. It certainly involves acceptance of the sacrifice of Jesus for our sin. *Sin* - that's not often defined. According to John, the 'apostle of love', it is *'transgression of the Law [of God]'* (I John 3:4). He adds, *'This is the love of God, that we keep his commandments'*.

Now that's hard. For any who would be a disciple of Jesus it means, for example, marriage - and not co-habitation or 'free' sex or a same-sex relationship. It means faithfulness within marriage. It means an end to the idolatry of consumerism and to tax dodging. It means that there is one God who has revealed one weekly day to worship Him - and that's *not* Sunday. It means that a Christian abandons the pagan holidays of Christmas and Easter and saints days and the mass - and observes God's festivals.

This is the message the first enquirers about Jesus heard and were expected to embrace.

Salvation, of course, can't be earned by any degree of commandment keeping. We are reconciled to a holy God only through *cont'd p.8*

That's Life!

Why do some folk seem to sail through adversity without batting an eyelid?

We may wonder if they are privy to some secret formula, a recipe for calm! Others—most of us, probably—struggle to cope with our day-to-day experiences, for 'life sucks'. Millions of prescriptions for anti-depressants are issued yearly. Or, the coping strategy, too often, is poured from a bottle.

Why, we might ask, do some—and it's not gender-related!—take fright at the sight of a spider or a mouse, while others quite happily allow them to roam over them? The mere sight can evoke the 'fight or flight' reaction. Usually the latter!

Mr Calm will probably tell you something like '*catch yourself on—it's just a spider*'. Not very helpful to the terror stricken. Yet isn't that a bit like what Jesus tells us?

Choice Offered

In several texts in the Gospels Jesus says '*...take no thought*'. He said, in other words: '*...do not be anxious about tomorrow; for tomorrow shall be anxious for its own things. Sufficient to the day is the evil [ie, adversity, bad experiences] of it*' (Matthew 6:34).

He gives us a choice. We can choose not to worry! It's our personal responsibility to deal with our anxious thoughts, he says. But that, surely, is easier said than done.

Reality of Stress

It's very much a matter of self-discipline—and a proper understanding of 'stress'—a much *mis*-understood concept. And *faith*. And our self-image.

The body's response to perceived danger (physical or psychological) is to produce an appropriate response in the form of blood sugar, adrenaline *etc*. If these are not 'used up'—*ie* if there is an over-reaction—they have an adverse physical effect.

Character

You see, our bodies are designed to be in equilibrium, a balance of the physical, emotional and spiritual elements. This is in effect Christ-like character, 'perfection'. (Said Jesus: '*...be you therefore perfect (Gk teleios = complete)*')

When these elements are out of kilter, however, there's a reaction. This is what is called stress, experienced as some degree of discomfort (headaches, indigestion, sleeplessness, irritability *etc*) and often leading to quite serious illness if prolonged.

But the 'event' to which we often attribute the source of our stress is *not* the cause. Not an external threat, not a person no matter how obnoxious or irritating. The stress response is *within* us, physical—and something we can work at to put right. We change *ourselves* and not the perceived cause.

Jesus is the perfect example. We're told: '*...when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he*

Request the free article:
Tabernacles: humanity in the flesh

suffered, he threatened not' (1 Peter 2:23). Perfectly in balance—and completely unstressed.

The How

So the short solution to our life's challenges is—'be perfect'! To the degree we incorporate the principles taught by Jesus to that extent we learn to reduce our inner stress response. Every adverse factor—anger, inordinate desire, dishonesty, greed *etc*—provokes a reaction in our bodies. Even an inadequate or poor diet, or medication, or recreational drugs have their adverse stressful effect on our body.

The apostle Paul details some of these in his '*put off, put on*' comments (*eg* Ephesians, 4). And the book of Proverbs is a university course in adjusting our lifestyle. The Scriptures spell out for us the real causes of our stress reactions. By them we can identify our personal stressors.

The apostle equates the putting on of these actions as '*... put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness*'. And in Colossians 3 he adds '*...put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him*' (v.10). Elsewhere he says to the brethren: '*...of whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you*' (Galatians 4:19).

Surely that is the purpose of our Christian living.

Effort Plus

To move towards this 'image'—the image the Father has for each and every person, no matter how far astray we may have

wandered—our mind-set has to mirror that of Jesus.

Power to Change

We can, of course, eliminate such adverse factors through our personal determination and will-power (eg anger management courses can be effective, or we can determine to be truthful, or we can eat healthily). But as Christians we have deep resources to draw on in overcoming our defects. (Remember, such defects are the true stressors!)

When we have the perfectly balanced psyche we *forgive*, we return *good for evil*, we *trust God* (faith), we *love*, we are *compassionate* and *merciful*. It's a package that few can achieve from our own resources.

Paul again: '*...The Spirit also helps our infirmities. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. And He searching the hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God*' (Romans 8:26-27).

Stress is essential for healthy living. But only to the extent that our physical stress response to external factors is proportionate.

Divine Image

We are 'made in the image of God'—and are in His eyes of inestimable worth. To embrace this is at the heart of our self-image. In Christ we are in proc-

You may find the following titles of value in your journey towards mature Christian character:

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ess of becoming '...a new creature' (II Corinthians 5:17). As we become increasingly in his image we are more able to deal with the adverse factors that we daily encounter.

'The Lord is my Helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?' (Hebrews 13:5-6) **Ω**

Alpha... *cont'd from p.6*

His love and mercy and grace. But, as the apostle Paul wrote: '*Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? God forbid!*' The 'Holy Spirit' - the focus of Alpha - will be given you only if you are in submission to God and His commandments (Acts 5:32).

Alpha To Omega

True Christianity is not a soft option that ignores tough fundamental Bible teaching, as does the *Alpha* course. It is not a devalued 'all for nothing' faith.

Embark on an *Alpha* course and you may - perhaps - hear a basic introduction to Christianity. But the end - the "*Alpha and the Omega*" - requires the total dedication to God of every aspect of your life.

If you have 'graduated' from an *Alpha* course, it's time to take stock. Open your Bible. *Check out* what

you were taught there with the Scriptures.

You may now claim Jesus as your Lord - *but that is not enough*. He said: "*Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord' shall enter the kingdom of Heaven*". And to your religious teachers: "*In vain [uselessly] do you worship, teaching for doc-*

trines the commandments of men". Have you just learned '*the commandments of men*' - human tradition?

Tradition

Another Bible author, Jude, urged his readers to '*...contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints*'. Any subsequent teaching that conflicts with Scripture - which defines and records that faith for us - is mere human tradition. Like *Sunday* worship. Or *Christmas* and *Easter* and *All Saints Day*. Or the universal but pagan '*immortal soul*' concept. Or going to *heaven* when you die - or to *hell*.

If an encounter with Jesus through the Scriptures in an *Alpha* course has 'changed your life' - *that's great!* That's what Christianity is about. Now you need to move on. Study the Scriptures with an open mind.

And *do* what *they* teach. **Ω**

CALLING ALL INTERNET USERS!

The *Outreach Ministries* website lists over a hundred Bible-based articles which address issues frequently on the minds of Christians. You may download any, or request print copies. There is, too, a section of on-line audio sermons, links to associated groups, back issues of *New Horizons* and an on-line magazine for our younger readers.

**Be sure to take a look at
www.cgom.org**

MiniStudy**The Umbrella Church**

'Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!'

Unity—it's a concept close to the talking heads of all Christian churches, discussed in endless conferences and almost universally seen as the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Is it as mythical as that gold?

- Given human nature it isn't surprising that churches divide, whether Baptist or Methodist or Anglican and a host of others, spawning an alphabet of titles. Even those denominations which claim to be 'wholly Bible based' are by no means immune, generating split after split
- For some the reason for the division is plain to see. Take, for example, our own roots. A century and a half ago some Christians in the United States came to an understanding that *Sunday* observance did not reflect the teaching of the Christian Scriptures, that we best represent that teaching by observing the *seventh* day of the week—from Friday evening to Saturday evening. The idea, of course wasn't new, even then, for it had been planted in the USA by some Christians from England in the sixteen hundreds—notably through a man called Steven Mumford. Since then the original church has produced multiple offspring—not surprising, given that we are each endowed with a thinking mind! Differences are inevitable—but not necessarily ungodly!
- So doctrine (teachings), unsurprisingly, is a major cause of separation, and whole denominations have formed because a Bible truth has been rejected by a parent church. It is inevitable, since the treasure house of Scripture is a deep lake—and itself urges us to '*...grow in grace and knowledge*'. This lake, however, has limitations. It has not changed since the passing of the New Testament apostles: '*...earnestly contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints*', writes Jude (Jude 3). Over the centuries variant teachings have emerged, but such are acceptable only as they are supported by the Scriptures
- From time to time, however, buried doctrinal treasures are re-discovered, so some change (growth) is inevitable. If such a jewel highlights prior serious error (as with the Sabbath) division may become necessary, though we would hope that everyone would come to understand the new proven teaching! Sadly, *minor* differences, too, become a bogus reason for division. Power, authority, is not readily relinquished. Nor financial control
- But leaders, and not less church leaders, prefer to keep a grip on those levers of power, and in the church—as in III John—those who remain faithful to the word of Scripture are sometimes evicted from the visible church. The proliferation of divisive doctrines is enhanced by the influence of these errant leaders—and the larger the sphere of influence the more brethren are led astray. It is no less so today. A charismatic leader (bishop, apostle, pope, president) or a cabal sitting at the top of a denomination can speedily impose false doctrine on thousands (or millions) of subservient, and at times unthinking, brethren—jeopardising their Christian walk
- But follow the New Testament pattern of independent small groups generally of like mind who work together, and the effect of false teaching is limited. For the influence of co-operating leaders acts as a restraint on rash teaching. In place of intimate hands-on apostolic oversight, of course, we now have their inspired teachings authentically preserved in the Scriptures [*See our article: Leadership in the Church of God*]
- Each independent assembly in whatever city, whatever country has its own agenda appropriate to its own language, its own culture. However, as James (*ch 3*) warns: '*...we should not all try to become teachers. In fact, teachers will be judged more strictly than others*'. The leadership, he says, is held directly responsible by Jesus Christ for what they teach! A solemn warning, indeed
- House churches, clearly, are limited in their outreach ability, in the programmes they can implement. But, *if they follow the New Testament pattern*, they work in harmony with other like-minded assemblies—sharing pulpits and facilities, acting together in joint outreach and assembly, submitting to one another. Ideally, co-ordination is needed, and an 'umbrella organization' is helpful. The *Churches of God Outreach Ministries* and its associated *Churches of God, UK* (joint publishers of **New Horizons**) are such, and welcome other like-minded groups and individuals to associate [*Request the related article The Small Church*]

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