

new **Horizons**

Vol 20 No 2

March/April 2016

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

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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

Issue No 116

March/April 2016

Is it possible to know the Bible inside out - and still miss the point of it? Has the Church of God complete knowledge of the truth? How important is "doctrine" to the Christian life?

Former Russian leader Nikita Khrushchev reportedly could recite the entire New Testament word for word. Thousands of accomplished and eminent scholars have researched and dissected the whole Bible, and have amassed an awesome knowledge of its content. Yet Khrushchev and many of these same scholars would disdain the label "Christian". Some scholars even profess atheism as their "faith"! For such the Scriptures are mere literature. They don't seek out doctrine as a guide to life. All too many Christians reflect a similar approach!

The Value of Knowledge

It's clear from the Scriptures that Jesus Christ seeks "perfection" in his people. We aim to become "...all glorious with no stain or wrinkle or anything of the sort, but holy and without blemish" (Ephesians 5:27). That is, we are to mature spiritually, to become holy - to "grow in grace", as the apostle Peter words it (II Peter 3:18).

However, he also charges us to "grow in knowledge of Christ". It's the responsibility of God's people to search out from the Scriptures the golden nuggets of pure and wholesome doctrine. And certainly over the years the Church of God has mined rich treasures of knowledge, derived from the Word of God. We have insight into Bible teachings free from traditional interpretation.

This is no mere academic exercise. For if we are to be truly free, if we are to develop holiness and joy in Christ, if we are to follow the leading of the Spirit - then we need to grow in knowledge.

"The truth" said Jesus, "shall make you free" (John 8:32). As an example of this freedom, a right understanding of what happens at death in large measure removes death's sting. Our joy in Christ is

enhanced by the true doctrine of what at death befalls our "unsaved" loved ones, or the billions of adults and countless children who died not knowing Jesus.

And how can we "become holy" if our doctrine of true holiness is at fault? The word "holy" signifies 'set apart' - separated and belonging to God. As God explained to Moses "...you shall remember all the Lord's commands and obey them, and not go your own wanton ways, led astray by your own eyes and hearts. This token is to ensure that you remember all my commands and obey them, and be holy unto your God. I am the Lord your God" (Numbers 15: 39-41).

True holiness isn't a "sainted look" at a religious celebration. It is submission to what God requires of us! He is jealous, demanding loyalty and obedience of His people. Indeed, a true Christian is a "slave" of Jesus Christ. It is by searching out and following God's way of holiness as detailed in His Word - not what our

visible, sometimes all but eclipsed. But always there will be new Christians to stand where others have died or been martyred or gone astray. The Church continues, however imperfectly, to fulfil its divine commission: to proclaim repentance and deliverance, to make disciples, to warn sinning mankind of the end result of its chosen way, to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God.

Doctrinal imperfection, however, is not solely a twentieth century affliction. It has dogged the Church for two thousand years! God's people have never known all. Nor can we expect today's Church to solve every theological difficulty that has plagued it since its inception.

Notice some of the doctrinal blind spots of God's saints both of the Old Testament and the New. Errors which in no way invalidated their inheritance in the Kingdom of God.

A Universal Faith

Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, Daniel - stalwarts of Bible history - had a far from perfect understanding of the truths of God. Yet they will be a part of His ruling Family.

These esteemed men of God did not, for example, fully understand a teaching which in our day is a flagship doctrine of Christianity - that God wants all men to be saved. He waited some four thousand years before making this fundamental truth crystal clear. Here's how the apostle Paul recounts its unveiling: "...It was by a revelation that this secret was made known to me. In former generations this was not disclosed to the human race; but now it has been revealed by inspiration to his dedicated apostles and prophets, that through the Gospel the Gentiles are joint-heirs with the Jews - part of the same body, sharers together in the promise made in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 3:3-6). God welcomes Gentiles.

Circumcision

Then there's circumcision. It's a rare Christian who would consider circumcision to be essential to the life in Christ. Yet this concept smouldered in the Church for some twenty years before bursting into a flame that scorched Church unity. It was passionately be-

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own desires dictate - that we learn true holiness. It is knowledge beyond price.

Blemished Fruits

Is the Church, then, doctrinally perfect? Do we now have it all sewn up? Is there no further need for the Holy Spirit's guidance into truth? The fact is, never in history have God's people known the whole truth.

To this day there are stains to remove, wrinkles to iron out. Here and there may be blemished doctrinal fruits. But does the farmer fell the tree because of a few damaged peaches? Does the owner raze his home because of a few warped timbers? Or is minor injury or sickness a valid reason for taking your life? So it is with the Church of God. As a body it is healthy, vigorous, strong and abounding in the work of the Lord. But as long as the church organism is in the flesh there will be warts! Doctrinal blemishes are inevitable.

Jesus promised to preserve his church - it will never die, never be extinguished from without. Sometimes it is highly

lied by some influential members of the prestigious and august mother Church at Jerusalem. They even thought Gentiles could not be saved without circumcision. Paul hurriedly convened a conference to determine God's intent - and God's Spirit in them led them to see it as unnecessary (Acts 15:28).

But whose salvation was annulled because until then they had believed "*they must be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses*"? Certainly not the apostle James - martyred some seven years before (Acts 12:2). And indeed not any of God's people prior to the Council of Jerusalem. God certainly wants His people to move towards purity of doctrine. He wants us, like little children, to be teachable. It's our resistance to clear truths of Scripture that brings His just judgment upon us.

Prophetic Truth

What then of *prophecy*? Isn't prophetic understanding a mark of "the true Church"? Surely this is necessary!

If so, then we must exclude a whole galaxy of glittering saints - Abraham, Moses, David, Paul to name but a handful. Then there's Daniel. Surely he of all people understood every twist and turn of prophecy? God gave him skill in all knowledge and wisdom. And he "*...had understanding in all visions and dreams*". Did he therefore "know it all"? Judge for yourself, from his own pen: "*...And I heard but I did not understand*" (Daniel 12:8). What Daniel saw in vision, and recorded, puzzled him! Indeed he was told to "*...Seal the book, even to the time of the end*" (v.4).

In fact it wasn't until the apostle John received the visions recorded in the book of Revelation that a right understanding of end-time prophecy even became possible. This was towards the end of the first century, John alone of the Twelve surviving. Yet without this vital book the detail and sequence of prophecy is sealed to our understanding.

The apostle Paul, for instance, wrote at length about resurrection. But not until John pencilled in the details did the timeline become clear that there will be more than one future mass resurrection, each separated by many years.

Peter wrote of earth's "*being kept in store, reserved unto fire*..." - but John's visions are needed for us to see this awesome conflagration in its time context.

John outlived all the other apostles. So it's likely even they were in ignorance of

the full scope of the prophecies.

The Churches of God believe we have a sound grasp of the overall direction of future events - knowledge gleaned from long years of study of the Scriptures and history, and guided by God's Spirit. But we "sit lightly in the saddle" - we won't know with absolute certainty until all is fulfilled. Or not!

Wrote Paul: "*...Whether there be prophecies they shall fail, For our knowledge and our prophecy alike are partial, and the partial vanishes when the wholeness comes.... Now we see only puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we shall see face to face*" (1 Corinthians 13:8).

The apostle - God's channel for so much "new truth" - admits his prophetic understanding is incomplete. Isn't it clear that an incomplete knowledge of prophecy won't exclude us from the Family of God! Yet whole denominations originate in the prophetic scenario concocted by one person.

Time To Change

More important, though, than this failure through ignorance or misunderstanding is another type of prophetic failure. Jesus himself warned of it. Prophecy isn't annulled because it is not fulfilled according to our expectations - especially in regard to the *time* element. How many intricate schemes have been drafted - and torn up - in regard to when this or that prophecy would be fulfilled! Countless hours, miles of print, have been consumed on this vain pursuit.

But Jesus also said, speaking of his return to reward his servants: "*...But if he is a bad servant and says to himself, 'The master is a long time coming' and begins to bully the other servants, and to eat and drink with his drunken friends, then the master will arrive on a day that servant does not expect, at a time he does not know, and will cut him in pieces*" (Matthew 24: 26-51).

In other words, the prophecies will come to pass in God's time and in God's way despite our incomplete knowledge.

But notice the vital importance of what Jesus Christ went on to say: "*...the master...will cut him in pieces. Thus he will find his place among the hypocrites*" (v.51). Why? Because he misinterpreted the prophecies? Not at all. The bottom line is that our reaction to "prophetic failure" - as we see it - is the key to our personal future. If, when Jesus returns, we are found (however late ac-

cording to our private interpretation) still totally absorbed in doing our allotted tasks in His work - then we are blessed. We will share in the Kingdom of God (vv.46-47).

The alternative (v.51) is horrific.

Is Doctrine Important?

Jesus - in whom, said Paul, "*lie hidden all God's treasures of wisdom and knowledge*" and who has "*all power*" - assured his Church he would never forsake it (Matthew 28:20). He is the living Head of the Church and walks in its midst. Without committing himself to preserving the Church (nor any individual of whatever standing) from error Jesus in a very real way guides and directs and corrects it - just as he did in apostolic times (Revelation 2, 3).

Sadly, since the earliest days of the Church - and to this day - many Christians have ceased to respond to the Head. They are at sea, anchors dragging and without compass or bearings. And doctrinally lost.

Such a calamity can indeed happen. Throughout history whole Christian communities and individual Christians, whole denominations, have been shipwrecked through gross error, or moral decline, or refusal to grow in knowledge - or simple neglect of what they understood. The words of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, still ring loud and clear. Addressing the leadership of the people of God in his day he said "*...you always fight against the Holy Spirit*" (Acts 7:51).

The Church of God in first-century Pergamon is an example for today's Church. Jesus first commended them for not denying his basic teachings. He then warned them not to entertain those who "*...hold to the teachings [doctrines] of Balaam...and of the Nicolaitans*" (Revelation 2:14-15). These teachings concerned idolatrous worship - not serving God in the way and at the times He prescribed. It's a doctrine close to God's heart.

And if change were not evident? "*So - repent,*" said Jesus. "*If you do not I will come to you soon and make war upon them with the sword that comes out of my mouth*" (v.16). So it is important that we do all in our power to get right the true faith.

Jesus has not left his Church rudderless or without guidance. Notice his words to the apostles: "*There is still much that I could say to you, but the burden would be*

In Corinth the apostle Paul faced conditions not unlike those we experience today

The apostle Paul's guidance, in two lengthy letters, to the fledgling church of God in Corinth was set against a city given over to idolatry. He had spent two years in the city and after his departure the culture of Corinth threatened to engulf the church. So he instructs them *'...flee idolatry'* (I Corinthians 10:14). Does this have any relevance for the church today?

In the context of the Christian Scriptures 'idolatry' is the worship of any god other than that of the Bible. He is the Creator of all things material and spiritual, and his 'worship' is more, much more, than turning up to sing hymns and spiritual songs in church. For God has described for us *how* He is to be worshipped.

Every so-called 'god' is worshipped by a set pattern of practices. A modern example is *Allah*, the Islamic god with its distinct 'five pillars of Islam'. It includes regular worship on Friday, pilgrimage to Mecca, prayer five times daily, the annual Ramadan fast, *Shahadah* (the basic statement of faith) *etc.* Christendom is marked by worship on Sunday and various festivals (Christmas, Easter *etc.*). Hinduism, too, has its set festivals unique to it. The God of both Judaism and Biblical Christianity has a distinct worship pattern. It includes worship on the seventh day of the week and on the seven festivals outlined in Leviticus 23.

Anciently, various faiths had their special festival observances. Mithraism, for example, venerated the Sun (on Sunday, of course), and also the Saturnalia during the last week of December—celebrated as the 're-birth of the sun' following the dark days of winter. Indeed, this festival with its orgies and overeating may have been in the apostle's thoughts when he wrote to the Corinthian brethren about the excesses of the people of Corinth. Peter the apostle wrote: *'...You have spent enough time in the past doing what the heathen like to do. Your lives were spent in indecency, lust, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and the disgusting worship of idols'* (I Peter 4:3). It's almost as if he were transported forward in time to our day—around Christmas time!

A Transformed Life

The culture that envelops us (*'this age'*) in this twenty-first century increasingly reflects the worst traits from the ancient pagan faiths. Yet embarking on the

Christian way requires radical change. *'...be not conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, in order to prove by you what is the good and pleasing and perfect will of God'*, says the apostle Paul to the Roman Christians [the very heart of Mithraism!] (*ch* 12:2). Peter adds: *'...And now the heathen are surprised when you do not join them in the same wild and reckless living, and so they insult you. But they will have to give an account of themselves to God, who is ready to judge the living and the dead'* (vv.4-5).

Christians, in other words, had left behind all that sinful practice—idolatry with all its unholy lifestyle and ungodly festivals—when they became joined to Christ. It took courage to resist the hedonist culture—yet many were willing to suffer the jibes of family and colleagues and neighbours, give up jobs and even give their lives for *'...the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Je-*

Knowledge... cont'd from p.2

too great for you now. However, when he comes who is the Spirit of truth, he will guide you into all truth" John 16:12-13).

Against all odds this guidance to the apostles has been preserved for us - in the Holy Scriptures.

That Spirit of truth is still in the Church of God, still guiding it. And step by step, as the Church is open to it and ready for it he expands our understanding of these same Scriptures. It's our responsibility to seek out and maintain true doctrine.

While we are nowhere promised - in this life - a complete unveiling of the mind of God, we have been furnished with the essentials for eternal life. *"His divine power"*, wrote the apostle Peter, *"has bestowed upon us everything that makes for true life and religion"* (II Peter 1:3). Jesus Christ is committed to reveal to his Church every scrap of information that will expedite his work on earth. And all the power needed to enable the people of God to enter the Family of God.

What Counts?

It's clear, then, that every single one of God's people recorded in Scripture, with the sole exception of Jesus Christ himself, has lived in error to some degree.

While the Church taught circumcision, or proclaimed salvation for Jews only, or

Flee Idolatry!

sus' (Philippians 3:14). That 'high calling' is to be transformed through a resurrection to become a Spirit-born child of the great God of the universe, and to work with Him eternally.

God is consistent. *'I don't change'*, He said. Addressing His nation of Israel He says: *'...take heed to yourself that you not be snared to follow [the heathen]...and that you not inquire after their gods, saying, How did these nations serve their gods? And I shall do so, even I. You shall not do so to Jehovah your God; for everything hateful to Jehovah, which He detests, they have done to their gods. For they have even burned their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods. All the things that I command you, take heed to do them and you shall not add to it, nor take away from it'* (Deuteronomy 12:30-32). **Ω**

had incomplete understanding of the doctrine of resurrection, or misunderstood prophecy - at that time the Church was in error. Or was at best teaching incomplete knowledge. Yet a man like Noah, with his family, alone survived a worldwide flood - without complete knowledge. It is recorded of him: *"By faith Noah, divinely warned about the unseen future, took good heed and built an ark to save his household"* (Hebrews 11:7). He had but a glimmer of light about the coming Messiah and of God's grand design for mankind. But he died in faith, and will be rewarded at Christ's coming.

Lot, termed *"a righteous man"*, fled Sodom's destruction unscathed having only limited knowledge of God's plan and purpose. He simply trusted God.

Then there's Abraham who sacrificed his career, his family, his civilized life-style and *"went out not knowing whither he went"*. He wrote, as it were, a blank cheque acknowledging God's claim on the whole of his life. For a hundred years he surmounted trial after trial.

He resisted every imaginable pressure to opt out. Yet he endured, dying with the unique epitaph *"the friend of God"*. And without perfect knowledge.

What set these men apart and gave them high esteem with God? Was it that they fully understood doctrine? Or prophecy? Did they comprehend the whole mind of God? **cont'd p.5**

The Enigma of the Seventh Day

Isn't it curious that two people living next door to one another—even in the same house!—can hold radically different views on the same topic. How can that be? Assume these two are Christians, presumably drawing their views from the same Bible. Why, for example, does Mr A observe Christmas while Mr B avoids it. Or one goes off religiously to church every Saturday while the other heads for work that day, worshipping the next day. Or, in another home, one is a Christian and the other perhaps is of the Islamic faith.

Not only are we 'children of our times'—reflecting the prevailing culture—but we, initially at least in childhood, assume the beliefs of our home environment: my parents are Methodist so I embrace Methodism. Yours are Anglican so you are Church of England. As we encounter the wider world we absorb ideas new to us, fitting them around and into our own belief system. Sometimes we have the odd idea of our own.

And what a smorgasbord of beliefs and philosophies there are from which to select. It's said that if you have two economists you have at least three opinions. It is no different in matters of religious belief—there are more theological positions, it seems, than there are Christians!

It could be said that only in the Bible is there 'one pure faith', but given the diverse background of each Christian total unanimity of belief is not within reach, even after two thousand years of intense debate. A case can be made for some diversity, for there are indeed '*...things hard to be understood*' (II Peter 3:16)—and not just in the writings of the apostle Paul. The foundation teachings of the Word, however, are in plain sight. So why are they, too, so often misunderstood?

Those factors mentioned—up-bringing, outside input, culture, personal analysis—shape our beliefs, so what we read in the Bible is individually interpreted against the backdrop of these factors. Take, for example, the almost universal belief (across all the major faiths) that imbedded in each of us is an 'immortal soul'. That when we die we are immedi-

ately brought before the bar of God and judged, 'rewarded'—with Heaven or Hell or Purgatory. Or perhaps re-assigned to earth in another form, a different status. Where held, that belief—the immortal soul—inevitably colours our approach to life. And our interpretation of Bible texts—as in Philippians 1:23: '*...For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ*'.

Here's another common example. Raised as a Methodist or Anglican or Baptist—indeed almost any Christian denomination—you inevitably will focus your life around the weekly observance of Sunday. It's not something that daily exercises your mind. You just, without question, go to church on Sunday, on the *assumption* that's what Jesus has appointed.

New Testament Observance

But Sunday observance is *not* the backdrop of New Testament teaching. Underlying all of the New Testament is the unspoken age-old observance of the seventh-day Sabbath—Saturday. The LORD introduced it before 'the Fall' and His faithful have ever after observed it. Jesus observed it. His apostles observed it. The first Christians, for several centuries, observed it. Theologians, however, question every aspect of the Sabbath.

Despite six thousand years of seventh-day observance 'Sunday' is the norm in Christianity. [Though there are many millions who observe the seventh day.] Yet have you ever heard your pastor prove Sunday observance from the Bible? Ever heard him ask which day of the week is the seventh? Or, 'how can you be sure that Sunday is the original *first* day of the week'? Or, 'when does Sunday begin'? Or, hear him prove from the Scriptures that Jesus rose from the dead on Sunday morning (he didn't)? Has he clearly demonstrated *from Scripture* that Jesus changed the Sabbath to Sunday?

The Gospels were mainly written a couple of decades after the resurrection of Jesus. Their testimony is that Sabbath was *still* the day before Sunday. Here's what Matthew says: '*...After the Sabbath, in the early dawn of the first day of the*

week, Mary of Magdala and the other Mary came to see the sepulcher' (Matthew 28:1). Note also that Jesus expected the brethren to be observing Sabbath when Jerusalem fell to the Romans some forty years after he returned to the Father (Matthew 24:20). Recall that he calls the Sabbath 'the Lord's day': '*...the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath*' (Matthew 12:8), as did the apostle John towards the end of the first century (Revelation 1:10).

Many of those who heard the Gospel proclaimed were more open to the apostles' claims. For example Paul's hearers in Berea '*...Day after day they studied the Scriptures to see if these things were true*' (Acts 17:11). That's the source of our belief and practice as Christians. Jude writes that we must '*...earnestly contend for the faith once for all delivered to the saints*' (Jude 3). To Timothy, Paul writes: '*... what you heard from me commit these things to faithful men, such as will be competent also to teach others*' (II Timothy 2:2).

We would expect, then, that God wants us to tread carefully! We must 'study the Scriptures' to confirm our beliefs—no matter how well embedded is our traditional belief. Most Christians, for example, assume that Jesus or the apostles changed Sabbath observance to Sunday, the first day of the week. Yet there's not a trace of the change in all Scripture.

Instead we are confronted time after time with the apostles observing the *seventh* day and never Sunday. In Antioch Paul preached in the synagogue—but when many Jews left he spoke to the proselytes (Gentiles) who remained desired to return to hear more the next Sabbath: '*...when the Jews were gone out of the synagogue, the Gentiles besought that these words might be preached to them the next Sabbath*' (Acts 13:42-44). Notice—Paul didn't tell them that God's worship day had been changed to Sunday! '*Come back tomorrow!*'

In Memory

Every faith has its observances, from the simple to the intricately complex. For Christians God has left two memorials of the work of Jesus. In one Jesus says: '*...this do in remembrance of me*' (Luke 22:19), '*...until he come*' (I Corinthians 11:26), an annual observance known as the *Lord's Supper* in recollection of his redemptive work.

One in Seven?

I own seven houses and you want to buy one. I offer you the end of the row—No 7, the seventh, and you accept. I come round as you are moving in—only to find you moving into No 1. I need to explain to you that '*the seventh*' is not just 'any one in seven'.

The other memorial is 'the Lord's Day' - the day that commemorates his work of Creation. The LORD told Israel *...in six days Jehovah made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore Jehovah blessed the Sabbath day, and sanctified it* (Exodus 20:11). The seventh day serves to point to JHVH as the awesomely powerful Creator.

It's a theme echoed by the apostles and in the book of Revelation (late 1st c.). The apostles: *'...with one accord did lift up the voice unto God, and said, 'Lord, you are God, who did make the heaven, and the earth, and the sea, and all that are in them' (Acts 4:24).* And an angel to John decades later: *'...Fear God and give glory to Him! For the hour of His judgment has come. And worship Him who made the heaven and the earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters' (Revelation 14:7).* When do we worship the God of Creation? On the day set for us to remember it. The seventh-day Sabbath memorial of creation was still extant at the end of the first century!

And in this twenty-first!

Ω

'The First Day'

An apparent exception is in Acts 20:7: *'...upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached [Gk.dialegomai] unto them, ready to depart on the morrow; and continued his speech until midnight'.*

This, of course, was *after sunset* on Saturday and before 'midnight', for in Bible times the 'day' began around sunset—that is, around six pm in those latitudes.

After the Sabbath services the brethren met for a repast ('break bread') and the apostle then continues in conversation [Gk.homileo] until morning (v.11). It was, therefore *Sunday*—a work day—and he faced an arduous twenty mile walk.

Request the booklets:

**Why Observe Sunday?
The Resurrection was not
on Sunday**

KNOWLEDGE... cont'd from p. 3

By no means. What counted with these men - and with a countless host of other men and women of God - was their willing submission to what they understood, coupled with the quality of their lives. Typical of them all were God's satisfied words concerning Abraham: *"For I know him that he will command his children and his household after him and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment"* (Genesis 18:19). Years later God gave majestic promises to Abraham's son *"because that Abraham kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes and my laws"* (26:5).

They lacked complete doctrinal and prophetic knowledge. But once called of God they walked with Him. They committed to obedience to His laws according to the knowledge they had. They diligently sought out truth and obeyed what they understood. And they lived - and died - by faith.

This is what counts with God!

Crusade With Us

Today, Christianity is sorely divided. Traditional denominations can't, for example, even agree a common date for Christmas or Easter—talks on the latter are in progress. Other traditions also split over not only the calendar, but when to observe festivals on that calendar. Clearly, when sincere Bible students can "incubate different offspring from the same egg" it's likely it's not a matter which greatly bothers the egg's producer the Author of the Word!

The Church of God must focus on its divinely-appointed purpose. Tunnel vision focused on disputed doctrinal territory leads only to war. Swollen egos are puffed up as exegetical swords are crossed. Rather, let's concentrate on the foundation truths of God's Word and unite to reach out to a dying world with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Let's focus on the knowledge that counts!

Soon Jesus Christ will return to our planet as Supreme Ruler over every government. With him he will bring rewards for work accomplished by his people. Doctrinal perfection won't be among those works! When this momentous event occurs - will you be found still labouring in his vineyard, still abounding in the work of the Lord despite prophetic appearances? Will he find you have given him your all, dedicated your spiritual and creative and temporal resources to him? Will you have submerged your desire to "get it right" in wholehearted support for

the global mission of God's Church, in promoting the true unity of the Church? Will Jesus Christ find you active in your allotted task?

Or will you have abandoned the work of God in a fit of pique because of some error - real or imagined, doctrinal or prophetic - in one or other part of the Church of God? Will you embrace gross error simply because your leader asserts "we were wrong"?

True knowledge is important, and our doctrinal understanding may yet lack perfection. It may be incomplete. Nevertheless let's all take up the challenge of reaching out to our dying world with the bitter-sweet message of the true Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Let's give our best shot to this magnificent crusade!

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A Tale of a Nail

The congregation built a new church building and people came from far and wide to see it, and to admire its beauty.

Up on the roof, a little nail heard the people praising everything about the lovely structure - except the nail. No one even knew he was there, and he became angry and jealous. "If I am that insignificant, nobody will miss me if I quit!" So the nail then released its hold, slid down the roof, and fell into the mud.

That night it rained. Soon the shingle that had no nail blew away, and the roof began to leak. The water streaked the walls and the beautiful murals. The plaster began to fall, the carpet was stained, and the pulpit bible was ruined by water. All this because a little nail decided to quit!

But what of the nail? While holding the shingle, it was obscure but it was also useful. Buried in the mud it was just as obscure, but now it was useless and would soon be eaten up by rust!

Every member is important to the church. You may, like the nail, feel obscure at times, but just like the nail, your absence is felt. When you are not present for worship, in some way the body of Christ hurts.

We are all a part of the Lord's building.

Leslie A Turvey

Jews and Christians have been at odds for two millennia. Yet we have a shared heritage

being fully furnished for every good work' (II Timothy 3:15-17).

A Shared Heritage

Christianity is often viewed as a 'new' religion, a replacement for a so-called outdated Judaism. Yet only Christians and Jews worship the same God, share the same Scriptures of the Old Testament, have many of the same aspirations for mankind and for the future. And, of course, Jesus was very much a Jew—born into the Israelite tribe of Judah, as were the Twelve apostles, while Paul was from Benjamin.

A Shared Faith

In Hebrews chapter eleven we are reminded of the 'cloud of witnesses' who had embraced the faith of the Hebrew Scriptures: '... these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect' (ch.11:39-40).

That faith was preserved, enshrined in the Scriptures, in Israel: '... *Jehovah's portion is His people; Jacob [ie Israel] is the lot of His inheritance. He found him in a desert land, and in the waste, a howling wilderness. He encircled him and cared for him; He guarded him as the pupil of His eye*' (Deuteronomy 32:9-10).

Jesus was thoroughly 'Jewish' and fully immersed in the faith as recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures. The infant church referenced their teachings in those same Scriptures: '... *from a babe you [Timothy] know the Holy Scriptures, those being able to make you wise to salvation through belief in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, so that the man of God may be perfected,*

Note that the 'Scripture' to which Paul refers is the Old Testament—the 'New' was not yet written. The Hebrew Scriptures are the foundation of Christian theology, of our understanding of the '...*faith once delivered*'.

Heart Religion

Judaism is often castigated as being focused on externals, a formulaic faith, salvation by works. It does indeed have structure, with its weekly and annual round of observances (just as does Christianity with its festivals!) And before 70AD a sacrificial system with its significance in all its parts for the life and ministry of Jesus the Messiah.

The trauma of seventy years of exile

in Babylon left its mark, and strenuous efforts were made after their restoration to prevent a recurrence. Hence the foundation faith was guarded by sometimes onerous and coercive regulation enforced by its 'guardians', notably the Scribes and Pharisees whom Jesus took to task for their hypocrisy (Matthew 23) and traditions (Matthew 15:3).

That, however, is not a complete picture of Judaism. In the first century there were

many truly devout Jewish men and women—Anna, Simeon, the repentant publican in the Temple, Elizabeth, Mary are named in the Gospels. And down the ages multitudes in Israel had an intimate heart religion relationship with the Creator, Jehovah, the one true Elohim—a relationship that went far beyond the external observances: '...*Be glad in the LORD, and rejoice, you righteous: and shout for joy, all you that are upright in heart*' (Psalm 32:11).

Messiah

Jesus for Christians is the one and only Messiah, the Anointed One who came to fulfill the divine plan for mankind and to open the door to eternal life. He came as 'the suffering servant' to die for our sin, to bring forgiveness and access to the Father.

Judaism, too, looks for the coming Messiah, also born of Judah and, like Jesus, in Bethlehem. For Judaism He is yet future, and will come as a warrior King to restore Israel—as will Jesus. For both Jews and Christians Messiah will establish a worldwide peaceful Kingdom on Earth.

Jesus is their Saviour—and ours. **Ω**

The Oral Law

The *Oral Law* was the rabbinic interpretation of the written Law given by the LORD to Moses.

It gave guidance on the 'hard' parts of the Law—eg when two laws were in conflict, as with that of circumcision on the Sabbath, and the sanctity of the weekly Sabbath. (Jesus did not reject the ruling that circumcision for Jews had precedence.)

Some rulings, however, were condemned by Jesus (Matthew 15:2-9). Their leaders made such matters a salvation issue.

Ronald Dart 1934-2016

It is with deep regret that we report the death of Ronald Dart, aged 82—esteemed and inspirational teacher of the Bible. As my one-time mentor and a guide to sound Christian practice he was without equal. His written and spoken ministry has for half a century been a rich mine of insightful and often challenging truth for many worldwide.

In 1996 Mr Dart founded *Christian Educational Ministries* which continues to further his work through his writings.

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Unleavened Bread	April 23-29
Pentecost	June 12
Trumpets	October 3
Atonement	October 12
Tabernacles	October 17-23
Eighth Day	October 24

Why the Church?

As humans most of us are moved by the suffering we see, face-to-face or via the media. Such compassion is evidenced by the outpouring of financial help—from rich and poor, from all faiths and none—for those in need when disaster strikes. It's a universal emotion. And those who follow the example of Jesus Christ are no less involved. The Christian from the heart expresses compassion wherever encountered, a 'fruit of the Spirit'. Compassion is an expression of Christ in us.

A major function of 'church' is to nourish in each believer such qualities.

Primarily, however, each local assembly of believers is commissioned to proclaim the resurrected Jesus as mankind's sole Saviour. Too often the message falls on deaf ears, as Satan uses every device at his command to block the message.: Said Jesus: *'...when they hear, Satan comes at once and takes away the Word having been sown in their hearts'* (Mark 4:15). Paul, too: *'...if our gospel is being hidden, it has been hidden in those being lost, in whom the god of this age has blinded the thoughts of the unbelieving, so that the brightness of the gospel of the glory of Christ who is the image of God, should not dawn on them'* (II Corinthians 4:4).

Mother Church

But some do respond positively: *'...the one hearing the Word, and understanding it, who indeed bears and yields fruit'* (Matthew 13:23). But, according to Jesus, comparatively few: *'...narrow is the gate, and constricted is the way that leads away into life, and few are the ones finding it'* (Matthew 7:14).

The Father influences receptive individuals to have an encounter with His Son, Jesus, and those who commit to him are brought into a relationship with the Father as sons and daughters: *'... No one is able to come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him'* (John 6:44).

The 'god' of this World

What!? Isn't the Creator the God of this world ? Isn't *'...the earth [is] the LORD's and the fullness of it'*?

Yet the Scriptures make clear that there's another, a 'god' who is mankind's ruler, who in his many forms is the one who is worshipped almost universally. Said Jesus as he faced betrayal and death: *'...the ruler [Gk. archon] of this world is coming. But he has no power over me'* (John 14:30). This 'god' has from the beginning sought to overthrow the divine plan.

Over the millennia he has actively—but unsuccessfully—attempted to prevent the birth of the God-appointed Saviour: *'...You and this woman will hate each other; your descendants and hers will always be enemies. One of hers will strike [crush] you on the head, and you will strike him on the heel'* (Genesis 3:15, Romans 16:20). A death-blow to the 'serpent' and an injury to the woman's prophesied off-spring, Jesus. His 'wound' (death) was temporary, Satan's (the Serpent) will be unending.

The Adversary Unveiled

The apostle John identifies that ser-

pent: *'...the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceives the whole world'* (Revelation 12:9).

That deception (seduction) is far-reaching. As the apostle Paul points out, he is: *'...the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now working in the children of disobedience'* (Ephesians 2:2), adding: *'...if our gospel is being hidden, it has been hidden in those being lost, in whom the god of this age has blinded the thoughts of the unbelieving, so that the brightness of the gospel of the glory of Christ who is the image of God, should not dawn on them'* (II Corinthians 4:4).

The effect is clear. Millions in Christendom are in blissful ignorance of the truths of the Bible—the source book of Christianity. They are truly 'blinded' and bound by traditional teachings often derived from ages-old devil-inspired beliefs: *'... the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, cleaving to deceiving spirits and teachings of demons'* (I Timothy 4:1).

Surely it is time for all who profess the name of Christ to *'...examine yourselves, whether you are in the faith; test yourselves'* (II Corinthians 13:5). **Ω**

God is represented as regularly convening angels to report to Him—tradition says on the Day of Atonement. This includes Satan (Job 1:2, I Kings 22) and takes place in 'heaven'. That is, above Earth's atmosphere but not in 'the third heaven' where God is.

The LORD has often appeared in earth's environment, sometimes in human form (eg Genesis 18:1), or—as here in Job (I Kings 22)—surrounded by 'the host of heaven'. The prophet Ezekiel also encountered such an appearance (ch 1).

Although God's implacable enemy, Satan remains subject to God's restrictions on his activities (Job 1:12).

Such are encouraged to become part of a local assembly of believers where, like 'new-born babes', they are protected from 'wolves' [self-serving false teachers] and instructed in what Jesus requires of them: *'... teaching them to observe all things, whatever I [Jesus] commanded you'* (Matthew 28:20).

It is, sadly, a fact of modern Chris-

tendom that few denominational churches are prepared or willing to teach those commands of Jesus, instead substituting a pabulum of deceptive traditions and non-Biblical teachings.

Our readers are encouraged to carefully study *'...whatever [Jesus] commanded'* as taught in the Scriptures. We are here to help. **Ω**

A Family Affair

Since mankind first set foot on our planet, the bed-rock of society has been 'the family'. Its integrity has been jealously protected, battles fought to maintain it, laws drafted to guard it. It's a concept that has persisted universally to our era. Yet church, media and state have now embarked on a crusade to obliterate the clear lines of 'family'.

Ties that Bind

Several strands combine to identify a family. The whole human race, of course, is indeed '*...of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth*' (Acts 17:26). At the individual level consanguinity is a factor—ties of blood, as a man and a woman unite to 'share genes' and beget offspring to form the 'family': '*...a man [shall] leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh*' (Genesis 2:24). It is the first God appointed institution.

Soon after the Great Flood, Noah's sons with their wives peopled the depopulated earth: '*...These are the families of the sons of Noah, after their generations [by genealogy], in their nations; and of these were the nations divided in the earth after the flood*' (Genesis 10:32). The LORD allocated locations to each of these families (each small in number, at this stage): '*...[He] has determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation*' (Acts 17:26). [see side bar]

Moses reminds us that God dispersed the various families '*...When the most High divided to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of Adam, he set the bounds of the people according to the number of the children of Israel*' (Deuteronomy 32:8). He cares about family. Note how diligently Israel maintained their family tree!

Divided Tongues

Then there's *language*, a vital necessity for cohesion within the family, and within the larger family—the nation. After the Flood all of mankind still spoke the same basic lan-

Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it, and rule over the fish of the seas, and over birds of the heavens, and over all beasts creeping on the earth
Genesis 1:28

guage (that of Noah and family, notably Eber, grandson of Shem)—but began to misuse it (Genesis 11:1-6).

The modern world mirrors that ancient dream of Nimrod of one nation, as technology (and the English language!) enables co-operation between scientists, commercial interests and politicians to engineer a global economy, global control—and ultimately a global (tyrannical) state. The LORD said '*...now nothing will be restrained from them that they have imagined*' (v.6). [see side-bar]

But introduce in any stable nation an alien language spoken by a substantial sector of the population, and national cohesion melts away, there results confusion.

Culture

Every family evolves its own culture, its own set of domestic rules to maintain an orderly household: when do teens return home, how long on media, diet, bed-time, which church if any *etc.* They are broadly similar across the nation and forged over generations.

On the larger stage the nation (a family grown large) is defined by its culture and is expressed by its system of justice, by its values formed over centuries and influenced by the dominant historic faith. Even by its fashions (Zephaniah 1:8)! Or diet (Leviticus 11).

When these alien cultures begin to dominate a nation, when there's a babel of languages, when competing legal systems are introduced, when family boundaries are breached and ghettos form—then tensions arise leading to civil strife and a breakdown of law and order.

Coherent families are a vital factor for national unity and stability. Ω

One World

The awesome lesson of the Flood soon fell on deaf ears, and God was concerned that there was an attempt to form a global state (Babel) under the influence of Nimrod, singled out by Moses as a matter of note: '*...Cush begat Nimrod: he began to be a mighty one in the earth*' (Genesis 10:8, 10). He became notorious anciently, later generations raising him to god status (Bel, Bacchus).

Under Nimrod the talents of all the different families, aided by a common language, were harnessed to build this antigod state (*ch* 11:1-6). To foil this attempt at a world government God intervened to confound their language: '*...they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is what they begin to do; and now nothing will be withheld from them, which they purpose to do. Come, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech*'

'...the sons of Noah were ranged according to their nations, and every nation ranked by its families, so that every nation had its assigned territory, and in every nation the tribes, and in every tribe the families, were located by themselves'

JFB Commentary

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MiniStudy

Other Faiths

‘...there is salvation in no other One, for neither is there any other name under Heaven having been given among men by which we must be saved’ (Acts 4:12)

‘...even if some are called gods, either in the heavens or on the earth; (even as there are many gods, and many lords); but to us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we for Him, and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and we by Him’ (I Corinthians 8:5-6)

Nothing has changed since Paul wrote those words to the Corinthian church two millennia ago! No ‘god’ has succeeded Jesus the Christ. Jesus alone is worthy of worship. There is still but one God, Jesus the Messiah. Man’s salvation depends on Jesus—alone.

- Fresh from the hand of the Creator, our first parents experienced unrestricted access to Him. The LORD instructed Him in how to live the godly life, how to control his environment, how to worship the one God. They lived in innocence, conscience clear, free from any consequence of sin
- Since they sinned and were driven from Eden, the ‘serpent’—the ‘...god of this world’ (II Corinthians 4:4)—has monopolized mankind’s worship. Man’s mind distorted by his rejection of the Creator and his subservience to Satan (the ‘serpent’ - Revelation 12:9) - man descended into a multitude of deranged and irrational concepts of God (Romans 1)
- And they were without excuse: ‘...Ever since God created the world, his invisible qualities, both his eternal power and his divine nature, have been clearly seen; they are perceived in the things that God has made. So those people have no excuse at all!’ (Romans 1:20). By rejecting God’s way their thought processes became distorted: ‘...Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart’ (Ephesians 4:18)
- Deceived (by the ‘serpent’, as Paul notes), they ‘...changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator’ (Romans 1:25). As the apostle records, they: ‘...changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things’ (v.23). To Moses God warns: ‘...lest you lift up your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun, and the moon, and the stars, even all the host of heaven, should be driven to worship them, and serve them’ (Deuteronomy 4:19). History is littered with examples of such base and irrational practices—snakes, cats, even noted or notorious men and women, were exalted to ‘godhood’
- Given man’s innate desire to worship—whether a spirit or an object (in some cases it is the ‘state’) — nations must for national cohesion have a ‘god’ of some kind. Inevitably each takes on characteristics of that ‘god’, develops a common culture, a common form of worship. Usually there is a common source—in Christendom, for example, that is the Hebrew-Christian *Bible*, in Islam it’s the *Koran*
- Each body of scripture has its own ethical system, its own world view, its own culture—and often these are less than harmonious and indeed often in open conflict. The fate of ancient Israel is a case in point. Established as God’s model nation it was given a divinely-crafted constitution: ‘...what has Jehovah your God asked of you, except to fear Jehovah your God, to walk in all His ways, and to love Him, and to serve Jehovah your God with all your heart, and with all your soul; to keep the commandments of Jehovah, and His statutes which I am commanding you today, for your good (Deuteronomy 10:12). And, ‘...who is a great nation whose statutes and judgments are as righteous as all this Law which I set before you today?’ (4:8). It stands to this day as the bedrock on which Anglo-Saxon law is founded, and a shining example for all nations
- Israel lost the plot. Their Constitution encouraged kindness to the strangers in their midst (Deuteronomy 10:18) - but also required that all aliens conform to Israel’s law (Leviticus 24:16), a law Israel ignored to the destruction of their nation. Contrary to God’s directions they permitted an alien culture and over time they absorbed its alien values, thus forfeiting the protection afforded by submission to God’s laws. They experienced loss of sovereignty and were scattered abroad or exiled to Babylon. It is a salutary warning for our own nations as we are faced with the devaluation of Bible values

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