

new **Horizons**

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addressing the important issues for today and tomorrow



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CGOM

Churches Of God Outreach Ministries

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

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

Who We Are

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

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

To these ends we publish Bible-based literature - eg our bi-monthly e-mail Newsletter **OUTREACH**, the **NEW HORIZONS** magazine, the **BIBLE BASICS** on-line home study course, and a 32-lesson **BIBLE 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* or a *Publications List* please request it from any of the addresses listed or go to our website: **www.cgom.org**

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The Christian centuries have spawned a multitude of forms of 'governance.'

Is there a 'good' one?

Is there a 'right' one?

They are generally described as congregational, presbyterian and hierarchical forms - divided by degrees of independence and centralization. And we see all in action today, even within the Churches of God of the Sabbatarian tradition. They all are in varying degree effective.

However, it's pertinent to ask, Is there a format handed on by the primitive church, by the apostles? It is sometimes claimed that the answer is *No*, that we are free to devise our own form. Clearly there have to be differences between the first century and any time subsequent to the apostles. For example, there is simply no one today with inspired apostolic authority who can give a "thus says the Lord". I

suggest that the authority in the Church of God today lies in the Scriptures. The challenge - and the danger - comes in the matter of interpretation.

It is from the Scriptures that we derive the authentic teaching of Jesus, and it is surely sensible to assume that the form of governance left by the apostles is for our leaning. Deviate from the apostolic form (in the fundamentals) and we become less effective. Indeed if we ignore the apostolic pattern we are guaranteed that glitches will develop along the way. Like most Biblical doctrines, of course, the complete picture is not spelled out for us in any one text.

Our Tradition

The history of the Church of God tradition since the mid-nineteenth

century witnessed the development of the concept of church government. Our early approach changed in some quarters from a somewhat democratic form to a hierarchical. It is not unreasonable to ask if all the changes were positive. Indeed they were based on faulty assumptions relating the practice of the Old Testament to that of the Church. An example is equating the church leadership with the OT Aaronic priesthood. Another is falsely assuming a "pyramid" style of governance under Moses. Note that the essence of Moses' form was that all *judgments were made at the lowest level* - a practice Jesus promoted (Matthew 18:15ff)!

We need to learn from our experiences, but also to constantly measure our "experiments" against the rule of the Scriptures. This test was abandoned along the way.

A lesson from history on...

Church Governance

Certainly the fruits were both good—and destructively bad. A great work was done. But the seeds of division were sown in fertile soil. This is not to ignore the fact that heresy and division will occur anyway, even were we to implement the "perfect" form of governance. Recall the New Testament divisions and heresies!

The descent into heresy was in part an effect of the form of governance we imposed. Indeed it mirrors the progress of the church in the first century.

Pattern of Growth

Examine the development of the primitive church. An apostle or evangelist would go to an area, preach the Gospel, form an assembly - and go away, perhaps never to return. The same process was repeated - twenty

miles away, a hundred, perhaps five hundred. The apostle might return - as at Lystra, Iconium and Antioch - to appoint a foundation leadership. Or he would send an "apostolic delegate" for that purpose, as Titus in Crete.

This held true during the era of inspired apostles. But they gave guidance for future generations by outlining leadership qualification (I Timothy 3, Titus 1) and procedures (II Timothy 2:2, I Timothy 5:22).

Also, an individual Christian would through testimony gather around himself or herself a growing band of new Christians—for example, the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8).

Time passes. The local assembly puts out "runners", forming new local assemblies and each of these appointing elders. The new "church plants" would have emotional and perhaps leadership ties to the "mother" church. Those nearby will naturally co-operate in joint worship and other activities. Distant church plants (as a result of evangelism) will develop in a similar manner. Each assembly included members of the one Body of Christ, but it was not externally governed - from Jerusalem or elsewhere. Not theory, this for it is exactly how the primitive church developed.

As might be expected, however, carnal human nature entered the scene.

Growth of Centralization

Naturally the empire's first city would have the prestige and the wealth to dominate - not only its own church plants but also the world. Thus was born the Church of Rome, over four centuries becoming the Roman Catholic (Universal) Church. So, too, the Eastern Orthodox Church (Constantinople), the Ethiopian Coptic Church (probably from one humanly unsupervised man - Acts 8:26

- 40!) etc. All grew out of single self-governing assemblies. Each of these centralized bodies developed separately and, on their borders, in competition. Each developed its own theology, its own traditions, its own government - and its own heresies.

As the "empire" of each expanded and the true Biblical faith became diluted ambitious men developed a hierarchy of power and wealth. Students of church history are aware of the insidious development, during the first century, of the episcopacy from the original two offices, designated by the apostles, of *overseers* and *deacons* (Phil 1:1). The consequences mirror human nature in the raw, whether in secular government or ecclesiastical!

All this was a far cry from the purity of the apostolic foundations. As Joseph Priestley notes: "There did not remain, at the conclusion of the fourth century, so much as a shadow of the ancient constitution of the Christian Church" (*The Corruptions of Christianity*, p.229). That constitution is summed up by Edward Gibbon in his *Decline and Fall...*: "The societies [local assemblies] which were instituted in the cities of the Roman empire were united only by the ties of faith and charity. Independence and equality formed the basis of their internal constitution" (*abr. ed* p.170). And again (p.172): "Every society formed within itself a separate and independent republic, and although the most distant of these little states maintained a mutual as well as friendly intercourse of letters and deputations, the Christian world was not yet connected by supreme authority of legislative assembly". *That came later!*

Writes W D Davies: "The birth of what seems...an almost "military" hierarchical organization... is connected with the Church's failure to understand itself as the "People of God", as had the old Israel. By relinquishing the humble Synagogue, the Church organism more easily developed into an organization, a community stratified like the surrounding society and organized in terms of a

ministry separated from, though maintained by, a subservient laity" (*The Gospel and the Land*, p.387). The accounts of these historians match history on the ground.

All this radical change was motivated simply by the tendency of human nature, condemned so roundly by Jesus (Luke 22:25-27), to institute structures which make it easier to lord it over folk! The spirit of pride and ambition supplanted the servant mentality exemplified by Jesus and the apostles.

There will always be those who secretly desire a following—and power

The concept of the church as the People of God, God's heritage (I Peter 5:3) is enhanced, and the desire to dominate is limited, when the Church is viewed as an association of independent but co-operating assemblies. Before long, however, the heritage (Gk *kleros*), the brethren, were sidelined and the term *clergy* applied solely to the leadership. Others became "mere laity".

It is of note that the "principles of governance" in the New Testament are all *directed to local assemblies* with no implication that they refer to a universal "one and only true church organization" except in principle.

Into All The World

Note that the initial half-century of the church of God was the most productive in history! Local assemblies were diligent to carry out "the great commission". They went into all the world (Colossians 1:6) compelled by a love for mankind and a burning desire to do a work for God. All this despite huge obstacles imposed by geography and communications and transport. *And with no centralized organization.* In each assembly men and women equipped by God with necessary gifts and carried by a faith that God would provide went out from their local assemblies with the precious good news. No-one forbade them!

I'm not here advocating we all buy a donkey each! The apostolic principles include local autonomy, diligent application of spiritual gifts by *all* the brethren, fiery zeal, faith, vision, exploitation of available tools and voluntary inter-assembly co-operation.

Examples of the latter are in Philipians 4:16 (evangelism), Romans 15:26 (alms). It is folly to replace these principles by centralized organization. This leads only, in time, to gross abuse - as we have seen anciently and in this century. *And are sure to see again*, given enough time, and given there will always be those who secretly desire a following - and power.

In a world of burgeoning populations God has provided the tools, and the talented and gifted brethren able to skillfully use those tools. All the brethren in each local assembly must appropriately use to the full the diversity of gifts Jesus Christ has placed within their assembly. That will include evangelism. It will include the encouragement and financial support of those gifted for evangelism. It will include co-operation with other independent local assemblies to achieve this and other activities.

We should not, of course, assume the world will be at our feet even if we had perfect government! We sow where we can, but it is God who calls. *When* His harvest will be complete is known to Him. In the meantime we are - all of us - to labor zealously till the end, even if there are but "gleanings" that remain to be reaped or indeed if the harvest may already be gathered in.

Local Governance

It is a fallacy, however, to assume that local assembly autonomy means God does not require a form of governance in His church gathered in local independent assemblies. The Scriptures on this are writ large. For a local independent assembly to be effective it is vital that each be Scripturally ordered. *cont'd p.8*

The Day of Atonement in part represents the corporal church's relationship with the Father

For ancient Israel—and indeed in modern Judaism—the most solemn annual observance is the great *Day of Atonement*—*Yom Kippur*. It's a day when even secular Jews will fast and attend synagogue. It is one of seven annual gatherings instituted by God for His worship. Sadly, *Atonement* is ignored by Christians in general, thereby missing out on one of the most significant aspects of the divine plan.

A Special Day

Many Christians, however, continue to observe the day—held in autumn (the 10th day of the Hebrew seventh month). It is observed by able-bodied believers—appropriately, as we will see—with a day of fasting from all food and liquid. The fast begins in the evening through to the next evening (Leviticus 23:32). It is a special Sabbath day when all work ceases, and the brethren attend church services when available.

The *Day of Atonement* in its inception was a day of high colourful drama centred on the Tabernacle and, later, the Temple. It was the sole day in the year on which the Holy of Holies, God's earthly throne-room, was entered. Every action, every sacrifice, even every item of clothing worn by the High Priest, (who alone officiated on that day) has some representation in the life and mission of our present High Priest—the Messiah, Jesus. (See Hebrews 8-9)

The letter to Hebrews states: '... *But Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that*

The Great Day of Days

is to say, not of this building; Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us (ch 9:11-12).

The High Priest, having first offered a sacrifice for his own sin, then entered with the blood of a sacrifice for the sins of the people, interceding with God on their behalf. This latter sacrifice was one of two identical goats, chosen by lot—one to be sacrificed and the other, to carry all the sin 'into the wilderness'. In addition the sacrifices atoned for the sin that had accumulated on the Tabernacle through the confessions of the people since the previous Day of Atonement: '...*make atonement for the holy place, because of the uncleannesses of the children of Israel, and because of their transgressions, even all their sins: and so shall he do for the tent of meeting [the Tabernacle], that dwells with them in the midst of their uncleannesses*' (Leviticus 16:16)

This 'day of days', for Israel, signified the complete removal of those sins that hindered complete restoration to the divine favour.

The Wilderness Goat

While the meaning for Christians is in general clear—that the High Priest represents

Messiah—there are varied opinions on the significance of the *Azazel*, or wilderness goat. Simply, the two goats may be two sides of the same coin, both representing Messiah sacrificed and then bearing away our sin '...*as far as the east is removed from the west*' (Psalm 103:12) The Baptist tells his hearers: '...*Behold the Lamb of God, which takes [carries] away the sin of the world*' (John 1:29).

There is, however, dispute as to the significance of *Azazel* and its purpose. The text can read '...*to Azazel*' implying a person or place. (See side-bar)

In the ritual of *Atonement* all Israel's sins—sins that had accumulated throughout the year—were atoned for by the various sacrifices. The second goat wasn't sacrificed but Israel's sins—sins now forgiven—were transferred to it by the laying-on of hands of the High Priest. It was then led, alive, into the wilderness. Now with a 'clean sheet' the nation could proceed to another year of commitment to the LORD. The Tabernacle/Temple, too, had been cleansed.

Christian Practice

Given that all the ritual of the *Day of Atonement* was fulfilled in Jesus—does the Day have further significance for us? Is it not now irrelevant? Why do so many Christians continue to observe it with fasting and religious services? Is it any different from the *Passover* season which the apostle Paul indicates (I Corinthians 5:6-8) is a *Christian practice*?

Most Christians are not complete-

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

ly averse to observing an Old Testament festival, of course—they continue to observe the *Day of Pentecost*, for example. And a large Protestant organization (ICEJ) observes God's *Feast of Tabernacles* every year in Jerusalem. It is a truism that frequent and regular observance of an event enhances our understanding of it (eg Christmas, for many). So with the festivals appointed by God for His people—one of which is this *Day of Atonement* (see previous page).

It is important to note that *Atonement* is a *national* event for Israel. *Passover*, however, is personal and family, and for Christians is our annual re-commitment to the blood covenant with Jesus and the Father made at our baptism. *Passover*, preceded the evening before by the solemn remembrance of the suffering and death of our Saviour, represents our willingness to live a holy life, symbolized by the eating of unleavened bread—symbolic of corruption and sin—for seven days.

Repent!

Note that *national* element. Christianity, the fulfillment of the old faith, has no place for animal sacrifice, nor special 'holy garments', nor is it tied to a location as the Jerusalem Temple. But it, the church of God, is God's Temple: '*...All of you surely know that you are God's temple and that his Spirit lives in you. Together you are God's holy temple, and God will destroy anyone who destroys his temple*' (I Corinthians 3:16-17 CEV).

The Church of God—God's Temple, the Body of Christ—is a unit, though clearly not outwardly! It is made up of all in whom dwells the divine Spirit. We share a love of the truth (II Thessaloni-

ans 2:10)—yet squabble over minor interpretations. We share the same God—but disgrace His holy - Name by our petty divisions. We sing '*...all one body we*'—but ostracize individuals and dissenting groups.

And, just as Israel annually cleansed the Temple by their *Atonement* ritual, so the Church of God must approach this *Day of Days* in that same spirit of confession and reconciliation. It is a momentous opportunity to heal wounds. A chance to forgive past hurts. A chance to forge common links. Opportunity to co-operate, to leave behind petty finger-pointing and protectionism, to truly come to love one another.

All such is sin and defiles our God and His holy Name. Let us, on this *Day of Atonement 2018*, confess our personal and corporate sin, as did God's prophet Daniel: '*...We [Judah] have sinned, and have committed iniquity, and have done wickedly, and have rebelled, even by departing from your*

precepts and from your judgments...O Lord, according to all your righteousness, I beseech you, let your anger and your fury be turned away...O my God, incline your ear, and hear; open your eyes, and behold our desolations: for we do not present our supplications before you for our righteousnesses, but for your great mercies; O Lord, forgive; O Lord, hearken and do; defer not, for your own sake, O my God' (ch 9:5-19). God heard, and it was the prelude to their restoration to the Land.

In these uncertain days the Churches of God should be '*a city set on a hill*', a light shining in a darkened world dominated by a Sataniic mind-set, demonic practices, demonic teachings and led astray by seducing spirits—I Timothy 4:1). The church of God is—should be, must become—an example for the world of true reconciliation and harmonious relationships

Why is there stagnation? Perhaps the lessons of this *Day of Days* may awaken the churches to God's purpose for us. **Ω**

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the advantage of small assemblies

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the structure of the Out-

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is it based on the priesthood?

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does a church fellowship need leadership?

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The nations are in flux. A new one is born. Another is absorbed by a powerful neighbour. Another sinks without trace. It's chaotic—but behind all, guiding all, is God's Master Plan.

Here's how the prophet Isaiah sees it: *'...nations are as a drop from a bucket, and are reckoned as dust of the scales. Lo, He takes up coasts as a little thing'* (Isaiah 40:15). Or, zip forward a couple of centuries and hear Daniel, addressing the king of Babylon: *'...the Most High rules in the kingdom of men and gives it to whomever He will. And He sets up over it the lowest of men'* (ch 4:17).

And, the apostle Paul: *'...He [the Creator] made every nation of men of one blood, to live on all the face of the earth, ordaining fore-appointed seasons [their rise and fall] and boundaries of their dwelling'* (Acts 10:26).

Mankind—Adam and Eve—was created as a partnership, equipped to rule in harmony and in accordance with imparted godly principles. Sin changed all that, and life became a Godless selfish struggle that culminated in universal violence—and near total destruction of the race.

Territorial Imperative

As a result of man's rejection of godly principles, what has been termed the 'territorial imperative' binds us. It is defined as: *'...the drive in animals and man to take, hold and defend a particular area, zone, or turf'*. Civilisation recovered from that devastation, but human nature hadn't changed. As populations swelled despotic leaders eg Nimrod, Asshur—Genesis 10:8ff) staked their territorial claims.

There was still a single language spoken, facilitating the spread of false philosophies and ungodly practices—and God acted by confusing the language and pressuring them to disperse worldwide (ch 11): *'...when the Most High divided to the nations their inheritance; when He separated the sons of Adam, He set up the*

bounds of the peoples, according to the number of the sons of Israel' (Deuteronomy 32:8).

Israel migrated across Jordan and into Canaan, conquering the Amorites (a Canaanite tribe descended from Ham—the 'Palestinians' of that era) who by their foul practices had disqualified themselves from this territory so special in God's thoughts (Genesis 15:16).

False Claims

Around 1200BC the king of Ammon (the area of modern Jordan) staked his claim to the Land: *'...the king of the sons of Ammon said to the messengers of Jephthah, Israel took my land when he came up out of Egypt, And now... restore them in peace'* - Judges 11). He received a robust Trump-like response from the Israelite commander, Jephthah. In essence, Jephthah asserts our theme that *the Creator* is in control.

Spirits at War

Conflicts between nations often seem to ignite with a tiny spark—but in the background there's a greater conflict as spirit forces vie for control.

Jephthah may not have been aware of the detail, but he understood the bottom line—*God reigns*. Listen to his summary response: *'...now, Jehovah our God has dispossessed the Amorite from before His people Israel. And*

would you [Ammon] possess it? Whatever Chemosh your god causes you to possess, do you not possess it? And all that which Jehovah our God has dispossessed from before us, we will possess!'

Ammon had chosen to worship and fight under the banner of their false god, Chemosh, a demonic spirit, while Jehovah had demonstrated that *He*, in reality, is the one in charge.

We catch a glimpse of their unseen battle in the book of Daniel. An angel had come in response to his earnest prayer for guidance, but was hindered by *'the prince of the power of Persia'*—a powerful demonic spirit charged by Satan to control the nation (ch 10). This 'Prince' resisted the angel's work of influencing (not enforcing) the Persian leadership to conform with God's plan for Israel.

Glimpses of this unseen on-going worldwide conflict are recorded elsewhere in the Scriptures—see Zechariah 3:1, Jude 1:9, Job 1 and 2, Revelation 12:7. Satan truly is the Adversary, throughout history determined to cause mayhem and the destruction of mankind. He is *'...the god of this world'* (II Corinthians 4:4)

These spirits have so perverted humanity that we have set up an assortment of vile 'gods' in opposition to the one true Creator: They *'...changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things. Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonour their own bodies between themselves: Who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator'* (Romans 1:23-25).

Ahead is the certainty that the Adversary's long ages of conflict will grind to a halt at the coming of the warrior King of kings. Ω

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unsigned articles are by the Editor

Youth gives little more than a passing thought to the certainty of death—and even less to the concept of being ultimately held to account for our life. As we ‘mature’ it increasingly tends to impact on our thoughts!

That we *will* all face judgment is an iron-clad tenet of every major faith, though variously interpreted. In Christianity we are told: ‘...we all must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive the things done through the body, according to what he did, whether good or bad’ (II Corinthians 5:10).

At first sight that’s scary. And there are other ‘hard sayings’ in the Christian manual, the Scriptures. Hear the Psalmist: ‘...*The LORD preserves all them that love him; but all the wicked will he destroy*’ (Psalm 145:20). You wouldn’t want to fall into that class! Or, Psalm 1: ‘...*The ungodly are... like the chaff which the wind drives away. Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous. For the LORD knows the way of the righteous: but the way of the ungodly shall perish*’ (Psalm 1:4-6).

The Wicked

Not many among us would seriously call ourselves ‘wicked’ or ‘ungodly’.

As law-abiding citizens we plough our daily furrow without deviating far from the straight and narrow. God’s definition, however, is different.

As penned the Psalmist: ‘...*Death is the destiny of all the wicked, of all those who reject God*’ (Psalm 9:17). And, ‘...*The*

The Old Testament was the ‘Bible’ of the New Testament church (II Timothy 3:15). The apostles nowhere contradict its teachings.

Weighed in the Balance

wicked do not care about the LORD; in their pride they think that God doesn’t matter’.

‘...Your hand shall find out all Your enemies; Your right hand shall find out those hating You. You shall set them as a fiery furnace in the time of Your presence; Jehovah will swallow them up in His wrath, and the fire will devour them’ (Psalm 21:8-9).

That certainly has echoes of events following the return of Jesus (II Thessalonians 1:7-8)!

Hate—that’s strong! But it carries a host of connotations. ‘*I hate cabbage*’ is one. So, too, is ‘*I hate mass murderers*’. So what does it mean when God hates? What do we make of such texts as Deuteronomy 7:9-10? Is God vindictive? How is it possible to hate such

‘...Know therefore that the LORD your God, he is God, the faithful God, which keeps covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations; And repays them that hate him to their face, to destroy them: he will not be slack to him that hates him, he will repay him to his face.’

a merciful Creator?

A Holy God

King Solomon puts it like this: ‘...*To honor [KJV: fear] the LORD is to hate evil*’ (Proverbs 8:13). He is consistently described as ‘holy’; His name, His dwelling, His temple, His hill [Zion]. His Spirit is holy. He is separate from all that is evil. He alone ‘...*has immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man has*

seen, nor can see’ (I Timothy 6:16). And we are urged to be the same: ‘...*it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy*’ (I Peter 1:16).

In sum, what God ‘hates’ is all that defiles humanity—and all those who align themselves with ‘evil’ of every kind: *These six things doth the LORD hate: yea, seven are an abomination unto him: A proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, An heart that devises wicked imaginations, feet that be swift in running to mischief, A false witness that speaks lies, and he that sows discord among brethren*’ (Proverbs 6:16-19). We all fall down somewhere in that list!

Conversely He ‘loves’ those who strive for holiness as *He* defines holiness in His inspired Word, the Bible. But how, then can we, given our imperfections as Christians, be called ‘holy’?

Mercy

Jesus, through his life, death and resurrection, is our sin-bearer. When we commit to his service we are, through repentance and baptism, deemed to be righteous. All our sin is obliterated: ‘...*As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us*’ (Psalm 103:12). Righteousness is ‘imputed’ to us. It is *Christ’s* righteousness the Father sees in us.

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness

We will all be ‘weighed in the balance’ of God’s justice. **Ω**

How did he do it? How did Jesus resist the subtle wiles of the Adversary, exhausted and famished as he was after forty days without food in a howling wilderness? None of us will ever face such a horrendous trial—but there are lessons to learn

Born at the time of God's choosing ('...in the fullness of time') Jesus had for thirty years a relatively quiet life, a life lived in perfect harmony with the *torah*. Until, that is, his baptism in the Jordan by John the Baptist—a man specifically chosen by God to prepare the people for his appearance.

At that moment Jesus was anointed with the fullness of the Holy Spirit and received the witness of the Father: '...John bore record, saying, I saw the Spirit descending from Heaven like a dove, and He abode on Him' (John 1:32). Or, as recorded by Luke: '...the Holy Spirit came down in a bodily shape, like a dove on Him. And a voice came from Heaven, which said, You are My Son, the Beloved; I am delighted in You' (Luke 3:22).

The Contest

At once Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness where he would face the Adversary in a contest for the crown—the control of the planet. The role was held by Satan since the original title-holder, Adam, lost the battle with him: '...All this power I [Satan, the Adversary] will give you, and the glory of them; for it has been delivered [yielded up] to me. And I give it to whomever I will' (Luke 4:6).

Again—*how did he do it?* For Jesus emerged victorious and triumphant from this almighty contest. The Devil left, defeated—but only for '...a little season'.

Spiritual Armour

During almost six weeks without food Jesus was time and again harassed by the Devil (Luke 4:2). After those forty days the Devil mustered his final attempts to lure him to submit to his authority. It was a deceptively 'reasonable' request from Satan: '...you are near death's door from your fasting—so turn these stones into bread'.

The weaponry Jesus deployed against the Devil he has shared with all in whom he and the Father live. We, too, can conquer every temptation, every test we face. Like Jesus we can by donning God's armour fight off '...the wiles of the Devil' (Ephesians 6:11).

The principle is clear in Jesus's response to Satan's demands: '...It is written, man shall not live by bread alone, but by every Word of God' (Luke 4:4). Underpinning his mission was this: '...I have come down out of Heaven, not that I should do my will, but the will of Him who sent me' (John 6:38). Just as Israel was tested in the wilderness (Deuteronomy 8:1ff) so, too, was Jesus.

If he had submitted to the Devil's deceptively simple request, Jesus would have undermined his total commitment to always submit to the will of the Father, for that would be sin. To that end his every response was

Temptation...defeated!

from God's Word. He fought, as must we, with '...the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God' Ephesians 6:17. As wrote James, the Lord's brother: '...become doers of the Word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves' (James 1:22).

Know God's Will

The implication, then, is that we come to know what is that will of the Father as revealed in the inspired Word! Paul to the Roman church: '...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' (Romans 12:2).

In those darkest hours just before his crucifixion, in an agony in Gethsemane Jesus cried out: '...not my will but yours be done'. He conquered the enemy of mankind: '...as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil' (Hebrews 2:14). With Christ in us we, too, can conquer all temptations, all tests of character—if we apply his Word **Ω**

Reap a Destiny
you can beat those
destructive habits

*is it important which days
you observe?*

**Religious Holidays...
or God's Holy Days?**

Festivals 2018

Trumpets	September 10
Atonement	September 19
Tabernacles	September 24-30
Eighth Day	October 1

'Little Flock'

Jesus addressed his disciples (v.1) primarily following an encounter with the Pharisees: *'...Stop being afraid, little flock, because your Father was pleased to give you the kingdom'* (Luke 12:32). Now that's strange—for are there not some two *billion* Christian believers (so say the statistics)?

It's the received wisdom that the church would grow and grow to eventually encompass a global reach. But that's a concept foreign to the Scriptures. Certainly, in its beginnings the church of God was boosted into orbit by a surge of adherents—three thousand on the first Pentecost, many more later. It didn't last, however. For beginning with the early fourth century perhaps millions sewed on a 'Christian' label designed by legislation from the Emperor Constantine.

Spiritual disease invaded the Body of Christ, and Christianity indeed became just a label, with the church leadership, stemming from Rome, absorbing the gross pagan culture of the Empire. Millions 'joined', for to become a Christian was no longer a hardship and a member needed only to add a 'Christian' label to their pagan practices.

Jesus, echoing the 'small flock' analogy, had warned about this: *'...Go in through the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and many are the ones entering in through it. For narrow is the gate, and constricted is the way that leads away into life, and few are the ones finding*

it' (Matthew 7:13-14).

He then explains how the decay would arise: *'...But beware of the false prophets [teachers] who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inside they are plundering wolves'* (v.15). That's what happened. Over the ensuing centuries lives and fortunes were forcefully plundered by the church.

The official Christian church assumed the role of universality. The apostle Peter prophesied: *'... false prophets were also among the people, as also false teachers will be among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, and denying the Master who has bought them, bringing swift destruction on themselves. and many will follow their destructive ways, by whom the way of truth will be evil spoken of. And by covetousness, with well-turned words, they will use you for gain'* (II Peter 2:1-3).

To be—and remain—a Christian faithful to Jesus and his way of life demanded commitment. No

surprise, then, that the body of the truly faithful remained 'few'. Jesus's parable of the sower should be a red flag, as so much 'seed' was wasted or never bore mature fruit. Hadn't the Master told us to expect to lose friends, even family members?: *I [Jesus] came to divide a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a bride against her mother-in-law. "Ones hostile to the man shall be those of his own house." The one loving father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And the one loving son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me* (Matthew 10:35-37).

It takes guts and determination to follow Jesus *'...wherever he leads'*. There's no traction to the mantra 'only believe'. **Ω**

Governance ...from p.2

Within each assembly there is a God-given pattern which includes all the brethren. But this does not mean "the congregation 'rules'! The inspired writings tell us God's way to handle disputes among brethren, to maintain order, to determine doctrine, to appoint the leadership. This is a topic for future discussion!

The history of the first half century of the Christian Church depicts many independent but co-operating local assemblies. It is flawed reasoning to assume a pattern of church government foreign to that promoted by the apostles will be a more effective way.

Probably any form of church polity will work - for a while. But anything other than the apostolic pattern is like a bicycle with a buckled wheel. It will give us a rough ride, and eventually it will shake our 'bicycle' to pieces. **Ω**

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MiniStudy

Good News!

‘...Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, And saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent and believe the gospel’ (Mark 1:14-15)

Vast sums are annually ploughed into ‘preaching the Gospel’ by the Christian community. Multitudes of organized bodies are dedicated to this end, and myriad staff are deployed in the process. But *what* is the ‘Gospel’? Why such variety in the content proclaimed? And why are so few ‘saved’?

- It is commonly (but not universally) believed that all of mankind will—through the testimony of believers—be ‘converted’ to the message of Jesus by the time he returns from heaven as King of kings. As of now about one-third of earth’s population profess, somewhat precariously, the Christian faith, while most of the remainder either accept its existence—or virulently oppose it. It’s a pattern repeated generation after generation since the Gospel was first proclaimed, with most of us, in general parlance, ‘lost’
- The apostle Paul flags up a warning: ‘...*I wonder that you are so quickly turning back from the One having called you by the grace of Christ to another gospel, which is not another; only there are some troubling you, even determined to pervert the gospel of Christ*’ (Galatians 1:6-7). In other words, be careful what you believe
- Jesus, too, left us the same warning: ‘...*beware of the false prophets [preachers] who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inside they are plundering wolves. From their fruits you shall know them*’ (Matthew 7:15-16), and later urging extra vigilance as the end of the age approaches (ch 24:11-12). Back, then, to basics: what did Jesus teach concerning the Gospel—Gk *euaggelion*? (The word means ‘good news’, ‘glad tidings’). Glad tidings—of *what*?
- Mark records that Jesus came ‘...*preaching the gospel of the Kingdom of God*’ (ch 1:14)—a term which needs to be defined from the Scriptures. The prophet Daniel describes one aspect of this Kingdom: ‘...*in the days of these kings, the God of Heaven shall set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed. And the kingdom shall not be left to other people. It shall break in pieces and destroy all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever*’. It is a universal world-encompassing kingdom on Earth ruled not by incompetent mankind but by Jesus Christ and his saints
- Jesus through his perfect life, death and resurrection won from Satan the right to be ‘...*King of kings and LORD of lords*’ (Revelation 19:16-21). He will return to mop up the remaining rebellion against his presence, and to banish ‘...*the god of this [present] world*’ (II Corinthians 4:4) for a thousand years from his malign influence over mankind. The divine rule will usher in the long-desired kingdom of peace, prosperity, health and abundance envisaged by God’s prophets
- This earthly Kingdom will be a material kingdom but governed by true spiritual principles and backed by divine power. Its Supreme Ruler is the resurrected Messiah, its ‘civil service’ is the resurrected saints from all eras of mankind, who are transformed as spirit. Its citizens will be the physical survivors of the coming collapse of civilization and their descendants. But the Administration is *the Kingdom of God*—a Kingdom that has always existed, and will always exist
- This divine Kingdom is described as ‘...*Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, you are God*’ (Psalm 90:2). Elsewhere the Psalmist writes: ‘...*your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures throughout all generations*’ (145:13), a theme recurring in the writings of the prophet Daniel. It is a *spirit* Kingdom, it is the Kingdom of God
- It is this *spirit* Kingdom that’s most frequently referred to in the Scriptures. When we ‘preach the Gospel’, when we ‘evangelize’, we are proclaiming how fallen mankind, how YOU, can access that Kingdom. ‘Salvation’—to become a child of God—is to literally become part of the divine Family, to become a ‘joint-heir’ with our Saviour: ‘...*the Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ*’ (Romans 8:16-17). A destiny worth our every effort, our every sacrifice
- That thousand years of divine rule is but a ‘drop in the ocean’ of eternity. Man’s brief sojourn on earth is a selection process to identify those who will truly enter a covenant relationship with the Father through that Gospel message
- At the close of his earthly public ministry, Jesus repeated his mission statement, passing the task to his twelve apostles—the ‘Gospel’: ‘...*that repentance and remission of sins must be preached in His name to all the nations*’ (Luke 24:47). Only by that heart change (‘repentance’), and forgiveness of sin (only through Jesus), can we gain access to eternal life in that everlasting spirit Kingdom of God—the true Gospel Ω

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