

new **Horizons**

Vol 23 No 4

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addressing the important issues for today and tomorrow



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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 terms clear to those who have 'ears to hear' - and recorded for us in the Scriptures. Over the centuries that truth has been buried, dug up, buried again. Our desire is to restore the simple apostolic message. We hope you will be excited by what the Scriptures reveal about life, and the horizons beyond.

Who We Are

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

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

To these ends we publish Bible-based literature—eg our bi-monthly Newsletter **OUTREACH, NEW HORIZONS** magazine, the **BIBLE BASICS** on-line home study course, and a 32-lesson **STUDY COURSE**.

The *Outreach Ministries* also supports a network of Independent fellowships and scattered brethren.

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

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

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If you would like a copy of our *Statement of Beliefs* or a *Publications List* please request it from any of the addresses listed or go to our website: **www.cgom.org**

Publisher:
Churches of God Outreach Ministries
P O Box 54621
Tulsa, OK 74155-0621
USA

e-mail: information@cgom.org
phone: 1-800-611-8080

Editor: James McBride
e-mail: coguk@aol.com
mobile: 07949942180

Copy Editor: Richard Gawith

Graphics: Richard Gawith

England:
The Churches of God, UK
Unit 14356, PO Box 4336
Manchester M61 0BW
England
e-mail: coguk@aol.com

Canada:
Canadian Church of God
PO Box 476
Don Mills Station
Don Mills Ontario M3C 2T4
Canada
www.canadianchurchofgod.com

or from:

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The church Jesus is now building has a clearly defined purpose

For most Christians the word *church*—a word unique to Christianity—conjures up an image of the building in which they worship on a Sunday. For some few it's the centre of their world, where they serve in a variety of functions. But what is its true purpose?

In the New Testament, 'church' is the English

translation of the Greek *ecclesia*—a selection of people called out from the general populace. Its secular meaning—borrowed by the early Christians—was an assembly selected by a magistrate for judgments *etc* (eg Acts 19:32).

Called Out

The church, then, is formed by those called out by God from among mankind. Recall the words of Jesus: '*...No man can come to me, except the Father which has sent me draw him*' (John 6:44). It's an early stage of a process that ends with an individual becoming part of 'the church', the *ecclesia*.

Not all who assemble 'in church' are part of the church but those in whom dwells the Spirit of God through contrition, personal change and baptism. Having through the sacrificial death of Jesus been forgiven of sin they are part of the Family of God: '*...[I] will be a Father unto you, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty*' (II Corinthians 6:18).

Church of Old

The concept of 'church', however, isn't a New Testament innovation. The martyr, Steven, was arraigned before the Sanhedrin to face charges. He refers to '*...the church [Gk ecclesia] in the wilderness*' (Acts 7:38).

The offspring of Jacob, the Israelites, were a people whom

Why the 'Church'?

God called out from servitude in Egypt. They were the *kahal*, the congregation—the church—of Israel, and were 'chosen' for a special purpose, to be the torch-bearer for the true faith handed down generation by generation by the faithful. For, '*...He has not dealt so with any nation [than Israel]*'

"In the New Testament it is the translation of the Greek word *ecclesia*, which is synonymous with the Hebrew *kahal* of the Old Testament, both words meaning simply an assembly, the character of which can only be known from the connection in which the word is found. There is no clear instance of its being used for a place of meeting or of worship, although in post-apostolic times it early received this meaning".

Psalm 147:20).

The Remnant

To this day it is through 'Israel' that God carries on this task, this special purpose.

But *not* through the nation of Israel. Not the Ten Tribes and not the Jews—the modern Israeli nation.

When the early believers came together they were joined by others not (yet) fully committed to Christ—'*...the unlearned*' and perhaps casual visitors '*...unbelievers*' (I Corinthians 14:23). In a sense, assemblies were 'open' and visitors could be convicted by the preaching (v.24).

True, as said Jesus '*...salvation is of the Jews*' (John 4:22), but their representatives—the religious leadership—firmly rejected the Messiah, Jesus. Some believed, and they represent the true '*...the Israel of God*' (Galatians 6:16).

In Christ there is no division of 'Jew' and 'Gentile'—all, through the faith of Christ, may become equal part of that spiritual nation. Said Jesus to the Chief Priests: '*...The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof*' (Matthew 1:43).

Our Commission

Called out—but for what purpose?

Jesus himself gave the commission: '*...Go you therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world*' (Matthew 28:19-20).

Not just to passively occupy a pew week after week, but to fulfil a two-fold purpose: to *teach* and to *learn*, applying what we have been taught from the Scriptures.

The Gospel

What, then, is that ‘gospel’, that ‘good news’? Many have been accosted by street preachers and asked: ‘...are you saved?’ And that’s the crux of the Gospel: ‘salvation’.

Given such a special and precious message to deliver to all nations all of us, as a spiritual priesthood, ought to share it where appropriate. Peter reminds us that we should ‘...*be ready always to give an answer to every man that asks you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear*’ (I Peter 3:15). A reason to daily immerse ourselves in the Word!

To formally teach it, of course, is a different call. James warns of the dangers of being a ‘master, an instructor [Gk. *didaskalos*]’ - James 3:1, and to do so requires a maturity of belief. To this end the church is tasked to select some who are ‘...*apt to teach*’ (I Timothy 3:2) among their qualifications for office.

Danger Sign

Jesus, however, warned us of ‘false prophets’ (Matthew 24:11), and the apostle Peter of ‘false teachers’ who did indeed arise after Jesus returned to the Father (II Peter 2:1). Such abound even today.

And quoting the eighth century BC prophet Isaiah, Jesus addresses the religious leaders: ‘...*This people honors Me [Jehovah] with the lips, but their heart is far away from Me; and in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.*” For, said Jesus, *forsaking the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men*’ (Mark 7:7-8).

Some teachings can be ‘...*destructive heresies*’, and both teachers and aspiring teachers must bear in mind that warning by James.

Heart of the Gospel

What, then, is that message unveiled by Jesus, that good news, Gk. *euaggeleion*)?

It is what Jesus taught right from the beginning of his ministry. He ‘...*went about all Galilee, teaching in*

their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom’ (Matthew 4:23). As Mark records: ‘...*Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, a saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent and believe the gospel.*’ (Mark 1:15). The time had come for a new understanding of the eternal message.

It is the message the apostles proclaimed in the days of their instruction by Jesus: ‘...[they] *went through the towns, preaching the gospel [of the Kingdom v.2], and healing every where*’ (Luke 9:6). And it is the message they continued to proclaim after his ascension: ‘...*the Lord had called us for to preach the gospel unto them*’ [the Macedonians] (Acts 16:10). It is, said Paul ‘...*the gospel of the grace of God*’ (Acts 20:24). That is the heart of the gospel message.

The Divine Purpose

Before the creation of the material universe, God determined on the plan to enlarge His Family: ‘...*he has chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself*’ (Ephesians 1:4).

First came the ‘clay model’ (Genesis 2:7), equipped with all the facilities, mental and physical, to achieve that purpose. Indeed made in His image (*ch* 1:27) but, crucially, with the power to choose—life or death.

Mankind, in Adam, broke ‘the everlasting covenant’ by choosing the life path offered by the Serpent, the path of life-style choices in opposition to that prescribed by God. His gracious response is to provide a return path through the sacrifice and sinless life of the Son of God.

“Whosoever Will”

The invitation is to all who come within sound of the gospel message. Respond and the Father draws you

to Jesus as Saviour (John 6:37, 44)—the one and only way to be reconciled to Him.

The apostle Peter points the way: ‘...*Repent [a change of direction], and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*’ (Acts 2:38). That Spirit is essential—God dwelling in us: ‘... *if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his*’ (Romans 8:9).

The Family of God

This is the message the church has been commissioned to teach to all peoples: that we can become part of the divine Family—spirit members who will be raised to reign with Jesus Christ as joint-heirs of God for all eternity. That is ‘salvation’.

The Father has throughout time been selecting His sons and daughters and preparing them to be with Him. In our day He extends the invitation through His church as we—sometimes feebly—proclaim that same message.

Jesus, in his final revelation to the apostle John stated: ‘...*the Spirit and the bride [the church] say, Come. And let him that hears say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely*’ (Revelation 22:17).

An Invitation

If *you* sense that ‘tap on the shoulder’ from God, if your conscience is disturbed by your thoughts or your behavior, if your world is crumbling and your future bleak—it is your opportunity to make a positive response to God’s invitation.

It’s not a panacea for all life’s trials, for the road can be stony and take you to unexpected locations. The destination, however, is to be a joint-heir with Christ in the service of the Creator. **Ω**

All too often an organization can, almost imperceptibly, drift into what can be described as a 'cult'

Cults ('New Religious Movements') abound. All too often they hit and monopolize the headlines for weeks and months. Often they simply fade away—or end with a bang in conflict with the authorities. *Jim Jones* seduced his followers to mass suicide. Texas based David Koresh and his *Branch Davidians* battled it out with the FBI. Or the *Order of the Solar Temple* in Switzerland...the list could be expanded.

'Cult' is a pejorative term and is applied to any group that raises suspicions as to motive. One common element is their secretive nature, with the leadership

Some years ago a survey located around two thousand 'unorthodox' Christian groups in the UK, with a half-million adherents. They were labelled as 'cults', sects. How do you identify a 'cult'? Could your church be one, or become one? Do you belong to one?

Words change meaning, and cult and sect are no exception. Cult derives from the Latin *cultus*, signifying simply a form of worship. A sect (or section) is just that - a division, smaller part. In the New Testament it translates the Greek word *heresis* and is applied, without condemnation, to Christians (Acts 24:5), Pharisees (*ch* 15:5), Sadducees (*ch* 5:17). Recent meaning of both terms, however, is derogatory, and focuses on those religious and secular groups viewed as unorthodox, different, even weird.

heresis itself has taken on a different meaning, now applied to serious false teaching that places its believers outside orthodoxy. And, of course, 'heresy' is a charge directed from the mainstream at cults and sects.

What, though, is 'false teaching'?

Every religion harbours those who are considered to teach falsely, not least Christianity. Examine Christian belief, however, and there's a dilemma. Which denomination should we choose as orthodox? What, indeed, is orthodoxy, or correct teaching? Wrote Jude: '*...[I] exhort you to contend earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints*' (v.3). Clearly, there is a discernible core body of teachings to which all true Christians ought to adhere.

Every Christian denomination, cult, sect claims to place the Bible at the centre of its teachings. So why such wide variation of belief? There's a 'supermarket of ideas' from which a seeker after truth can choose. The teachings of Catholic Rome are far removed from those of Protestant Belfast or the 'Bible Belt'. And within each there are doctrinal conflicts - some of which, if you please, are considered 'heretical'. Cults? Sects? The dividing lines are blurred.

If, then, the Bible is central to orthodoxy - what identifies a cult? '*Believe the Bible, not me*' is a common Christian cult leadership pronouncement. But inspection of their teachings uncovers a very personal interpretation.

Added to - and distorting - the Scriptures (read Jude 3 again) are visions, tradition, unique textual translations, infallibility, personal encounters with God, visits to heaven, association with angels, special revelations, new Bible translations. '*Doctrines of demons*' the apostle calls them: '*But the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, cleaving to deceiving spirits and teachings of demons*' (1 Timothy 4:1).

So - are you in a cult? Or, is your 'mainstream' church, in reality, a cult? No matter how venerable or respectable or how large? Here are some more keys, some cultic techniques and principles of which to be aware:

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authoritarianism. Any church or local assembly (or indeed secular association or club) needs structure. A cult will use this essential to impose a hierarchy of control. You were, in fact, recruited to serve the leadership, not *vice versa*. It's an informant network by which the membership is closely monitored to ensure conformity.

exclusivism. 'We' alone have the truth, the cult teaches. All other churches are 'of the devil'. Don't contaminate your spirituality by associating with 'the world', they say. Shun those who depart the group. Avoid family contact, we are your friends now.

manipulation. You are educated to conform to the group image. Fine, if that image is Christ-like living. So powerful is this manipulation that once 'in' members fear to leave. It's like leaving God behind.

financial pressure. There's a heavy, regular claim on your income (to your last penny) for 'God's work', while the leadership is likely to live in luxury 'to the glory of God', to reflect His lifestyle.

total commitment. To the detriment of your family your time is consumed by endless meetings, Bible studies, evangelism, prayer meetings, fastings. Historically it has led to voluntary mass suicide.

love-bombing. You are recruited by a superficial display of intense interest in your personal well-being accompanied by the promise, in the bosom of the group, of inner peace, success, future reward, friendship.

secrecy. You won't know the 'depths' of the cult's requirements and teachings at the beginning. First comes commitment (*eg* in baptism) - then comes the hard stuff, the secret stuff. A 'true church' is up-front and open. Ω

Things Most Surely Believed

What must we believe in order to embrace salvation?

‘Salvation’ is the goal to which most faiths aspire. Each has evolved its own distinct concept of that happy state, and has devised its own, often bizarre, pathway to attaining it. And we each have our own ‘source’ to guide us.

Christians, of course, have the Bible—the Judaeo-Christian Scriptures of the Old and the New Testament—as our guide. Too often, however, what is taught therein as to what is salvation and how to achieve it is misinterpreted by theologians who then misinform their congregations.

But why should the Bible—and Christianity which grows from it—have priority over all other religious sources such as the seventh century AD Koran, and over all other faiths?

The Source

The Bible, then, is *our* source, and we believe it to be God’s authentic revelation on all matters spiritual (and material, for that matter!). And not just for Christians but for all of mankind, for all faiths.

Of all ‘holy books’, of all faiths, the Bible alone represents the belief system of the Creator God. It alone describes, propagates and maintains the ‘...*faith once delivered*’ by God—an enduring faith maintained through four millennia of human civilisation and culminating in the sacrificial death of mankind’s Saviour.

The Bible alone carries the divine mark, the observance that identifies the one true God—the everlasting and perpetual *seventh day rest day*. It is a memorial of creation ‘...*for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed*’ (Exodus 31:17).

Israel of God

When Israel was established as a nation the LORD wrote Sabbath observance into its Constitution: ‘...*Israel shall keep the sabbath, to observe the sabbath throughout their generations, for a perpetual covenant*’ (v.16). Through them God purposed to preserve its re-

The Sabbath originated at man’s creation as a perpetual universal memorial of the One who created ‘*the heavens and the earth*’—the material universe.

The faithful continued its regular observance (eg Genesis 26:5), while Pharaoh accused Moses in Egypt of wanting to do so (Exodus 5:5). When establishing Israel’s national Constitution God told them to ‘*remember [recall] the Sabbath day to keep it holy*’.

membrance in the midst of a world opposed to His ways. When Israel’s representatives—the Jews (John 4:22)—rejected Jesus as Saviour they relinquished the role of light-bearers, and the church Jesus was building (Israel) passed to the church of God, the new ‘...*Israel of God*’ (Galatians 6:16).

It is to Israel, specifically to Judah, that ‘...*were committed the oracles of God*’ (Romans 3:2). They were written within Israel, and they were carefully, safely and accurately preserved within the Israel environment.

The Family of God

The idea that God is a family is anathema to most Christians and perhaps doesn’t enter the thought processes of most other faiths.

Christians in general accept the confusing notion—inherited from ancient pagan sources—of a ‘trinity’ and indeed often dismiss from their company Christians who believe otherwise.

The Faith Corrupted

From the beginning God has had His faithful witnesses, His prophets and historians preserved the record of the true faith. But they were few, for corruption soon engulfed mankind and false prophets manipulated the truth and molded it to their own ends.

Hence developed a variety of philosophies that gave only a passing glance at God’s revelation. Religious tomes became the foundation for new faiths, often—as in Islam—incorporating with their inherited falsehoods aspects of both Judaism and Christianity, and often reflecting aspects of the original faith.

Distortions of the true faith gave rise to the various myths, stories of the ‘gods’ *etc.* Some included aspects derived from the Genesis 3 account of a coming Redeemer. Having lost sight of the Creator they fabricated gods and doctrines from their vain imagination—often assisted by ‘the father of lies’, Satan.

Primordial Faith

Man at his inception was designed physically and mentally to function effectively in accord with divine ‘laws’. He was in God’s image: ‘...*God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female*’ *cont’d p.8*

Love isn't just an emotional attachment but also a practical expression of selfless care for fellow-man

created he them' (Genesis 1:27), and initially he reflected the divine character which is 'love' (I John 4:8).

That law was the 'law of love' manifest in the instruction to care for his wife: '*...a man [shall] leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh*' - Genesis 2:24. He was also to care for the environment: '*...[God] put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it*' (v.15). This was true religion and it underpins positive human relationships ever since. It is God's unchanging guiding principle. It is to be the driving force for all believers: '*...Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently*' (I Peter 1:22).

Broken Covenant

But it didn't last. Our first parents opened their minds to deception, sundering their personal relationship with the Creator, and now able to approach Him indirectly only through sacrifice. Their covenant with God was broken: '*...[Israel] like [Adam] have transgressed the covenant: there have they dealt treacherously against me*' (Hosea 6:7).

Confused by the Serpent's deceptive words, they rejected the fundamental truth that to break the covenant would result in *death*—the cessation of existence. '*...You shall not surely die*' Satan told them (Genesis 3:4). It's a lie now almost universal in all faiths.

Pathway to Life

Death means death! As said Jesus: '*...whosoever believes in him should not perish, but [in contrast] have everlasting life*' (John 3:16). There is no 'immortal soul', and there is no eternal life apart from a relationship with the Father. And unless that relationship is restored we will cease to exist.

Before man's creation God understood that because man would have freewill a pathway to restoration was necessary: '*...[the Father] has chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love*' (Ephesians 1:4).

To the Deceiver the LORD said: '*...I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; it shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel*' (Genesis 3:15). A future offspring of the woman would survive the adversary's assaults and would eliminate him.

The Image Restored

The apostle continues with that thought: '*...having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself*' (v.5). That, in short, is *salvation*.

The Father is building a family, a family in His own image in whom are manifest His character and who will continue at His side throughout eternity. They will share this role with Jesus Christ,

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unsigned articles are by the Editor

the *first begotten* and the *first-born* into that Family: '*...we are the children of God, and if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together. For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us*' (Romans 8:16-18).

It is why we believe, why we tread the narrow way: '*...the gate to life is very narrow. The road that leads there is so hard to follow that only a few people find it*' (Matthew 7:14).

'I Am the Way'

The Bible, as we have seen, is the sole comprehensive guide to the plan and purpose of the Creator. Jesus announced '*...I am the way*', and the apostle Peter echoed this when dragged before the Sanhedrin: '*... there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name [Jesus] under heaven that is given among people by which we must be saved*' (Acts 4:12). Not by Buddha, not by Allah, and not by any of the countless Hindu or other gods.

Since Adam sinned, access to a relationship with God has been by His grace—no action on our part will 'earn' it. Note that even the Sabbaths—observing Jews didn't qualify. Peter again, when he addressed the Jews gathered for the Feast of Pentecost: '*...Turn back to God! Be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, so that your sins will be forgiven. Then you will be given the Holy Spirit*' (Acts 2:38).

The Unique Key

The Holy Spirit—the power, the essence, the personality of God—is key to our salvation. By his sacrificial death *cont'd p.8*

Do You Like 'Church'?

A church is rightly regarded to be a 'safe place' for a Christian to fellowship. Sadly, it's not always so

Jesus Christ is represented on earth by his ambassadors, the 'church'—defined as those in whom dwells the Spirit of God, men and women selected for a purpose.

It is where believers come together for fellowship, for worship, for instruction in the faith. A safe place. An enjoyable place. A place to forge enduring friendships, a place to carry your troubles, to be comforted. Is that your experience?

That is, perhaps, the way most perceive church. But, sadly, not by all. For many endure the cold shoulder, the exclusion, the cliques that almost inevitably fester when people encounter others in groups.

Why are some assemblies warm, friendly, welcoming, tolerant. And why do others have a record of 'losing' potential brethren. Visitors come—but, viewed with suspicion and even hostility, never show their face again, a possible loss for the Kingdom.

How can we account for the differences? And how can it be rectified?

The Leadership

A worthy leader (elder *etc*) will have his 'finger on the pulse' of his congregation, will gauge attitudes, detect trends, be aware of undercurrents of dissent. Above all he will personally set the pattern for all by his visible behaviour—as a *servant* of the church.

Wrote the apostle Paul, citing his inspired example: '*...Give none offence, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God: Even as I please all men in all things, not seeking mine own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved. Be you followers of me, even as I am a follower of Christ*' (1 Co-

rinthians 10:32-11:1).

Paul, despite all his personal encounters with Jesus, had humility, he was a servant of the church, he emulated his Master, was an example to all the brethren throughout his wide ministry.

'Church' in Scripture doesn't refer to the *building* that houses believers, but to the *body of believers* who gather there

When his future leaders vied for the highest status, Jesus used the example of childhood innocence, telling them: '*...whoever causes one of these little ones believing in Me to offend, it is better for him that a millstone be hung on his neck, and he be sunk in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world from its offenses! It is a necessity for the offenses to come, yet woe to that man through whom the offense comes*' (Matthew 18:6-7).

Truly, as wrote James: '*...My brothers do not be many teachers, knowing that we will receive greater judgment*' (ch 3:1). Example is set from the top.

The Master

Everyone who aspires to lead in God's church must reflect the Master, Jesus. He was compassionate. He was tender-hearted. He was welcoming of all no matter their wealth, their beliefs, their social status. His social contacts included dodgy men from the 'inland revenue'. It included prostitutes. It included the hypocritical Pharisees and the heretical Sadducees.

He was humble—and he taught his apostles, his future leaders, to reflect those characteristics—the mark of a truly converted person.

At his final meal with the Twelve Jesus highlighted his role among them: '*...who is greater, the one re-*

clining, or the one serving? Is it not the one reclining? But I am in your midst as one serving' (Luke 22:27). Too many among the leadership 'recline'!

The evening before his death Jesus gave the Twelve a practical example. After their final meal together he chose to wash their feet and said: '*...If then I washed your feet, the Lord and the Teacher, you also ought to wash the feet of one another. For I gave you an example, that as I did to you, you also should do*'; (John 13:14-15).

The Church

Those words of Jesus, however, apply also to 'the church', to all who through personal change and baptism are God's ambassadors. Those leadership characteristics need to be emulated by the brethren: compassion, humility, service—and tolerance. All such are aspects of that fundamental 'fruit of the Spirit'—*love* [Gk. *agape*].

Or, are the brethren so focused on 'the right doctrine' that *love* is excluded? Hold to a variant teaching and you are off limits. The Ephesian assembly experienced this, priding themselves on being followers of the apostles, and yet had Jesus warning them that '*...I have against you that you left your first love*' (Revelation 2:4).

The Visitor

The assembly of believers is an 'open door'. It doesn't exist in isolation, cut off from the rest of mankind. The New Testament church welcomed enquirers and it welcomed unbelievers.

Addressing the Corinthians the apostle Paul notes: '*...If therefore the whole church be come together into one place [eg for Sabbath service], and all speak with tongues, and there come in those that are unlearned, or unbelievers, will they not say that you are mad?*' (1 Corinthians 14:23).

We ask the question: will these enquirers or these unbelievers be encouraged to stay, to find out more?

Church ...cont'd from p.6

Will they, as we have enquired, find a warm and friendly welcome? Sadly, too many would reply 'No!'

The church of God must come to display those same characteristics that Jesus has. After all, he was the perfect reflection of our Father to whose perfection we would aspire (Matthew 5:48), whose children we are. Ω

Christianity 101

what do Christians believe?

"What Shall We Do?"

Sooner or later each of us has 'pangs of guilt' about our behaviour, though we often divert them into our sub-conscious (with who knows what delayed consequences!).

Soon after Jesus Christ was raised from the dead the apostles encountered such a scenario. For six weeks this momentous event had monopolised the gossip in Jerusalem—then came the awesome events on the Day of Pentecost. The Jews listened to the energized apostles as they rehearsed Israel's history culminating in their rejection of the promised Messiah: *'...when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?'* (Acts 2:37).

However distorted may have been their understanding of His nature they firmly believed in the God of the Hebrew Scriptures. They understood He would ultimately bring them to judgment, and the realization of what they had done to their Messiah shocked.

Seduced by pseudo-science we have today almost become immune to our accountability towards God, and we act on the premise that 'God is dead'. The concept of a future time of 'judgment' has faded in modern Western mankind. What God calls *sin* is passed over as inconsequential, a mere life-style choice rather

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The Law of Life

What Do You Mean - 'Repent'?

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than a breach of the fundamental 'law of life'—the divine Law—a breach with eternal consequences.

Convicted of their sin, those first-century Jews pleaded for guidance as to the remedy. The message from the appointed (and inspired) representatives of Jesus was clear: *'...Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit'* (Acts 2:38).

Repent. Turn your life around. Come to the Messiah and have your sin forgiven, the guilt removed. Be baptized—symbolic of rising to a new life, becoming a 'new creation'. Live thereafter in harmony with the divine law of life energized by God's Spirit, His Law engraved on your heart.

Said Jesus: *'...Come unto me, all you that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and you shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light'* (Matthew 11:28-30).

That message is unchanged. It is a foundation principle of Christianity. In our busy world it is easy to brush aside those pangs of guilt as the 'cares of this world' crush in on us—and thus through neglect we lose *'...so great salvation'* (Hebrews 2:3). Ω

OUR PLANET

Our climate is changing. People are dying too young. Youth are on the march. Our polluted air rings with the cry of a million mostly young voices. We are strangled by non-disposable plastics. And a tide of near mass hysteria engulfs some governments panicking them to introduce draconian and costly remedies.

Environmental damage is almost inevitable, given man's greed and short-sighted use of earth's resources. It is, however, a fact that our planet's climate is *cyclical*. Long before 'carbon emissions', once verdant steppes became desert. Grapes were grown in the north of England. And a couple of centuries ago the river Thames froze sufficiently to bear the weight of vehicles and market stalls ('frost fairs'). Indeed from 1350-1850 Britain experienced a 'mini ice-age' with extremely low temperatures.

For over a century (1750-1900) the Ottoman Empire suffered its coldest and driest period leading to widespread unrest. (the 'Little Ice Age').

Early settlers of North America suffered terribly in the unexpected low temperatures often causing them to abandon whole territories.

Our complex eco-system is governed by forces far beyond human control. Variation in the solar activity, volcanoes *etc* cause often extreme variation over long periods.

Nevertheless we are choking in pollution and that ought to be reversed by sensible but affordable measures. Ω

"At the end of the last Ice Age, the Sahara Desert was just as dry and uninviting as it is today. But sandwiched between two periods of extreme dryness were a few millennia of plentiful rainfall and lush vegetation".

The Wave-sheaf Offering

Most Surely Believed...cont'd

Jesus took on himself our sin—but that sacrifice is personal to each of us and must be ‘officially’ applied by our baptism, the laying-on of hands and the gift of the holy Spirit. We thus enter into covenant with the Father. We agree to His terms and He comes, through His holy Spirit, to dwell in us: ‘...if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his’ (Romans 8:9).

We become His children when His ‘seed’, His Spirit, begets us into a spiritual relationship. It is not ‘virtual’. It is *real* and over time works a transformation in our behaviour and in our destiny: ‘...If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him’ (John 14:23).

‘...Keep My Word’

That transformation demands our active co-operation as we ‘put off’ our former ways and ‘put on’ the characteristics we see, through the Scriptures and the example of others, in Jesus Christ. As Paul writes to the Roman brethren: ‘...be not conformed to this world: but be transformed by the renewing of your mind’ (ch 12:2). And to the Colossians: ‘...put off all these; anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication out of your mouth. Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds’ (ch 3:8-9).

Yes—our Father views each of us through the prism of the perfection of our Saviour. We are, *now* and despite our imperfections, God’s children. But through our daily choices we must seek to become increasingly Christ-like. Ω

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

Jesus, according to Scripture, was in the grave for ‘...three days and three nights’ (Matthew 12:40). He ended the need for sacrifice ‘...in the middle of the week’ (Daniel 9:27)—ie Wednesday—and therefore was resurrected at the close of the weekly Sabbath (which was his third day in the grave).

His death coincided with the killing of the Passover lamb at the beginning of the fifteenth day of the first month of the calendar in use at the time—an event remembered the previous evening when Jesus instituted, for Christians, the ‘Lord’s supper’ emblems of bread and wine [‘the cup’].

When that Sabbath (the 17th of the month) drew to a close the priests harvested a ripe sheaf of the first-fruit grain and prepared it for its offering next morning. This act was coincident with the resurrection of Jesus and was a fulfillment of the ceremony carried out in preparation for the *Wave-sheaf offering* the next morning (the 18th).

The *Wavesheaf* represents the resurrection of Jesus (the harvesting of the *firstfruit*—I Corinthians 15:23) and his presentation to the Father the next morning. Recall his words to Mary that morning: ‘...Do not touch Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father’ (John 20:17). A short time later that day and on future occasions Jesus permitted such intimate contact (eg Matthew 28:9).

This day, the 18th* of the first Bible month, the fifth day of the *Unleavened Bread* festival, is the true day for celebrating this world-changing momentous event of the resurrection. Ω

- Jesus was resurrected at the close of the weekly Sabbath during *Unleavened Bread*, thus fulfilling the symbolism of the *Wavesheaf* ceremony. He is the ‘firstfruits of them that slept’ (I Corinthians 15:20)
- Next morning, our Sunday, the ‘...morrow of the Sabbath’ (Leviticus 23:11), as the *Wavesheaf* [Heb *omer*] was offered in the Temple, Jesus ascended to the Father
- That same weekly Sabbath (v.15) was the start day for the seven-week count to the *Feast of Weeks*—Pentecost, fifty days later
- *Pentecost* alone of the feasts is not assigned a specific Bible calendar date
- During most of this time—forty days (Acts 1:3)—Jesus was in Galilee teaching the Twelve the elements of the faith
- He then sent them to Jerusalem and told them to remain there (until Pentecost) to await empowerment

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**This year (2019) this date co-related*

MiniStudy**Christ Is Our Righteousness**

‘Be you therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect’ (Matthew 5:48)

‘We have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin’ (Hebrews 4:15)

That injunction by Jesus (in Matthew’s Gospel) poses quite a challenge for Christians! Can anyone possibly become perfect in this life? Can we attain to the level of perfection inherent in the God of endless existence? Can we emulate our Saviour, Jesus, who has indeed attained it? Can mortal man be sinless?

- True: our first parents were created sinless, created in the ‘image of God’ (Genesis 1:26-27). As such, however, they also had the power to choose—to choose the way which God had designed in them for *life*. Or to go down the path of ‘*I’ll do it my way*’. God calls that *sin*. And *death* follows: ‘...*You shall not eat of it, neither shall you touch it, lest you die*’ (ch 3:3). The apostle Paul observes that from earliest times men ‘...*changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator*’ (Roman 1:25)
- By his choice, Adam walked out of his covenant with God: ‘...*like men [Heb: adam, as representing mankind] they have transgressed the covenant: there have they dealt treacherously against me*’ (Hosea 6:7). He, and all his progeny, were no longer in that personal and direct relationship with the Creator. Mankind was propelled into a decreasing awareness of the divine way of life so that by the time of King David (c.1000BC) he could pen, ‘...*no one living is righteous before you*’ (Psalm 143:2). And notes his son, Solomon: ‘...*For there is not a just man upon earth, that [continually] does good, and doesn’t sin*’ (Ecclesiastes 7:20).
- Without divine intervention we were without hope: ‘...*having no hope, and without God in the world*’ (Ephesians 2:12). God, even before man was created (Ephesians 1:4), had the remedy—a plan to restore His image: ‘...*when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law...that we might receive the adoption of sons*’ (Galatians 4:4-5)
- ‘Yet, even as Christians bound in covenant with the Godhead and having the indwelling Spirit of God, we are far from perfect. Note Paul’s experience, surely shared by all of us: ‘...*I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) dwells no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not*’ (Romans 7:18). He adds: ‘...*If I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwells in me*’ (v.20). That life-force energizing our physical life and passed from Adam to every descendant is corrupt. As wrote the apostle John: ‘...*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. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us*’ (I John 1:8-10). He defines sin as *lawlessness* or *transgression of the law*
- Created in us—in our physiology, in our psychology—is a *living law*. Unless suppressed it nags our conscience. Ignore it and our physical and mental health is impaired—an increasing burden on our health services. The ‘law of life’ is summed up in the laws delivered to ancient Israel in its Constitution—the ten commands of the Creator (Exodus 20), a law now ‘written on the heart’ of those in covenant with Him
- No act of ours, not even our law-keeping, can reconcile us to God. The law-abiding Jews assembled for God’s holy day—*Pentecost* (Acts 2)—still needed a *change of heart*, to become transformed by the Spirit of God (vv.38-39). As does all of mankind. When the Father observes His children what He sees is the perfect righteousness of His Firstborn, Jesus, imputed to us, as it was to Abraham, through faith (Romans 4: 19-24)

Ω

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