

new Horizons

Vol 6 No 3

May/June 2002

Too many marriages are falling apart. Underpin yours - and make it a success - with strong foundations

Church calendars overflow with wedding appointments. Blushing brides daily adorn the feature columns of small towns and cities. The long-lived traditional marriage is still desired by most young people despite the so-called "sexual revolution". The "golden" or "diamond" anniversary celebrates solid achievement - and by any standard such marriages can be resounding successes.

Yet marriages continue to flounder. Divorce is at an appallingly high level - even among Christian partners. And the resulting anguish for children, parents, relatives and friends is lamentable. Marriages even of only short duration crack and fall apart. And at the other end of the age spectrum partners of long-standing part company via the divorce courts.

Why? Is there some basic fault with the very concept of marriage? Are we expecting too much, or not enough, from marriage? Or could it be that marriages are based on wrong foundational principles?

Dispassionate investigation of the traditional monogamous union confirms in the long run that it cannot be surpassed. When it "works" it really works. All the factors of stability, security, mutual support, love, personal fulfilment are the fabric of the ideal marriage. So

what goes wrong? Why don't even half of all western marriage unions last a lifetime? Why do so many couples quit?

Let's look at some of those elements of marriage which give it a sure foundation. Let's look at some factors for success based on God's Word.

First, what about that highly extolled virtue romantic love?

Romantic Love

"In the beginning it seems as though the lights will never dim... Every silly, silly cliché seems to

have been written just for you: mouths go dry, lights flash and life is as supernaturally pretty as a chalk butterfly." That's how one psychologist describes the concept of romantic love. She continues, "Today it is considered more or less immoral to marry for any other reason".

It gives marriage a rosy glow. Every mundane task tackled together has a romantic aura. Washing up, decorating, shampooing the carpet, mending the burst water-pipe - all are enveloped in a haze of delight.

Alas, such ecstasy tends to fade. Ten years on, perhaps ten weeks, the romance is swamped in a morass of worldly cares. There's the realisation that both partners have firmly entrenched personality traits that seem irreconcilable. Time, once your own, must now be shared with a growing family. Then there are

your partner's special friends and interests, and what is often viewed as an unreasonable attachment to parents. There are differences of approach both religious and philosophical which before marriage endowed an air of mystery, but which later provoke contention and controversy. Financial constraints: reduced income, extra mouths, mortgage, keeping up with the neighbours, pensions - all increase the pressure. And, ultimately, there's the decay in outward physical appearance and abilities.

So romance fades.

If romance is the sole binding strand then the reasons for staying together appear invalid. Once blissful hours in one another's company become dull and intolerable. Cracks can no longer be paved over. And many couples seek to recover the romance in a soap-opera style clandestine "affair". Indeed many marriage counsellors encourage such "therapy"!

The result? Before long, more often than not, the agony and trauma of divorce seems the only cure.

Many turn to the newspaper "agony aunt" for guidance. A thousand do-it-yourself marriage counselling books and tapes crowd the bookshop shelves. Perhaps most of those who see the impending crash of their marriages will clutch at such and for a time "work at it". Indeed it's widely recognized, and true, that even the best marriages need sustained effort to preserve them intact.

Often, though, the emphasis of such books is on recapturing the

romance of marriage. All the worthy aids are promoted: the candle-lit meal, the bouquet of roses, the new dress or hair-style, the romantic night out, making yourself "more interesting".

Romance, of course, ought to persist and be nourished in every marriage. It's essential for all-round success, and marriage cannot thrive in its absence. But romance is the "icing on the cake".

Let's look at some of the other factors vital to a successful marriage.

Mutual Support

An ancient wise saying extols the virtues of joint commitment and companionship. "two are better than one" said King Solomon, "because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up. Again, if two lie together they are warm; but how can one be warm alone? And though a man prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him. A three-fold cord is not quickly broken" (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12).

In the context of marriage the implications of this are clear. A husband and wife totally committed to one another can provide mutual support in times of stress, both from internal challenges and from without. A third strand, divine help or perhaps a child or the extended family, can increase the resilience of a growing family. So, when the inevitable illness strikes, or economic reverse (we all have our "winters"), the family can rally to provide material help and an emotional boost. Properly viewed, illness or economic adversity is a shared experience which in the family setting can bind and not destroy. Unlike mere co-habitation there's not the same temptation to "throw in the towel".

Heart-rending disappointment

stemming, for example, from the collapse of a mutually-cherished project can be smoothed and overcome by the combined resilience of two people in close harmony. And the interplay of minds united in common purpose can provide strong impetus towards the achieving of family goals or a shared vision. Two, indeed, are better than one!

Traditional marriage with its lifetime commitment provides a contractual bond not possible in a more permissive arrangement. To encourage permanence frail human nature needs the framework of exchanged vows. And perhaps they should be written down, witnessed and signed! Without such a framework couples have a convenient bolt-hole to escape personal responsibility if they so wish when the going gets tough. As it inevitably will.

Companionship

True love and marriage is a partnership. It is companionship. In the first unveiling of the marriage bond God said "It is not good that a man should be alone" - an observation that belongs equally to women. Eve was created a companion for Adam. And vice versa. The husband is termed "the companion of her youth" (Proverbs 2:17) and the wife is "your companion and your wife by covenant" (Malachi 2:14).

The Hebrew word for "companion" expresses a close personal relationship. In marriage a man and a woman are to become intimately united in body, purpose, thoughts, goals - "one flesh".

Few marriages, sadly, implement this concept. All too often the idea of partnership, of companionship, of the combination of husband-wife mind-power, of a shared dream or vision is ignored and the union is impoverished. But when the marriage begins with the sure understanding that companionship is a vital pillar of the relationship, then

this concept becomes a powerful force which encourages a permanent bond.

Every Christian man and woman considering marriage ought to thoroughly discuss with one another (and possibly with their pastor) this important principle. It must be upfront in their preparations for marriage.

Then, when adversity strikes, they will understand that together they can share the misfortune, sustain the wounded spirit and gain the victory. The interplay of two minds united in common purpose is vital to overcome adversity.

Build A Dynasty

Romance, certainly, is a factor in a lasting and happy marriage. Mutual support and companionship are vital. But there's a third factor which must have prime consideration before a marriage begins. Indeed it must rank near the top of the list of priorities in a marriage covenant.

A most distressing aspect of marital breakdown is the vexed question of "division of property" (using the word in its wider sense). This includes, vitally, the welfare of the children. It includes the division of the previously shared home. It includes sharing chattels brought to the marriage from two family inheritances, and what was once termed "dowry". It includes the redistribution and dispersal of the material goods to the next generation.

Such effects of a resort to divorce, however, are not limited to the immediate and personal emotional distress of two people and their children. The hurt and distress and confusion ripples onward in ever-increasing circles to touch parents, grandparents, friends - and future generations.

Indeed the stability of a nation can - has - as a result come under threat!

In titled families each generation takes pride in its inheritance, and in preserving it for future generations. They can trace their ancestry by clear lines on a genealogical chart and by family portraits to many generations past. They thrill to exhibit the family home and lands and heirlooms, and proudly cite highlights of their history back to the early Colonial period - or even to the Conquest! They are part of an enduring dynasty. It imparts pride, status, security, authority and stability.

But divorce in the modern world dissipates family inheritance. Divorce divides family loyalties. It shatters the substance of a potentially sound building block of any society. Break up a home and creative energy is diverted from productive activity. Children are their potential limited. The family suffers, the community suffers, the nation suffers.

On the other hand *you can build a dynasty*. By lifting your eyes beyond an introspective notion of romantic love or mere personal fulfillment. By consciously establishing your small family unit as a foundation stone of a future "house". By instilling in your family a pride of achievement and vision. By setting aside short-term desires and building now for the future. By these means you can build an enduring dynasty and your marriage will take on greater stability.

The idea is much neglected in our day. Yet anciently it was written into every godly marriage. So important is it that the Creator legislated detailed laws of inheritance when establishing His model nation of Israel some three thousand five hundred years ago.

Marriage can survive for a time on romantic love, but all too often and too soon that bubble bursts. An enduring marriage demands more substance. For an enduring, fulfilling marriage each couple must

strenuously weave strong bonds of mutual interests and companionship. There must be a compassionate legal framework for the union. And essentially the guiding vision of combining two different historic human streams into a single mighty river flowing into the years ahead. *An enduring dynasty.*

A Vital Dimension

But this is not the whole story.

There is yet a further dimension to marriage that must not be omitted if lasting success is to be achieved.

For, to resolve the challenges that arise in marriage can at times require help that transcends human counselling abilities. There remains an element to marriage which alone imparts true stability and perspective.

Because marriage is not merely a human institution.

The Creator God instituted monogamous marriage. Does He have

any say in who you should marry? Or even if you should? Is marriage simply one life-style among many? What about 'singles'? Ought you to marry outside your "race" - or your religion? Is God concerned about such ground-rules for marriage? Do they matter?

What does God think of divorce? Is there any place for divorce as a "solution" to an unravelling Christian marriage? And are there inspired guidelines for solving the challenges of married life?

Future articles will address such questions.

Crash Course

In sum, if you want to spend a lifetime together

- Before marriage make sure you spend enough time getting to know your prospective life partner
- Always nourish the romance in your marriage
- Learn to share goals and interests
- Develop close bonds of companionship
- Focus on the long-term: build an enduring dynasty
- Be prepared to work together diligently for marriage success
- *Above all, ensure God is at the head and heart of the marital table* □

University of the Home

A properly conducted marriage is the ideal setting to raise a family. Too often, however, children can disrupt family life simply because parents are at a loss to know how to deal with them. This article, *University of the Home*, gives some Biblical guidelines. It is available - free - from any of our addresses

If you would like to counsel about any matter related to your Bible studies or to your personal challenges our elders are eager to be of service. They may be contacted through any of our addresses

in strict confidence

You are invited to request the companion title *The Edge Of Divorce*. Any of our Churches of God elders will be pleased to counsel with you on any of these matters. They may be contacted through our various addresses.

The *Outreach Ministries* also supports individual Christians, and local assemblies of any size, through our various publications and tapes. And if you would like face-to-face contact - *eg* to talk about baptism - we do our best to arrange it, given the constraints of time and distance

WHEN DOES LIFE BEGIN?

There are parallels between the physical and the spiritual. Here's how the 'new birth' sheds light on the vexed question of when human life begins

Bill Faith

Abortion is a contentious issue, often focusing on the question *When does life begin?* Does human life begin at conception, or does it begin at birth?

To answer the question, let's look at the question from a different perspective. In Romans 1:20 we are informed that there's no excuse for denying the existence of God. The reason being that God created the world in such a way that the hidden things of God, even His attributes, can be clearly seen by the things that He created.

We should, then, be able to understand the physical creation better by looking at the 'hidden things' of God. As an example, to better understand when physical life begins we can examine the Scriptures to see when our spiritual life begins.

The New Birth

Some Christians believe that being born again refers only to the conversion process that we go through after believing in and accepting Jesus as our Savior. However, this is not the understanding we come to if we read of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus.

In that account we find Jesus telling Nicodemus, "...unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). To that comment Nicodemus replied, "...How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born" (v.4)?

Notice carefully Jesus' reply, "*That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit....The wind blows where it*

wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit" (vv.6-8).

After Jesus was raised from the dead, he could truly come and go as the wind. This is clearly revealed in the following scriptures: "*Then, the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the mist, and said to them, 'Peace be with you'....And after eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them, Jesus came, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, 'Peace to you'"* (John 20:19, 26). Jesus had been born of the Spirit and could now come and go as the wind.

We have now been born of the flesh and await the time when we will be born of the Spirit. That will occur when Christ returns. Jesus was the firstborn from the dead (Colossians 1:18, I Corinthians 15:20). We who are Christ's will be born of the Spirit when Jesus returns: "*For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming"* (I Corinthians 15:22-23).

Life - now

We will, then, be spiritually born again *at the resurrection*. But we need to ask the question, *Are we spiritually alive now, or must we wait until the resurrection?* John the Apostle answers that question specifically. In I John 5:11-12 we read, "*And this is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life...."* If we have the

Spirit of Christ in us, we have eternal life - now. That's why John was also able to write, "He who believes in the Son has everlasting life...."(John 3:36). Notice it says

that if we believe on the Son we *have* life. It does not say that we will have life only in the future.

We can conclude that our spiritual life begins when we receive God's Spirit - also referred to as 'the Spirit of Christ'. In fact, we are "sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee (deposit, down payment) of our inheritance" (Ephesians 1:13-14). The Spirit of God dwelling in us is our guarantee of eternal life.

Mother and Child

We can compare the Spirit of Christ dwelling in us to the umbilical cord which connects the unborn baby to its mother. All the nutrients including oxygen to sustain life is furnished to the unborn child through the umbilical cord.

Likewise, we have spiritual life only because we are connected to God through Christ. As the Apostle Paul wrote, "If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not his" (Romans 8:9).

Through His Spirit, we are furnished the spiritual food that we need. The Apostle Paul even went so far as to say: "*The Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered"* (Romans 8:26).

The life of an unborn child, however, can be terminated preventing it from being born. And while we have life through Christ yet our *spiritual* life can be terminated preventing us from being spiritually born at the resurrection. If we before our spiritual birth commit the unpardonable sin, our eternal life will be terminated (Hebrews 10:26-29).

Our spiritual life begins when our spirit is impregnated by the Spirit of God, and not when we are finally spiritually born. As we read in Romans 8:16: "The [cont'd p.9

Across most Christian denominations baptism is seen as the “admission ticket” to the faith. Is it free? Or is there a price attached?

Baptism is one of the “rites of passage” in many religions, not least in Christianity. The rite was practiced, for example, by the Sumerians (3rd millennium BC). It was integral to those embracing Judaism. And, of course, is particularly known to the Christian world through “John the Baptizer”. Jesus, himself baptized by John, commanded his disciples “...going, therefore, disciple all nations, baptizing them...” (Matthew 28:19). And from the earliest beginnings of the Christian church the rite was enjoined on all converts to the faith. The apostle Peter on the first Christian Pentecost urged his hearers to “...repent, and be baptized” (Acts 2:38).

In Roman Catholicism baptism is one of the seven “sacraments”, and is administered almost always shortly following the birth of a child into a Catholic family. Most denominations today baptize infants. But it wasn’t always so. Peter’s hearers, for example, were mature adults.

Lesson From History

During the first couple of centuries of the Christian faith, baptism of adults was the sole practice. To become a Christian was a serious life choice. Jews who accepted Jesus as the Messiah were ostracized from the community, with loss of job, status, family ties. They were even beaten in the synagogues. Peter’s hearers were entirely Jews (or proselytes) gathered from around the world in Jerusalem for the age-old festival of Pentecost. They were totally committed to the divinely revealed faith of Israel - to the observance of the weekly Sabbath and the annual holy days (see Leviticus 23) and to the precepts of the “Law of Moses”.

But something was missing.

At Sinai, some fifteen hundred years before Jesus’ birth, Israel had entered into a covenant with God. They would, in return for obedience to God, be “a special treasure to Me above all people” and they would be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:1-8).

As a nation, they failed to keep their side of the covenant and lost God’s protection. The separate House of Israel and the House of Judah were taken from the land of promise and exiled to Assyria and Babylon. Only the House of Judah returned, and chastened by seventy years of exile they were diligent in observing the Law. But the general ethos of the nation in the time of Jesus - as today - was one of outward observance. Just as today, there was lip service paid to “being good”. But the hearts of most people festered with self-serving which surfaced in violence, greed, oppression, tax fraud, aberrant sexual behaviour. John, Jesus - and the apostles - challenged this.

Change of Heart

The challenge of the teaching of Jesus demanded a fundamental change of heart. Not just the outward obedience of the Ten Commandments but a new personal relationship with the Law-giver.

The guilt associated with all human sin could, in Israel, be removed through the tiresome round of divinely prescribed animal sacrifices. But these could never bring forgiveness: “For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sin” (Hebrews 10:4).

The awfulness of human sin demanded a greater sacrifice. But now in Jesus, the divine representative, all sin could be forgiven. He is “the Lamb of God

who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

God’s Grand Design

In further revealing God’s grand design for mankind, Jesus unveiled a new covenant. Now the same divine Law would no longer be written on stones but in the human heart. The power that enabled Jesus to live in perfect harmony with the heavenly Father was now - through his sinless life, death and resurrection - made available to humankind. God would dwell in us by means of His Spirit and we could literally become His sons and daughters, and brothers and sisters of Jesus His Son.

But it required “repentance” - a genuine sorrow for our transgression of the divine Law which results in a changed life. Repentance demands mature reflection on past and present behaviour. It demands an understanding of “sin”. It demands a readiness to count the awesome cost of discipleship - to the point of martyrdom, if need be.

It required, too, the knowledge that only the sacrifice of “the Lamb of God” - Jesus of Nazareth, God’s appointed victim - was sufficient to bear away all the sin of mankind.

Baptism, then, is possible only for someone of mature mind.

A Watery Grave

In the Scriptures there is but one form of baptism. That’s by the submerging of the repentant individual in water. The apostle Paul describes it as a watery grave: “Do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him through baptism into death” (Romans 6:1-11). And emerging from this watery grave - we would drown if we stayed under the waters! - is symbolic of our resurrection as “a new creature in Christ” (vv.4-5). Mere sprinkling - or hosing - fails to convey this significance!

Should You Be Baptized?

The annual rhythm of the seasons has spiritual significance. Here's what the spring harvest means

Most Christians are familiar with the term *Pentecost*. It's considered to be the 'birthday' of the church. Indeed it is a festival that once upon a time had Western national significance, often designated as a bank holiday (known as *Whitsun*). Sadly, secularization has buried this snapshot of the divine plan.

HARVEST TIME

Ancient Origins

The origins of Pentecost, however, long precede the beginning of the church in the first century. It roots are buried deep in an Old Testament ceremony - one of the 'feasts of the LORD' (Leviticus 23).

As with all these divinely-revealed festivals (given through but not by Moses!) Pentecost continued to be observed by the apostles and all early Christians - though it is for most Christians today the sole surviving Biblical festival! All others - Sabbath, Unleavened Bread, Trumpets, Atonement, Tabernacles - are ignored, and replaced by humanly-devised celebrations (Sunday, Easter, Christmas *etc*).

The Biblical festivals revolve around the three harvest seasons - early spring, summer, autumn. They are 'built in' to the fabric of creation (Genesis 1:14)

All the festivals - which God designed in a pattern of *sevens* - fall on specified dates on the Hebrew calendar. Pentecost is the lone exception - God ordained that it is to be 'counted'. This means it falls on various dates in the calendar.

Feast of Firstfruits

Pentecost was to be observed after Israel entered the 'land of promise'. The count was to begin annually with the firstfruits of the spring harvest, when a ripe sheaf of grain was ceremonially 'waved' before God - 'on the day after the [weekly] Sabbath' (v.11). God's instruction was: "You shall count seven weeks for yourself; begin to count the seven weeks from the time you put the sickle to the grain. Then you shall keep the *Feast of Weeks* to the LORD" (Deuteronomy 16:9f).

This arrangement focus attention on the 'seven weeks' of harvest', which began with the resurrection of Jesus. It is symbolic of the perfect spiritual harvest of the firstfruits of mankind.

From that day seven Sabbaths were counted - the next day (always the first day of the week, Sunday) being the *Day of Pentecost*. The term *Pentecost* means *fiftieth* - it being the fiftieth day from the beginning of the first day of that week - as Sabbath ended. The festival is also termed in Scripture the *Feast of Weeks*.

The 'wavesheaf' was by New Testament times - by tradition - harvested at the close of the weekly Sabbath during the seven *Days of Unleavened Bread*.

The Biblical account in Leviticus 23, however, does not specify this, merely stating it was the firstfruits of the harvest. The Jewish authorities, probably for convenience, moved the count from the weekly Sabbath to the first holy day - thus forcing Pentecost to fall on a fixed calendar date.

Cosmic Symbol

But Pentecost - and all the Biblical festivals - are not mere relics of an ancient and now obsolete worship system. They were introduced *by the Creator* and have cosmic significance.

Take *Pentecost*. That 'wavesheaf' is the firstfruits of God's human harvest - His plan to save all of mankind. After Jesus had risen he appeared in his resurrection spirit body on the morning of the first day of the week. It was the very day of the wavesheaf offering in the Temple! There is ample Bible evidence that during that day Jesus ascended to the Father in heaven - presenting to God as the first of 'the firstfruits' (I Corinthians 15:20, 23).

The following seven weeks are a type of the 'church age' - seven symbolic weeks during which God is calling His firstfruits, His firstborn, human harvest to the Kingdom. They are the 'firstfruits unto God' (Revelation 14:4) and 'a kind

of firstfruits' (James 1:18). This spiritual harvest will culminate in the glorious return of Jesus the Messiah, accompanied by an outpouring of the signs and wonders which saw a foretaste at the first Christian *Pentecost* (Acts 2).

At that moment the 'main crop' of the firstfruits harvest - faithful Christians - will be resurrected to reign with Christ in his millennial Kingdom.

It is noteworthy that the 'holy days' of *Unleavened Bread* and *Pentecost* are not, in the text (Leviticus 23:6-8, 21), designated as regular 'Sabbaths' but are simply called 'holy convocations'. (All the other holy days are called 'Sabbaths'). This emphasizes that the count to Pentecost starts at the close of a *weekly* Sabbath (v.11).

of firstfruits' (James 1:18). This spiritual harvest will culminate in the glorious return of Jesus the Messiah, accompanied by an outpouring of the signs and wonders which saw a foretaste at the first Christian *Pentecost* (Acts 2).

At that moment the 'main crop' of the firstfruits harvest - faithful Christians - will be resurrected to reign with Christ in his millennial Kingdom.

The Harvest Isn't Over

Jesus foresaw that nothing would interfere with this divine plan, which he personally oversees. Through the centuries the church of God would survive - often persecuted, always comparatively few. But always jealously guarded by divine power. Many, he said, would be given the opportunity to be part of this firstfruits harvest. But 'narrow is the gate and difficult is the way and there are few who find it' (Matthew 7:14). Few would remain faithful to the end.

The coming seven weeks - culminating on the *Day of Pentecost*, **Sunday May 19** - are a recurring reminder that God's plan is on track, that His harvest will be completely gathered in according to His perfect timing. Clearly all is not yet 'safely gathered in' - there remains time (though perhaps not much time!) for men and women everywhere to 'count the cost' and to make the costly commitment to real discipleship (Luke 14:25-35).

Request the free booklet:
God's Holy Days

Bible Basics

The *Churches of God Outreach Ministries* publish a home study course

If you would like to study with us please request **Lesson 1** from any of our addresses. This introductory lesson gives some hints about how to study your Bible.

We are pleased to reply to any questions you may have arising from any of our publications. However at this time we are not in a position to 'grade' your studies in Bible Basics

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 cooperates 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 quarterly *Newsletter*, *Fountain of Life*, a bi-monthly outreach magazine *New Horizons*, the *Bible Basics* home study course). The *Outreach Ministries* also supports a network of independent fellowships and scattered brethren.

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

Rising out of the water, every sin has been forgiven. We are clean! The Lamb of God, Jesus of Nazareth, has taken all the sin of each of us upon himself through his suffering and his sacrificial death on the hill of Golgotha - "the place of the skull". His life blood, lanced by a Roman spear, poured from his lacerated body.

Until Jesus returns (unlike the sacrifice of the Passover which will be observed after he comes back), baptized Christians annually observe a memorial of his suffering and death in the Lord's Supper 'on the night he was betrayed' (I Corinthians 11: 20-26).

Also significant in baptismal symbolism is the concept of being washed - again perfectly represented by immersion. Paul was confronted by Jesus for persecuting believers. He said: "Arise and be baptized [Gk = immersed], and wash away your sins" (Acts 22:16, Hebrews 10:22). The water here is symbolic of Christ's blood shed for us: "...to him who loved us and washed us from our sins in his own blood" (Revelation 1:5).

Your Choice

Every one of us - all mankind - has "fallen short of the glory of God". His plan for each of us is that we share in His glory - a process that requires we become spiritually mature. By nature God is absolutely pure, and none of us can enter the divine Family loaded with our sin.

God's love for us has in Jesus the Messiah provided a path to forgiveness. In baptism we acknowledge our determination to change our inborn hostility to God and His law ("repentance"), emerging from the water clean in His eyes through the righteousness of Jesus.

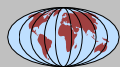
God's "glory" is not some ethereal pie-in-the-sky. He offers us the choice of extinction - or of living for ever in partnership with Him as joint-heirs with Jesus Christ in a real material universe in which the divine plan will develop endlessly.

The example of Jesus, himself immersed by John, and the example of the practice of the early church confirms that baptism is the prescribed path into the Body of Christ, his church. It is symbolic of our death to the 'old man' - that nature we brought into the world with us. It is symbolic of our 'resurrection' as a new creation in Christ. It is symbolic of the washing away of our sin - our falling short of the glory of the Creator - in the shed blood of our Saviour.

If you are willing to pay the heavy price of discipleship, you must counsel about baptism. Each of us is faced with a stark choice of living for ever - or death.

God wants you to choose life! ☐

World Watch



world news in the light of Scripture

What will happen in the Middle East? Islamic suicide bombers callously murder Jews celebrating Passover. Israelis powerfully respond in defence of the realm with the latest weaponry. The United States rattles its mighty sabre at Iraq and its murderous leadership.

The past fifty-plus years of war and

diplomacy have utterly failed to reconcile Arab and Jewish aspirations.

Christians have long viewed this minute piece of real estate as the site of mankind's 'final battle' - *Armageddon*. A host of time-lines have predicted when this would occur - so far unsuccessfully.

But are we now on the 'home stretch'? Is this mankind's last hour? Who knows, but God! The predicted events, however, are certain - they *will happen* as God

has foreseen, but perhaps as unforeseen by Bible interpreters!

Whatever - Jesus did warn Christians to *be on the alert*. We have inherited from him - and from the other Bible prophets - an outline of world-scale events that will mark 'the end'. Not the 'end of the world' but the end of human misrule and the beginning of the rule of Messiah.

We have listed some of these events in *The Time of the Signs*. Write for a free copy!

Dear Brethren

What does it take for us to become part of the Kingdom of God? It may appear fairly obvious, but it seems there's a deal of misunderstanding among the brethren.

Many of those who claim to follow Jesus Christ will, of course, believe you just 'believe' without understanding the meaning. But my post-bag highlights the fact that many Christians in our own tradition also misunderstand 'what is necessary for salvation'.

Let's explore it.

The starting point has to be Jesus Christ. *"There is no other name given among men whereby we must be saved"*.

It is through Jesus alone

that mankind can enter the Kingdom of God.

Forget Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism - and 'Christianity'. All represent man's effort to find a way round *God's* method of salvation. Through Christ, then - and only by God's grace, His favour, His mercy. Nothing we can do will ever *earn* salvation - not in a million years.

Why, then, put ourselves through the hoop by losing our job, putting the family's back up - because we observe the Sabbath and the Biblical holy days?

Many brethren have decided just that: Sabbath, holy days, unclean meats - doctrine even - simply don't matter. *'In Christ I am free'* is the cry. So if such observances don't matter where is the dividing line? It's OK to keep Sunday (some now do), and Christmas (some do), eat pork (and some do). If that doesn't mean anything why not keep Friday and Ramadan? Or Tuesday.

The majority of Moslems and Hindu and Buddhists are good enough people. They look after their own, worship diligently and no-one can doubt their sincerity. The ecumenical movement would have us embrace all religions as 'just another way to God'. But that, of course, isn't Christianity; not *Biblical* Christianity.

On the other hand, some Christians see 'keeping in the faith' as something of a tight-rope walk. Wobble just a little and - well, unless you repent it's hell for you. Is that the teaching of Jesus or the Bible generally?

One Christian believes we ought not to

observe *birthdays* while for others that's OK. Both claim Biblical support. The same with *make-up* (for women, that is!). Or the weightier matter of *military service* - some say fine and some see serving in the armed forces as a salvation issue. And both camps supposedly base their relative position on the Scriptures. Another contention is a '*place of safety*' - protection from the Tribulation. *Evolution v Creation* is further contentious point, with Christians defending both - and supposedly from the Bible.

Then there are disputes over the Biblical *holy days*. When should we observe the Lord's Supper? Or Pentecost? There are, too, at least half a dozen differing dates offered this year for all of the holy days, depending on which 'inspired' calendar you espouse.

A LETTER TO THE CHURCH

In all these matters there are Christians - and organizations - out there who robustly defend their peculiar view as essential for all Christians. *The tight-rope again*. If they are correct, then we had better believe it! However, we need to ask, is our eternal life so precarious, so dependent on doctrinal perfection? What does God require of us?

The Bible has many examples of men and women whose behaviour should shock. (Not, of course, a licence for any of us to do as we please.) Yet they 'lived by faith' and they are 'after God's own heart'. These godly people shared a couple of characteristics: *they worshipped the true God, and they were willing to repent of wrong personal behaviour*. In other words, they 'loved God' and they 'loved neighbour as themselves'.

Consider the first generation of Christians - largely Jews. As Jews they were as widely divided as today's church, yet sharing common foundation teachings. The apostles didn't have to teach them, for example, who God is or which day is Sabbath or on which days God prescribes that they assemble annually to worship Him or about the mortality of the 'soul'. In their diversity they were all 'the Israel of God'.

But to be part of the new Israel, the church of God, required an added dimension: *Jesus Christ*.

Convinced by the prophetic Scriptures, by their personal guilt at having caused

the death of Jesus, and by their urgent need for forgiveness of sin (*see* Acts 2:14-39) they enquired about what they should do. The apostle Peter's reply was that they must have the indwelling divine nature, the Holy Spirit - through repentance and baptism.

And that remains the key to salvation.

A mere behavioural change isn't enough - many outside Christ have radically altered their lifestyle, had a 'make-over'. All Peter's hearers had the externals of true religion. But that wasn't enough - *there has to be a change of heart*. Christ, by faith, has to be living his life in us. And like babies, we have to grow up and through experience to become mature.

If Christ is active in us we have salvation assured. No matter what our doctrinal deficiencies, no matter how young - or old - in the faith. For he, internally, urges us to a greater understanding of the divine will. Truth grows in each of us at varying rates!

Over the centuries, however, men - and women - have sought to carve a name for themselves by overlaying these basic truths with a tangle of doctrinal debris. It results in such anti-Christian pursuits as the Inquisition, the medieval religious wars, persecutions. No less the tendency to condemn all who disagree with 'my' private sectarian viewpoint.

When the Spirit of Christ is working in us there will be one major visible characteristic: *'By this they will all know that you are my disciples - by your love for one another'* (John 13:35). That love grows out of a heart filled with the divine Spirit, the mind of Christ. Working in us it produces all those attitudes and behaviours that are revealed by God in His perfect Law. It's a spirit of tolerance, concern, patience, mercy, humility and obedience to the divine will. Destructive heresy - self-willed opinion leading to sectarian division - stems from opposing qualities.

What, then, does it take to be 'in the Kingdom'?

The unfolding expression of the perfect mind of Jesus Christ dwelling in us through a repentant attitude (and baptism) from which flows willing and active submission to the divine Law according to individual conscience. *Maturing spiritual fruit*, in other words. And it is Jesus Christ - and he alone - who ultimately will judge us. □

"that they may be one"

J e s u s
a s k e d
P h i l i p

by Bill Faith

Knowing that He was to be crucified, Jesus went to his Father in prayer the night before his crucifixion - recorded in John 17. In that prayer he asked the Father that both the disciples and those who would come to God through their word might be one, as he and the Father are.

The passage reads as follows, "...Holy Father, keep through your name those whom you have given me, that they may be one as we are...I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us..." (vv. 11, 20-21).

How much was Jesus and the Father at one? To find the answer to that question we only need to read John 14:8-10 where we are told, "Philip said to Him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us.' Jesus said to him, '...He who has seen me has seen the Father;...Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in me?'"

Not that Jesus and the Father are the same person, but rather that they were so much alike in their thoughts, beliefs and way of life. They were so much alike that Jesus was able to say that if you saw Him, you saw the Father.

When someone sees us, do they see Christ? That may sound a little self righteous at first. Yet, Jesus' prayer was that we would be one in him as he is with the Father. Are our thoughts, beliefs and way of life patterned after Christ's to the extent that we closely represent him? If not, perhaps it's time to evaluate ourselves.

whether he believed that the Father was in him and that he was in the Father. What about us? Are we in Christ and he in us? Certainly, otherwise we are reprobate. For Paul wrote that, "If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His" (Rom. 8:9).

In another place, we are asked to examine ourselves to see whether or not we are in the faith: "Prove yourselves. Do you not know yourselves that Jesus Christ is in you unless indeed you are disqualified" (II Corinthians 13:5).

It was God's intent from the beginning that we should walk in His way of life. "For we are His workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10). If Christ indeed is in us, then we will pattern our life after Christ and walk in his footsteps. Because John wrote that, "He who says he abides in him (Christ) ought himself also to walk just as he walked" (I John 2:6).

If we do not walk as Christ walked, then we are deceiving ourselves - because the word "Christian" itself denotes a follower of Christ.

John also wrote, "This is the message which we have heard from Him and declared to you that God is light [ie, God is holy and pure] and in Him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness [ie, not being holy and pure], we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light as He is in the

light, we have fellowship with one another [with God], and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin" (I John 1:5-7).

No U-turns

But what happens if we turn back to living a life of sin after accepting Jesus as our Savior? That question is answered in Hebrews 10:26-29. "...If we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins...Anyone who has rejected Moses' law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counting the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace?"

It is plain from these verses that as long as we live our life practicing righteousness our life will be hid in Christ. Paul also confirms this in Romans 8:1 where he wrote, "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit."

Hopefully, our life is a reflection of Christ's. If we love God with all our heart, soul and mind which is the first and great command, then we will be seeking God's truth and His way of life. And His truth and way of life will become in integral part of our life. Then truly, we can let our light so shine before men, that they may see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven. Then if someone looks at us, perhaps they may get a glimpse of Christ who dwells in us. □

Life Begin?...cont'd

Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God."

If we take this understanding of spiritual life and apply it to our physical life, then we can understand that life begins at the time of conception and not at the time of our birth. □

Your questions may find an answer in one or other of our free publications - available from any of our addresses.

Request a copy of the
Publications Catalogue