

outreach

Churches of God, UK Newsletter

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Matthew 28:19-20

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Divided Kingdoms

Three of the Gospels record these words of Jesus: '*...if a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand*' (Mark 3:24-25). It's a statement borne out by the facts; for we see nations torn apart by civil war, and we see families ripped asunder by strife.

Sadly it is, too, a fact of life within the world's religions. The various Islamic sects in the past—and even now, today—are at each others' throats, sometimes literally. In Christianity denominations arise and over time divide as internal factions arise. History tells us that the latter has at times resulted in hot wars between branches of their faith.

Church of God Movement

It is a fact of life that this division has infected our Sabbatarian churches. There have been splits—often amicable. But a few factions act as attack-dogs regarding the ethical or doctrinal stance of other groups—even to the extent of branding them as unchristian, and 'headed for the Tribulation'. Or, 'damned to destruction' and may 'lose eternal life'.

It is worth recalling the letters Jesus wrote to the seven individual churches in Asia Minor (Revelation 2-3). Despite their clear heretical tendencies in some, Jesus still recognizes each of them as his church, though in need of a clean-up. Critics fail to note that *Jesus* is the Head of the Body, and that he alone judges—and, when necessary, corrects his church. Or removes them.

It is true that the ethos of any one congregation affects everyone in it—Laodicea is a prime example. A whole assembly—indeed a whole world-wide denomination—can depart the 'faith once for all delivered' by the apostles.

Salvation, however, is *personal*, and individual Christians within a failing assembly may well remain as humble servants of the Saviour despite what comes from the pulpit (Revelation 3:20)! The Father deals with each of us personally, lovingly (though it might hurt! Hebrews 12:5-8) shepherding us towards the formation in us the image, the holy character, of Jesus. After all, He chose us to serve Him throughout eternity. We are not 'yellow pencils'!

Co-operation

The New Testament pattern for organization of the church was that each individual assembly was autonomous, independent—rather, inter-dependent. They were not tied to the strings of a denominational label—but simply addressed as '*the church of God in [location]*'. They worked together, not in competition.

Individual local assemblies welcomed visiting teachers—but carefully weighed their message. They initiated country-wide evangelistic outreach. They supported needy brethren in distant assemblies, and emulated their faith. They saw to the material needs of roaming apostles and evangelists, and provided prayer support. They shared written communications from authentic recognized leaders. Above all they were in tune with the Head through the leading of his Spirit (*eg* Acts 13:2).

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Passover

One of the oldest of religious observances is that of *Passover*—the annual recollection of the deliverance of ancient Israel from slavery in Egypt. It is held on the evening of the fourteenth day of the Hebrew first month of the year, (named *Nisan* or *Abib*) - our March/April. It is observed to this day within Judaism.

The ceremony focused on the sacrifice of a lamb. It was carefully selected as blemish-free and an official token lamb sacrificed in the Temple on the ‘even’ of Nisan 14 around 3pm, the ‘ninth hour’. This coincides with the time that Jesus ‘...yielded up his spirit’ (Luke 23:46). Lambs were also brought by the people for sacrifice by the priests. (How long this took is disputed.)

[‘even’ was that period of time following the declining of the sun—after midday—and the setting of the sun, around 6pm-7pm in Jerusalem.]

Each family prepared the lamb and roasted it whole. It was to be eaten before midnight, accompanied by unleavened (*ie*, flat, unyeasted) bread. That is, it was eaten on the 15th Nisan—recorded as ‘...a night to be observed’ (Exodus 12:42), a time of celebration of their deliverance from slavery in tyrannical Egypt. This was now the first of the seven days of the *Unleavened Bread* festival.

Paul approvingly records that the Corinthians continued to observe this festival (I Corinthians 5:6-8). As there is now no Temple nor a designated priesthood—animal sacrifices cannot be offered—the occasion is marked by a festive family meal. Throughout the seven days only unleavened products are eaten. Ω

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Those Revelation letters also indicate diversity of doctrine and behaviour (good and bad!) in individual assemblies. But note that within each of those assemblies taken to task by Jesus there were faithful brethren who resisted the negative influences.

Unity, then, is not subservience to a unitary remote and uncaring headquarters. It is a unity of spirit, a shared desire to work together to further the work of the Gospel of Christ and the spiritual nourishment of the saints to Christ-like maturity. A divided kingdom won’t last. Ω

Lord’s Supper: after sunset April 2nd

Unleavened Bread: April 4th—10th
begins previous evening

Pentecost: May 24

Remember!

The Biblical spring festivals begin with a time of remembrance—the *Lord’s Supper*. On the night in which Jesus was betrayed he gathered the Twelve in a room he had set aside for them in which to observe the annual *Passover/Unleavened Bread* festival—a seven-day event held annually and due to begin the next evening.

[*Note:* The term *Passover* refers to the entire seven-day observance. See Ezekiel 45:21, Luke 22:1]

During their conversations Jesus introduced the solemn remembrance we know as *Lord’s Supper, Communion etc*—now universally observed in Christendom but at various times and under different names. Paul, though, pinpoints its observance to ‘...the night in which he was betrayed’ (I Corinthians 11:23). It is linked to the time of the *Passover*, observed the next evening (John 18:28) and observed annually.

Jesus invited the disciples to continue this new observance, commemorating his suffering and coming death through the symbols of bread and wine: ‘...this do in remembrance of me’ (v.24). It is to be observed ‘...until he come’ (v.26).

The Corinthian brethren were taken to task by the apostle Paul for turning the *Lord’s Supper* into a rowdy party. It is appropriate that we approach this service with solemnity and in an attitude of contrition and self-examination: ‘...Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily [in an unworthy manner], shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. For he that eats and drinks unworthily, eats and drinks damnation [judgment] to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body. for this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep’ (I Corinthians 11:27-30).

The *Lord’s Supper* is a solemn remembrance and we should approach it with due reverence, ‘worthily’. *Passover*, by contrast, is a joyous celebration of our deliverance and our freedom in Christ—a ‘...night to be much observed’ by the redeemed as a festive family meal. The *first* and *last* days of the festival are annual Sabbaths.

As noted by Ezekiel (*ch* 45:21), *Passover* will continue to be part of worship in the thousand year reign of Messiah, while the *Lord’s Supper* is observed once a year ‘...until he come’.

Two Faiths

Spokesmen for Islam praise the morality of their faith—contrasting it with the perceived debauched behaviour rampant in ‘the West’. And who can blame them! For the so-called ‘Christian’ West has long ago abandoned its firm ethical moorings in the Christian Bible with its strong moral code—inculcated in the general populace since the eighteenth century religious revivals—foundations now eroded by powerful secular influences.

From a Biblical stance, then, there is much of value in the Islamic faith, and that’s to be welcomed as they settle in the West. Islamic—‘*sharia*’—law in some ways parallels the Bible code for human behaviour. But it is not Christian, reflecting as it does in some ways the *Old Testament* system of justice. But with the proviso that the nature of *Allah*, the god of Islam, does not mirror that of the Christian God the Father.

Two Faiths

It is widely accepted in the media and in government—though wrongly—that Islam and Christianity are parallel faiths, that the religion of Mohammed is that of the Biblical Abraham, that Allah and Jehovah are the same god, that the two are simply two ways to the same god..

There can, of course, be but *one* supreme God—Creator of all, sovereign, all-powerful, unique. Yet, as noted by the apostle Paul: ‘...*For though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or in earth, (as there be gods many, and lords many,) But to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him*’ (1Corinthian 8:5-6).

It is of note, as in Paul’s comment here, that the God of the Christian Scriptures is often called ‘Father’. That is, *He has a Son*, known as Jesus the Christ. This is anathema to Allah, who explicitly denies that he has a son. Different beings, then!

[Note, too, that Jehovah has made clear that He is identified by the observance of the *seventh-day Sabbath*—it is His sign—Exodus 31:13-17. Both Islam (Friday) and modern Christianity (Sunday) fail on this.]

Allah

This vast supermarket of religious faiths developed by man-made additions and traditions, often directed by unseen spirit forces. Yet most

religions retain remnants of the one body of beliefs delivered to our first parents. Over the millennia this primitive faith decayed into the myriad splinter faiths that mankind embrace today.

Allah, for example, derives from the compound Arabic word *al-ilah*—literally *the god*, a generic and not a personal name (as is *El* in Hebrew and *theos* in Greek, both used of *any* deity). His worship long pre-dates the founding of Islam in the seventh century AD. The name was widely used in worship throughout the Middle East.

Allah has strong links to *moon* worship, just as modern Christianity employs much symbolism from *sun* worship. Note the *crescent moon* that dominates every mosque. It was adapted from earlier pre-Islamic beliefs as the symbol of the Ottoman empire, and is now universal to Islam.

Islamism

The entire world is presently engaged in a confrontation with those labelled *Islamists*—the so-called militant wing of Islam, the ‘Islamic State’ (IS). It is violently uncaring of human life, opposed to every other faith (notably Christianity and Judaism), destructive of property and tradition, and hell-bent on spreading its evil creed worldwide.

IS is widely viewed as an aberration from true Islam. But, like medieval Christianity its violent behaviour is rooted in the unholy marriage of religion and state—the lust for power and control. As wrote the brother of Jesus: ‘...*Why do you fight and argue with each other? Isn't it because you are full of selfish desires that fight to control your body? You want something you don't have, and you will do anything to get it. You will even kill!*’ (James 4:1-2).

World Dominion

Religion and state may be united only when God—the one and only God—is in control.

The religion of Jesus in no way gives support to conquering the world by the sword as did these two major faiths during the Middle Ages: ‘...*though we are still living in the world, it is no worldly warfare that we are waging. The weapons with which we fight are not human weapons but are mighty for God*’ (II Corinthians 10:3-4).

A world-embracing ‘caliphate’ *will* come. It will not be Islamic but will be governed by the one true faith—that of Jesus the Messiah, who will reign supreme from Jerusalem for a thousand years as King of kings and Lord of lords. Ω

The Christian State

Although increasingly secular, nations such as the United Kingdom, America, Canada, Australia and other 'Western' nations are widely viewed as 'Christian'. Indeed a third of the world's population is so named, and Christianity has left its mark around the world even on so-called 'heathen' nations. What would we expect to see in a Christian nation?

As we are discussing Christianity we will, of course, use the 'Holy Bible' as our source. And, recalling the words of Jude—'...contend for the faith once for all delivered to the saints'—we will sweep away all extraneous traditions that have sullied the primitive faith. And, believe it or not, we will resort to the teachings of Jesus Christ.

Rule of Law

First, a disclaimer. One day this same Jesus will return to establish a Christian *world*. His way of life will envelop *all* nations—all of Christendom, all of Islam, all Hindu and Buddhist, all animists—and even the atheists. One way of life, one universal faith, one way to eternal life.

The same Gospel message of the days of the apostles will then be proclaimed to every generation throughout His thousand year reign—salvation through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Yet the nation states will continue, and will be ruled by divine Law: '...out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. And he shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people' (Isaiah 2:3-4). Jesus specified that the apostles would at that time '...sit on twelve thrones, and shall judge the twelve tribes of Israel' (Matthew 19:28). The apostle Paul told the Corinthian brethren: '...the saints will judge the world' (I Corinthians 6:2).

Clearly, the implication is that some alive at that time—even with Jesus present on earth—will live contrary to the Christian Gospel, and will still be under the rule of law. So not everyone will embrace the Christian life—it will remain a matter of personal choice.

The Christian State

What, then, should we expect of a modern 'state if truly 'Christian'?

- It will be subject to God's Law as outlined by the 'Ten Commandments'
- There will be no need for military academies
- It will have disarmed, and destroyed weapons
- Most of the populace will have become actively and truly Christian

- There is little need for a police force or armed forces—all will be living the Gospel
- There will be one faith, one form of religion - that of the Christian Scriptures
- Corruption at all levels will be abolished

Deception

Is a Christian state possible? Not in today's world! For we inhabit a world that has been seduced by a deceitful philosophy. It walks'... *according to the course of this world, according to the ruler of the authority of the air, the spirit now working in the sons of disobedience,*' (Ephesians 2:2).

That spirit is '*...the devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world*' (Revelation 12:9). Through infiltration of the world's systems he infects the very thoughts of mankind—through education, through religion, through economics, through politics—thus effectively preventing any notion of a 'Christian nation'.

Wrote the apostle Paul: '*...if our gospel is being hidden, it has been hidden in those being lost, in whom the god of this age has blinded the thoughts of the unbelieving, so that the brightness of the gospel of the glory of Christ who is the image of God, should not dawn on them*' (II Corinthians 4:3-4).

Save the World?

Two thousand years of Christian endeavour, and most of mankind—generation after generation—remains outside the Christian fold. Whose fault? Is it the church—bound up as it is in expensive bureaucratic red tape and widespread disinterest? Or is it God Himself, who has implemented an ineffective 'church programme'?

The reality is that God is not 'trying to save the world'. In the beginning He gave us the opportunity to 'do it My way' and it was rejected—with the consequent chaos and confusion that surrounds government today.

All, however, is not lost. For God through the worldwide proclamation of the Gospel of Christ identifies those with whom He can work, men and women who in general don't amount to much—until He transforms them by His Spirit (I Corinthians 1:26-29). These are 'the called', whom the Father is training to reign with Christ for when the true 'Christian state' is established on earth—the spirit Kingdom of God.

Until the Father intervenes—in His perfect timing—mankind will continue on its downward path to self-destruction. Ω