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Horizons

Vol 12 No 4

July/August 2008

addressing the important issues for today and tomorrow



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CGOM

Churches Of God Outreach Ministries

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

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

the views expressed by the writers are not necessarily those of the Editor

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

It is distributed free on request, being a cooperative voluntary effort financed by the members and friends of the Churches of God. We also welcome the financial support of all who benefit from our publications and who wish to labour with us.

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Tulsa, OK 2008

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new Horizons

Issue No 70

July/August 2008

Sceptics scorn what they perceive as 'the errors' of the Scriptures. Their value, however, is infinite

Taken out of context a document or an action or a situation can be distorted, can appear to mean other than what is intended. So it is with the Christian Scriptures. Yet from beginning to end - from Genesis to Revelation - there's a consistency of purpose that is relevant to every person ever born.

Fundamental to this purpose is the reality of an ever-living Creator God. (Stop here if your mind is locked down against this concept! Alternatively, you can explore here the only reason for your existence.) Christians look to the Bible as the inspired revelation of this divine plan - otherwise to quote it is mere circular reasoning. Writes the author of Hebrews: *'...without faith no one can please God. We must believe that God is real and that he*

rewards everyone who searches for him' (Hebrews 11:6 CEV). And, *'...Everything in the Scriptures is God's Word. All of it is useful for teaching and helping people and for correcting them and showing them how to live'* (II Timothy 3:16 CEV).

The nature of the one God - there can be but one true God - is clearly revealed throughout the Scriptures. It is consistent in both Old Testament and New Testament. He is *'...the same yesterday, today and forever'* (Hebrews 13:8), and Himself says *'...I never change'* (Malachi 3:6). Jesus - the perfect reflection of the

Father - thinks and acts the same as JHVH of Old Testament times. And God's character? *'...you, O Lord, are a God full of compassion, and gracious, longsuffering, and plenteous in mercy and truth'* (Psalm 86:15). All of the Scripture record has to be seen in this context.

Why We Are Here

Our species is no accident. In the beginning God *'...made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is'* (Exodus 20:11). The entire ecosystem was perfect - and crowned by mankind. Indeed our beautiful blue and white planet, suspended like a jewel on nothing, was designed specifically to service mankind's every need. And to be the 'nursery' in which we would be nourished to perfection.

Created With Purpose

Man is made *'...in the image of God'* (Genesis 1:26-27). It may not look that way, especially when we compare our nature with His! We do, however, have implanted characteristics that

reflect God's nature. Chimps can achieve up to but not beyond the abilities of an average human three-year-old - while the latter can continue to develop until death. We can design and build a great metropolis with all its intricate infra-structure. We can replicate on paper and on canvas the beauties of the natural world - and appreciate that beauty. We envision and implement new technology and exploit for our benefit the bounty of nature. All God-given and part of His creative 'image' in us.

Look around, however, and it seems we were made to self-destruct. If

God has in mind for us 'some vast eternal plan' - what happened? *Free will*. Man is no automaton, not a robot controlled by internal computer. We have choice - choice to follow the Maker's *'Instructions for Use'* or to devise our own operating system. Follow the Instructions and we are on the way to fulfilling the divine purpose. Don't, and we press the self-destruct button.

Love In Action

The Creator has for His creation (Gk *kosmos*) a deep and penetrating love: *'...God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes on him should not perish, but have eternal life'* (John 3:16). It's a text well-known throughout Christendom. Note: believe and you won't perish, die, be destroyed. You will, if you believe, live for ever. That is God's purpose - that we may live for ever as a part of His Spirit Family. To achieve that the Father was willing to suffer the agony of the death of His eternal companion and Son.

Have you considered this in context of God's plan? Nothing will stand in the way of the fulfillment of His loving purpose. Here's what the Psalmist tells us: *'...You [God] warn the nations and destroy evil people; you wipe out their names forever and ever'* (Psalm 9:5 CEV). And: *'...the LORD preserves all them that love him: but all the wicked will he destroy'* (145:20). Solomon adds: *'...I love them that love me; and those that seek me early shall find me'* (Proverbs 8:17)

God will when necessary remove individuals, communities, nations who stand in the way. He warns, He

is patient, He is merciful. God is love. But when we persistently 'throw a spanner in the works' - He acts. Look at a few examples,- recorded as an example for us (I Corinthians 10:11).

Purging of Evil

Having created man and instructed him in the way of life, the Creator had initiated His plan. We blew it. Rather than follow the *Manual* we devised our own operating system, and as with any misused device it didn't work. Over the centuries man deviated further and further from the Way - to such a degree that eventually '...GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually' (Genesis 6:5). The result? All of mankind but for one righteous family was 'purged' in a worldwide flood - to save the plan.

Lessons were not learned, and before long the different families were scattered (*ch 11*) - again to save the plan. But corruption again set in. The 'righteous' became ever sparser, and the LORD again had to work with one family - that of Abraham. In his days the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah had become degenerate: '...this was the iniquity of thy sister Sodom: pride, fulness of bread, and prosperous ease was in her and in her daughters; neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy. And they were haughty, and committed abomination before me .' (Ezekiel 16:49-50). Clearly a corrupting influence: '....therefore I took them away as I saw good'.

God had given ample time for the nations to embrace that one true faith. The Amorites - perhaps the leading Canaanite tribe in occupation of Palestine - sank deeper and deeper into lawlessness, despite the righteous witness of Shem, of Abraham, of Melchizedek. They continued four

generations before being expelled by Israel (Genesis 15:16).

Four centuries after Abraham when his descendants entered Canaan idolatry had increased. It was a threat to the plan, and Israel were warned to avoid the surrounding tribes (*see Deuteronomy 7*) As torch-bearers of the one and only faith Israel - in their divinely-appointed homeland - were to avoid all contamination from these idolatrous nations. Said the LORD: '...I will see that your borders reach from the Red Sea to the Euphrates River and from the Mediterranean Sea to the desert. I will let you defeat the people who live there, and you will force them out of the land' (Exodus 23:31 CEV). Israel were not even to enter into any treaty obligations with them (Deuteronomy 7:2-6). These nations were so grossly idolatrous and wicked that they were beyond the ability to change.

Israel, Too

God's model nation, however, was not exempt from the Satan-driven pressures of idolatry. Shortly after Solomon's reign Israel became divided. The northern Ten Tribes themselves sank into idolatry and were taken captive, as yet to be restored. The southern House of Judah over a century later followed suit - worse even than Sodom (Ezekiel 16:47) - and were exiled for seventy years in Babylon before their restoration to Palestine.

There they remained for nigh on six centuries subject to domination by foreign nations - ultimately Rome. During that time the expectation grew of a liberating Messiah. When he came, despite the witness of prophets, they rejected him. Confronted by and despite the undoubted miracles of Jesus, the religious leaders determined to kill him. The High Priest, fearing a Roman crackdown (v.48), even '...prophesied that Jesus should die for that nation' (John 11:47-53). The nation on the whole

rejected their prophesied Messiah and were exiled - again, returning *en masse* only in the last century.

Notice the pattern. Every intervention by God in human affairs throughout human history is to further His all-embracing purpose. He removes kings, overthrows nations, expunges peoples. In the counsels of heaven every action and every thought of man is examined by a loving Creator God. Puny man cannot fathom His reasons: '...The secret things belong unto Jehovah our God; but the things that are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law' (Deuteronomy 29:29 ASV).

'Gentle Jesus'

But didn't Jesus change all that? Didn't he bring a softer touch to divine action? Didn't he correct the Father's 'shortcomings'?

In short, no. Jesus perfectly reflects the Father's will (John 10:28-38 *etc*). He is the God who interacted with mankind throughout history - none other than our Saviour. He is the pivot of the divine plan, the sacrificial 'Lamb' through whom comes salvation. He, in the days of his flesh, portrayed the compassionate and merciful face of God.

Jesus is not, however, the 'gentle Jesus' of childhood's bed-time stories. In the days of his flesh, he was fearless when opposed, courageous in face of death. And he 'told it like it is': '... The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that cause stumbling, and them that do iniquity, and shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 13:42). The words of Jesus himself!

Writing to the Christians in Thessalonians Paul says: '...the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that **cont'd p.8**

Request the (free) article:
God Is One

Alpha is an introductory course to Christianity. But beware of some hidden pitfalls

Alpha International continues its onward march, with almost 200,000 visitors in 2007 in the United Kingdom - up 15% on 2006. Internationally there are over 35,000 courses in 163 countries. The course impacts many from all walks of life.

The *Outreach Ministries* welcomes the fact that men and women previously impervious to Christianity are finding faith through the *Alpha* ministry. It is claimed that as a result lives have been transformed.

However, we urge a cautionary note. 'Graduates' of the course should be aware that it is but an *introduction* to the Christian way.

No Easy Faith

There's a tendency in modern Christendom - at least in the West - to see the faith of Christ through 'rose-coloured spectacles'. Believe, give your life to Jesus - and you are a Christian: '*Heaven, here I come*'. Well - maybe so. But that is just the beginning.

Nearly all the world's two billion professing Christians are *born into* Christianity in some form, and in that form most remain. Born Roman Catholic or Lutheran or Anglican or Pentecostal? Likely you will die so. Few will examine the credentials of their belief system.

But to become a true Christian demands commitment. It's not just religiously 'going to church'. It's not the possession of a Bible or a set of daily Bible readings. Luke, the biographer of the apostle Paul, records: '*...These [in Berea] were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so*' (Acts 17:11). They were open to the message, and they checked it out.

Those 'Scriptures', of course, were the Old Testament writings - no others were yet written.

And when you get your nose into the Bible you are due for a shock!

You will find that the Bible has continuity. It has one message from beginning to end - from *alpha to omega*, if you like. God doesn't change. He is '*...the same yesterday, today and forever*' (Hebrews 13:8), and says '*...I don't change*' (Malachi 3:6). Now that means you will find much of what you hear in 'church' is

in conflict with the Scriptures. If you are new to church (or - maybe especially - an old-timer) you ought to listen carefully - and check out from the Scriptures what you hear. Indeed it's almost guaranteed that what Jesus requires of you is a life-change on many levels.

It's tempting to accept that any 'man of the cloth' will truly reflect what God says, that you can take as 'gospel' every word preached from the pulpit. Refer to the Scriptures, however, and you will find repeated warnings - and this in the time of live apostles - of professing Christian ministers leading people astray. It's a pattern repeated down the centuries - not least today. 'Let the buyer beware'!

The apostle Paul warned of those who are '*...false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ. And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers*

Each quotation from the Bible in New Horizons is from the translation which most clearly expresses the original language

ALPHA... just a beginning

ters of righteousness' (II Corinthians 11: 13-15). How can we distinguish?

Me? An Idolater?

'Getting it wrong' is a human proclivity - not least in religion. False religion has plagued mankind from the beginning, and God calls it *idolatry*. Idolatry is any practice that flies in the face of divine revelation. That's why the Bereans are singled out as examples - they sought out the truth, from the Scriptures.

From the beginning there has been but one true divinely-inspired faith, largely perverted by mankind. Elements of that faith have survived in almost every man-made religion - the concept of a Messiah, for example. But the fundamentals are clearly laid out in the Christian Bible. *All else is idolatry*.

Abraham was one of the few in his generation who clung to the truth. He '*...obeyed my voice, and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws*' (Genesis 26:5). His faith guaranteed that his descendants (through his son Isaac) would inherit both material and spiritual blessings - and responsibilities. Israel were to be the torch-bearers for the faith, a model nation, and their inspired records preserved it.

But Israel - as those same Scriptures record - failed. Despite a perfect God-ordained 'Constitution' and direct divine intervention on their behalf, Abraham's descendants embraced idolatrous practices. Indeed they had barely been miraculously delivered from slavery in Egypt before reverting to idols. So seriously did God view idolatry - it undermined His plan for us - that the Israelites were exiled - Judah for seventy years, while the House of Israel remains in exile to this day.

Time and again the early Christians are praised for opposing idolatry. Said Paul: '*...flee from idolatry*' (I Corinthians 10:14). **cont'd p.8**

IN THE BEGINNING...

'Our planet is four billion years old'. 'No - more like six thousand', say some. Just how old is Earth? And does it matter?

Debate in regard to the age of Earth often centres on 'religion v. science'. Science is adamant that an 'old Earth' - billions of years - is closer to the mark. Many Christian teachers believe the Bible requires but six thousand years. Indeed there are those from both science and religion on either side. Can this vast chasm be bridged?

Where do we start? Surely - '*...in the beginning*'. For science (mostly), that beginning is the sudden, instantaneous development - from absolute nothingness - of matter. First was perfect emptiness, then a universe peopled by billions of galaxies on one (at least) of which dead matter miraculously - and gradually - became alive. That 'livingness' began some four billion years ago. From the one initial spark of living matter came the vast variety of life we know today - 'amoeba to man'.

For many Christian believers that 'beginning' was a mere six thousand years ago. Evidence is produced to support this. God at that point created all that now exists in six literal twenty-four hour days. Islamic teachers reflect this, but claim the six 'days' were simply six long time periods. Our world - according to the beliefs of many nations - was later shaped by a catastrophic worldwide flood.

Believers, of course, have recourse to an all-powerful Creator God who exists outside time and is eternal - without beginning, without end. Indeed, if such a Being doesn't exist then we are forced to believe the incomprehensible miracle described

previously - that matter, inorganic and organic, simply materialised from nowhere, together with all the complex and harmonious fundamental laws of nature.

Genesis

Within the religious view of existence the most cohesive and believable account of creation is in the Christian Scriptures - the Bible. And, of course, it is God-centred. He - the LORD, Jehovah, JHVH - is portrayed as being self-existent, all-powerful and *purposeful*. The physical creation is but the canvas on which He portrays a plan more complex than anything devised by man. Indeed, *man is the centre-piece*. All creation is moulded to forward God's purpose for us. Mankind is the pinnacle of creation, and to this end Earth was furnished with man's future needs.

The Scriptures throughout claim God is the One who created heaven and earth and all on it: '*... you alone are the LORD, Creator of the heavens and all the stars, Creator of the earth and those who live on it, Creator of the ocean and all its creatures. You are the source of life, praised by the stars that fill the heavens*' (Nehemiah 9:6 CEV).

All this was placed under human control: '*...God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the heavens, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth*' (Genesis 1:26).

Two Views

Christians by definition accept that

God exists, that the LORD is Creator of all. Without Him nothing would exist. Atheists and skeptics reject the very notion of a 'God' and opt for an evolutionary scenario (while being clueless as to how it all began). But the 'how' is in one sense unimportant. We came into existence. We are here, now. We have every resource we need. We have the intelligence - too often misused - to exploit those God-provided resources.

But it is of interest as to *how* this all came about. Did it all happen in the course of one normal but extraordinary seven day week? God, certainly, has the power to accomplish that - to instantly '*...spread out the heavens like a curtain*'. Or, as demands science - and many Christians - did the universe and life come into being by a multi-billion year process?

Creationists present much evidence in support of a 'young earth' - a mere six thousand years since all matter first appeared. Earth's present configuration - mountains, oceans, atmosphere *etc* - is shaped by a universal flood some four and a half millennia ago. It's a view - called *catastrophism* - that can be supported by geology.

The Scriptures throughout claim God is the One who created heaven and earth and all on it

Geologists now accept the principle that much of what we see in our planet can be attributed to mighty physical forces at work. The up-thrust of huge mountains by tectonic forces, the gouging of valleys by catastrophic floods, the effects of huge 'quakes and tsunamis. All have shaped our Earth. Whether over a billion years or six thousand years - or even in a lifetime.

Science Gaps

The evidence of science is littered with gaps. The '*red shift*', for example - used to posit a universe stretching out fifteen billion light-years, and still expanding - is dubious. Studies of the '*speed of light*' suggest it was in the past much faster (even infin-

ity). All have implications for dating Earth's life-span and may support the concept of a 'young earth'.

Then there are the undoubted gaps in the *fossil record*. The millions of required transitional forms have not increased since Darwin mourned their absence.

There are, too, worries even in the scientific community, about the reliability of *dating methods*. After all, as none of us lived thousands or millions of years ago we must rely on such fallible evidence.

Bible Gap

The Bible text is clear: '*...in six days Jehovah made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is*' (Exodus 20:11). That's comprehensive, all-inclusive. Given that by definition God is all powerful it is perfectly believable. God could indeed in six literal days shape the universe, creating Adam on Day Six. We can, as believers, take that at face value. No need to contort the facts.

Alternatively, we may consider the view of the ancient Jewish Torah scholars that Adam was indeed the first man to be imbued, six thousand years ago, with God-consciousness. In a sense it doesn't matter. We are here. And we are here with God-ordained purpose.

Yet we don't have to stretch credulity about a 'six day' creation a mere six thousand years ago. There is also a 'Bible gap'.

Beginnings...

The Christian Scriptures are clear that God pre-exists the material universe, and that He is Creator of all it contains. He envisaged it, He planned it - and He made it happen as planned.

The record informs us, early in *Genesis*, that the seven days of creation began with a planet enveloped in water: '*...In the beginning God cre-*

ated the heaven and the earth; and the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters' (Genesis 1:1-2) That is, earth *pre-existed* the seven creation days - by how many billion years we don't know. And, if earth, surely the entirety of the Universe then existed.

earth and made it; he has established it, he created it not in vain, he formed it to be inhabited' (Isaiah 45:18).

Note: '*...not created in vain* [Heb *tohu*]' - that is, not a desolation, but '*...to be inhabited*'. The same term used in Genesis 1:2: '*...without form [tohu] and void [bohu]*'.

And if created to be inhabited surely that implies the presence of resources necessary to sustain life. What that life was stares at us from the fossil record - reptiles, mammals, vegetation, fish *etc.* All was in God's time submerged in a planet-wide flood - leading us to Genesis 1:2.

How long that flood continued is unknowable - perhaps millions of years. The outcome was a planet choc-a-bloc with all the resources we now draw from it: minerals, oil, gas, shale, radioactive material, verdant vegetation *etc.* And fertile soil. All were formed by the activity of natural forces over perhaps billions of years.

While there is evidence that some reptiles (*eg* dinosaurs) have walked the planet since that first Sabbath - Job refers to such huge, powerful creatures (*ch* 40:15-24) - yet the Bible record is not averse to their existence over vast ages in that early earth, their bones contributing to our present resources.

Re-creation

Into that world the LORD again entered. In seven days He re-shaped earth, regenerated the life we see today, and set for all mankind a pattern of weekly work and refreshment.

And that was the purpose of it all: *Man*. In the far reaches of eternity God determined to have companions to share His glory and power. Not automatons or robots but beings willing to develop His characteristics and values.

That's why you and I are alive. Ω

Death Enters

One argument against an 'old earth' is that there was no death before Adam's sin. Paul: '*... by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin*' (Romans 5:12).

However, we might ask, assuming he lived more than a few days before he sinned: *did Adam never see a dead fly or bird or other small creature?* He apparently knew what the sentence of death passed on him meant.

Paul's words apply to humanity: '*...and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned*'.

Animals don't sin.

At that moment earth was shrouded in thick cloud and in total darkness awaiting the penetration of light from the sun as the cloud thinned - energized by the all-powerful Spirit of God.

Ready for Life

Isaiah tells us, however, that our planet wasn't created that way: '*...For thus says the LORD that created the heavens; God himself that formed the*

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Be sure to enroll for our free 32-lesson Study Course. It's a key to what is for many a 'Book of Mystery'

unsigned articles are by the Editor

Our Mission

The *Churches of God Outreach Ministries* is not a denomination but a group of co-operating independent local assemblies. Formed in 1996 *CGOM* was the outcome of the dissatisfaction felt by brethren whose voices were ignored in our previous organization. As other denominations which shared our foundation beliefs displayed the same flaws previously experienced, we determined in conference that the way forward was our present independent structure.

The *Outreach Ministries* provide support for any individuals or independent assemblies who would like to increase their impact through co-operation with other like-minded assemblies. We invite such to join with us in our mission to sow God's Word wider and wider.

For further information check our website (www.cgom.org), or write to us.

Request the articles *CGOM in Perspective* and *The Small Church*

THE FEAR OF CHANGE

Should a church change its teachings?

Many churches pride themselves on the fact that they don't change, that they are *always the same*. It's a concept that has merit. After all, if you 'have the truth' - why change? (And if you don't - then why not change?) It would be criminal. It would betray your leadership. It would be *sin*.

This view, however, deserves probing. For what is perceived as 'truth' at one time may, with new understanding, become - well, error. The astronomer Galileo, for example, was branded a heretic for claiming earth orbited the sun and not *vice versa*. He has now been rehabilitated!

Need For Change

Churches have in the past both discarded teachings and added others. Rome, for example, has in recent centuries inserted the doctrines of the *Immaculate Conception*, and the *Assumption* of Mary bodily to heaven. And the concept of *limbo* is now discarded.

When change better reflects Bible principles it is to be praised. But change is often resisted. For example, there is controversy within the Adventist church as one scholar

seeks to clarify part of Ellen G White's teaching.

The *Worldwide Church of God* [see *side-bar*] in contrast, has radically changed having abandoned long-held sound Bible teachings. Even, there, however, there was positive change, as erroneous - and harmful - teachings were ditched: on *healing*, on *divorce and re-marriage*, for example. Change, too, as to days to observe - replacing Sabbath by Sunday, Passover by Easter *etc*.

Sadly, many of its former members and offshoot groups continue to re-

Worldwide Church

One curious modern example is that of the *Worldwide Church of God*. It has, since its Founder died in 1986, changed head-over-heels and is now 'mainstream Protestant'. It has changed from a 7th-day church (that's Biblical) to a Sunday church, from being binitarian to trinitarian, from observing the Biblical festivals to observing Christmas, Easter, *etc*.

Yet over his lifetime in the church (1934-1986) its Founder vociferously claimed the church to be the only repository of Bible-based truth - the 'one true church', its teachings inspired by God's Spirit.

The church, however, was no stranger to flip-flop change - belying the claims that its beliefs were inspired rather than merely the personal - fallible - beliefs of the leadership.

main faithful to those original erroneous teachings. They do not '*grow in grace and the knowledge of Christ*', but have stagnated.

Often this is a slavish reliance on the teachings of the man - now long deceased - they erroneously considered to be 'God's end-time apostle'.

What Counts?

It's important that we come to understand what God wants of us - including 'truth'. We all strive for increased understanding of the Scriptures. But what counts primarily are those factors that affect our relationship with God and our fellows. Get it wrong and we suffer.

Sound Doctrine

Believe, for example, that God's Law is obsolete and we shatter our relationship with Him. In His Law the LORD teaches us *when* He will formally fellowship with us - *ie* on the Sabbath and on His prescribed annual convocations. Most Christians are in ignorance of this - and have substituted idolatrous practices derived from pagan sources.

In the Law God tells us how to conduct daily life. By ignoring these instructions Christians, wrongly, feel free to behave according to personal whim. And that is sin - with consequences for now and for eternity.

Sound doctrine, then, can be vital to our life in Christ. False teaching undermines faith. But our salvation does not depend on our 'getting right' every nuance of God's revelation to us. Doctrinal purity is unattainable in this life!

So, let's strive for better understanding of God's Word for us, not fearing to embrace change that is soundly based on the Scriptures. **Ω**

Request the article:

The Knowledge That Counts

Most readers of *New Horizons* will be aware of the concept that God has a time plan, that the 'seven-day week' may represent a seven thousand year divine plan. Man's rule will, in this scenario, end after six thousand years of human existence and be followed by the thousand-year reign of Jesus as 'King of kings and LORD of lords'. This, alongside the perceived 'signs of the times', has fuelled the many attempts to establish a date for the expected 'Great Tribulation' followed by the return of Jesus to reign on earth.

Down the centuries there have been times when Christians have been confronted by events that were interpreted as being signs of the imminent end of man's rule. There was a flurry of this interest in the mid-eighteen hundreds - and in the last half of the nineteen hundreds. Even now there are self-styled 'prophets' proclaiming 'the end is nigh'.

History is littered with incarnations of wannabe 'Elijahs' and enough 'two witnesses' to fill a stadium. They have come - and gone. Sadly, they leave a legacy of dashed hopes among their deluded followers. Indeed some - remember Jim Jones, David Koresh - lead their loyal followers to gruesome deaths. Others will lead you off to some desert place or wilderness.

It is vital we take note of God's warning in regard to these false prophets: '*...when a prophet speaks in the name of Jehovah, if the thing follow not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which Jehovah has not spoken: the prophet has spoken it presumptuously, you shall not be afraid of him*' (Deuteronomy 18:22).

Don't be cowed by his charisma or by persuasive words or his wielding of his vaunted 'God-ordained authority'. *Don't follow him*. Just observe!

This, of course, assumes that you have been alert and not sucked in by

BEWARE False Prophets

his 'story'. Said Jesus: '*...beware false prophets*'.

How, then, can we be sure we are not deceived by the proclamations of an 'Elijah' or a 'witness' or a self-styled 'prophet'?

One day there will indeed appear not one but two truly God-appointed prophets: '*...I will give unto my two witnesses, and they shall prophesy a thousand two hundred and three-score days, clothed in sack-cloth*' (Revelation 11:3). Their mission (in Jerusalem) is described in this chapter:

Secular Prophets?

There's a tendency among Christians to assume that prophets will always be believers. Yet some of the loudest, most penetrating voices crying out against society's imperfections are a breed of secular journalists, who '*...cry aloud and spare not*'

God will use anyone to accomplish His purpose. Sadly, as with ancient prophets, the 'powers that be' don't listen. *Listen to what they say!*

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- We aren't told if they are human - or angelic beings
- Their identity is not revealed in Scripture. It has been suggested that God may restore ancient prophets to life as His witnesses - perhaps Elijah and Moses. But no -one knows!
- They will do their work by divine power and will have no need of financial supporters
- Likely they will have established their credentials beforehand - by a record of fulfilled prophecies
- While we should be aware of the 'signs of the times', we must be very cautious about accepting dates for prophesied events. Many Christians believe the 'six thousand years' are complete - though we are now some twelve years beyond the accepted date - based on Creation at 4004BC
- Caution, too, as to the time elapsed, for historical - and Biblical - dates are notoriously unreliable. In Judaism, only 5768 (not six thousand) years have elapsed since Creation
- Further, the typology of 'the prophetic week' may simply mean that God has imposed a limit on the time man can continue to ignore Him. In *His* time He will intervene in human affairs
- The only 'sure word of prophecy' in this matter are the words of Jesus: '*...And many false prophets shall arise, and shall lead many astray. And because iniquity shall be multiplied, the love of the many shall wax cold. But he that endures to the end, the same shall be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a testimony unto all the nations; and then shall the end come*' (Matthew 24: 11-14).

The key is that we '*endure to the end*', faithful to our calling and to our Saviour. Ω

ALPHA... cont'd

To the Thessalonian brethren he writes: 'you turned unto God from idols to serve a living and true God' (I Thessalonians 1:9). And any who claimed to be Christian but embraced idolatrous practices were excluded from the fellowship of believers (I Corinthians 5:11).

Idolatry Defined

How, then, will you avoid idolatry? How do you recognize it? Despite 'professing Jesus' could you be idolatrous?

Surely every Christian has heard of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20 - see Box). They tell us how to behave towards the LORD (numbers one to four), and towards man (five to ten). The latter are behaviours shared in degree by all faiths, and by none. The former, however, are unique to the one Creator God. As it was the LORD who conceived them in the beginning we need to pay attention! Our species functions best when the Commandments are at the heart of the individual - and indeed at the heart of society.

We might conclude that the Commandments - all of them - are how God wants us to please Him (as well as for our own benefit). They define His character, for we were created '...in his image' (Genesis 1:26) - and all else is idolatry. No element of the Commandments may be altered. Indeed Daniel prophesied of a future ruler: '...This king will speak evil of God Most High, and he will be cruel to God's chosen ones. He will try to change God's Law and the sacred seasons' (Daniel 7:25 CEV). The 'sacred seasons' are the weekly and annual holy convocations that are integral to God's revealed faith.

Anyone, then, who seeks to change or negate God's Law or who observes days other than what God reveals - no matter how sincerely observed, or whether done in ignorance - is by definition an idolater. An early king of Israel provides an example. He (Jeroboam) is branded throughout the Scriptures as one who '...caused Is-

God said to the people of Israel: I am the LORD your God, the one who brought you out of Egypt where you were slaves:

- Do not worship any god except me
- Do not make idols that look like anything in the sky or on earth or in the ocean under the earth.
- Do not misuse my name. I am the LORD your God, and I will punish anyone who misuses my name
- Remember that the Sabbath Day belongs to me. You have six days when you can do your work, but the seventh day of each week belongs to me, your God. No one is to work on that day - not you, your children, your slaves, your animals, or the foreigners who live in your towns. In six days I made the sky, the earth, the oceans, and everything in them, but on the seventh day I rested. That's why I made the Sabbath a special day that belongs to me

Created...cont'd from p.2

know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power; When he shall come to be glorified in his saints, and to be admired in all them that believe (because our testimony among you was believed) in that day' (II Thessalonians 1:7)

Ahead for mankind lies the time of '...the wrath of the Lamb' (Revelation 6:17). And yes, that's Jesus! It will be a time of utter mayhem in preparation for his coming earthly Kingdom.

God is indeed portrayed in the Scriptures as 'wrathful', 'angry'. But He is so only when wicked people undermine His purpose, when evil subverts the righteous, when idolatrous practices threaten to destroy.

It puts into perspective the so-called 'imprecatory psalms'. The Psalmists perfectly reflected the

rael to sin' (I Kings 12:32, II Kings 10:29 etc). Among other idolatrous practices he changed the divinely-appointed time for 'the feasts of the LORD' - a feast he '...devised out of his own heart' (I Kings 12:33). Yet his fellow-Israelites considered their idolatrous worship was directed towards the LORD.

The people of Israel - before idolatry set in - were influenced by the holy Spirit in the Word of the LORD [Moses, the Prophets etc], and ministered to them through their prophets and priests in the Tabernacle and in the Temple on the Sabbaths and holy days. They rejoiced in their worship.

It should be noted, however, that they were *influenced* by God's Spirit - but the Spirit did not indwell them. The Spirit was not yet given until the first Christian *Pentecost* (John 7:39, Acts 2). With the Spirit *indwelling* us - that is, true conversion - and active in our daily walk, then we are internally motivated to worship in accord with the first four of the Commandments [see side-bar]. These identify the Creator God of the Bible.

God doesn't change the fundamentals of His worship! It's clear from the New Testament that Christians continued to respect the Law - including the seventh-day Sabbath and the festivals. Many do so to this day.

Repentance and baptism (Acts 2:38) are but the *first steps* in our Christian walk - the beginning. **Ω**

mind of the Father and of Jesus towards those who oppose the divine plan. God does indeed wholeheartedly love the *kosmos*, His beautiful creation. To preserve it, man in rebellion is expendable!

The Father and Jesus are perfectly at one in their interaction with mankind. Man, the pinnacle of creation, will fulfill his destiny as God's companion throughout eternity. **Ω**

MiniStudy**God's Grand Design**

The Spirit Himself witnesses with our spirit that we are children of God. And if children, also heirs; truly heirs of God, and joint-heirs of Christ, if indeed we suffer together, that we may also be glorified together. For I calculate that the sufferings of the present time are not worthy to compare to the coming glory to be revealed in us (Romans 8:16-18)

Death and taxes. They are considered to be the only certainties of life. It's what *follows* death that's a concern for all of us - the odd atheist excepted. We can assume that death ends all, and perhaps strive to leave a positive inheritance to the world. We can seek to lead 'a good life' with the expectation that we will return to a physical life higher in the grand scheme of things. Or, *we can tap into the divine plan for man*. What the Creator has in mind for all who so desire is unimaginably more dramatic, more exciting, more satisfying than all the weird and wonderful scenarios dreamed up by philosophers and theologians. of all faiths

- Of course, if there is no God the matter of an afterlife doesn't arise (*but see* Psalm 14:1, Hebrews 11:6)
- To start at the beginning: '*God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them*' (Genesis 1:27). Such a plan implies purpose
- Through human choice that image was marred, and man embarked on the long journey to an extinction that God alone can prevent. The divine purpose is to enable us to become part of His Family (Romans 8:16-18)
- As a practical illustration of God's step-by-step plan, He instituted a series of weekly and annual festivals. They are showcased in the religion of the Israel nation, and detailed in Leviticus 23
- Since the beginning of the Christian church it has been understood that the *seven day week* is a model. There would be six 'days' - each of a thousand years - when mankind would have (almost) a free hand to conduct his affairs. It is followed by a millennial 'day of rest' for which the *seventh-day Sabbath* is a model
- The 'day of rest' is known as 'the Millennium'. Jesus will return to reign over all political and religious entities: '*King of kings and LORD of lords*'. The annual *Day of Trumpets* pictures this momentous event. Pictures, too, the resurrection to unending life of all in whom is the Spirit of God - the '*first resurrection*' (Revelation 20:7) It will initiate a time of rest from war, freedom from ill-health and disease, economic stability, abundant resources, pure religion. The Devil's influence will be temporarily removed and mankind will be universally reconciled to God - for which the annual *Day of Atonement* (Yom Kippur) is a type
- The annual *Festival of Tabernacles* sums up human frailty. It has many layers of significance: thankfulness for God's provision in the harvests, a commemoration of Israel's wilderness sojourn (when they lived forty years in 'tabernacles' - temporary dwellings), the human body (it is temporary and wears out), the millennium, the general resurrection. Overall it spans the whole time of sinful human existence in the flesh
- The final day of the seven-day Festival of Tabernacles - termed '*the Great Day of the Feast*' (John 7:37) - represents the general resurrection to judgment of '*the rest of the dead*' (Revelation 20:5). All those from all ages of man hitherto excluded from the true faith will be resurrected in the flesh and have opportunity to embrace the Gospel - the 'good news' of salvation: *ie* becoming a part of the Kingdom (Family) of God - and for judgment
- But there will come an end to this time in the flesh: '*...the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall be dissolved with fervent heat, and the earth and the works that are therein shall be burned up*' (II Peter 3:10). This is '*...the second death*' (Revelation 20: 13-15), known as *Ge'henna*, 'Hell'. The symbolism of the *Festival of Tabernacles* - mankind temporarily in sinful flesh - will then be fulfilled
- All who then remain will be spirit - truly children of God. It is *Eternity* - the culmination of God's grand design. Appropriately, it merits a special festival, the seventh holy day of the festival year, and immediately follows *Tabernacles*. It completes the festival year and marks a new beginning - to spirit life. The purpose of God in creation will be complete and mankind will truly, fully, be '*in the image and likeness of God*' Ω

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