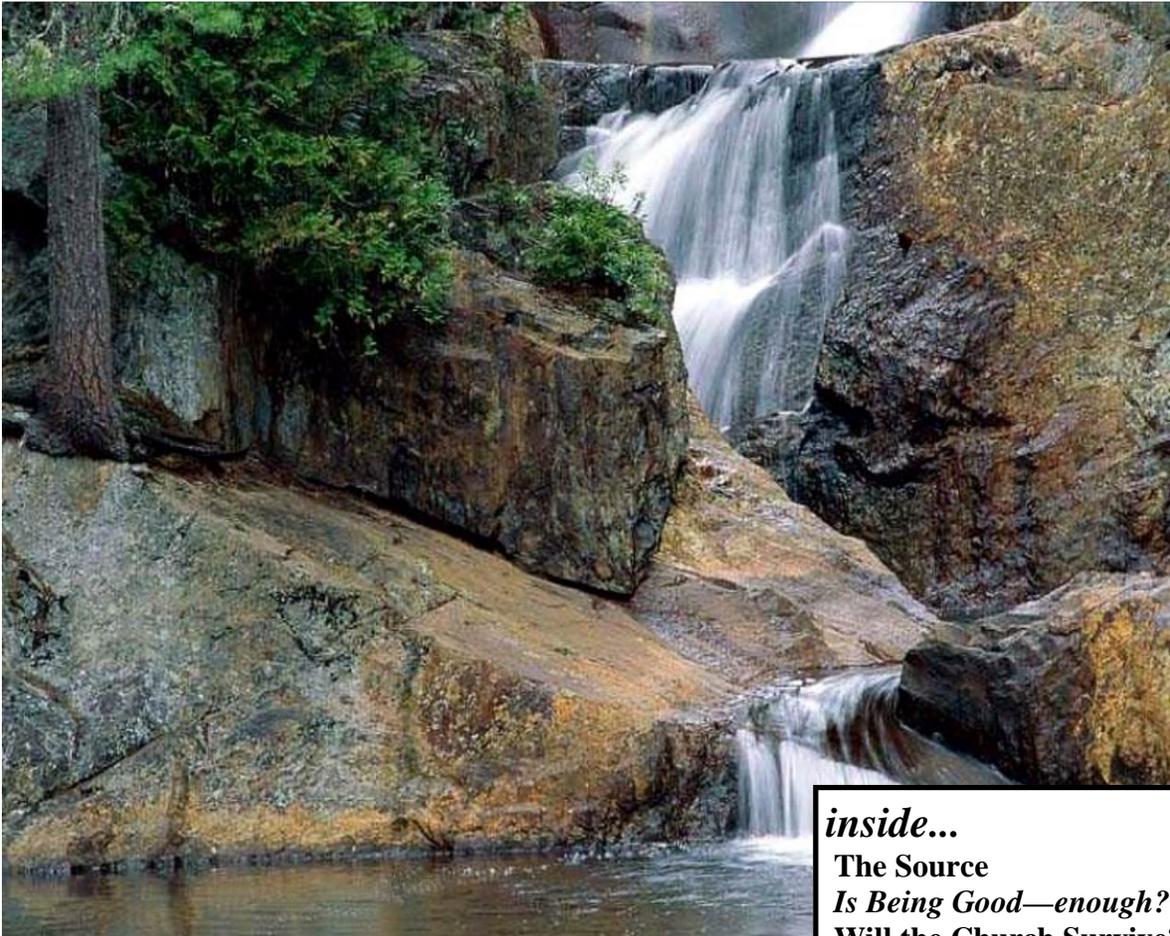


new **Horizons**

Vol 13 No 1

January/February 2009

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 Scrip-
tures. Over the centuries
that truth has been buried,
dug up, buried again. Our
desire is to restore the sim-
ple apostolic message. We
hope you will be excited
by what the Scriptures re-
veal about life, and the
horizons beyond**

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

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new Horizons

Issue No 73

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With around two billion souls professing to be Christian and thousands of choices for association—where should you fellowship? And given the wide variation of teaching, we could ask—*who is right?* Can there be so many authentic ‘brands’? Isn’t the church meant to be ‘one’?

We should not be too concerned about minor differences. After all, the New Testament churches clearly were riven by division, and Paul, Peter, John had to tackle the personal and doctrinal challenges facing all of them. Note the wide differences in the seven churches which Jesus addressed (Revelation 2 and 3). Yet all were part of ‘the church of God’. How then can we differentiate?

the source

Broadly, Christian denominations may be identified by a variety of criteria. Take, for example, the weekly ‘holy day’. Some will say it’s not necessary, and will meet anytime it is convenient, though this usually means Sunday. Others—millions, perhaps surprisingly—insist on observing the *seventh* day of the week, Saturday as Sabbath. And, of course, the vast majority observe Sunday. For them, anything else is heretical. Indeed, the ‘ecumenical spirit’ does not extend to non-Sunday keepers!

Sabbatarian Churches

But, as a ‘case study’, let’s take

the Sabbath-observers.

In the beginning of the Christian church the *seventh* day (Saturday) was the only weekly observance, carrying forward a practice initiated by the LORD at creation. It’s a practice that persisted down the generations since—often in face of martyrdom instigated by those ‘Christians’ who observed Sunday.

Sabbatarian assemblies can be traced across the Middle East, Europe, Great Britain and in America. A large—some say over a million—Chinese Christians to this day observe it (*eg* the *True Jesus Church*, founded 1909). In the United States the seventh-day Sabbath was ob-

erved

from the 17th century, the most high-profile denomination being the *Seventh Day Adventists* with currently several million adherents worldwide. But there are hundreds of other Sabbath-observing denominations and independent assemblies.

As in New Testament times, each group adds its own doctrinal flavour—though some may drift in and out of heresy! This, naturally, gives rise to contention. Indeed some groups will, sadly, completely ostracise any with even small deviation from what they consider to be ‘truth’. It’s a practice that envel-

ops all of Christendom with its thousands of variants! Open discussion is often a (dubious) reason for exclusion.

The Source

All Christian churches, of course, pay at least lip service to the authority of Scripture. The Christian Bible (Old and New Testaments) is supposedly the source of their teaching, though all—notably the Roman Catholic Church—add non-Biblical and often contradictory ‘traditions’.

Believe in ‘Scripture alone’ and you may well be pigeon-holed as ‘fundamentalist’. The Sabbatarian churches would be so labelled—largely because of their Sabbath belief. (The observance of Sunday is nowhere mentioned in the Bible.)

Because Christendom at large rejects this clear Bible teaching, there’s a tendency in some groups to class Sunday-keepers as ‘pagan’. There is no doubt that Sunday, Christmas, Lent, Easter *etc* are indeed from pre-Judaeo-Christian religions—and therefore non-Biblical, and not to be observed by Bible believers. Yet we all know such believers who are ‘the salt of the earth’, who believe in Jesus, who apply to their lives the great principles of Christian living. Are they ‘doomed to ‘hell-fire’?

[Biblically, only those who ultimately are judged by Jesus as incorrigibly wicked; will face that

fate.]

Identity Crisis

A key to being recognized by God as one of His children is expressed by the apostle Paul: ‘... *You are no longer ruled by your desires, but by God's Spirit, who lives in you. People who don't have the Spirit of Christ in them don't belong to him*’ (Romans 8:9 CEV). The apostle Peter tells us how we receive the Spirit: ‘...*Turn back to God! Be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, so that your sins will be forgiven. Then you will be given the Holy Spirit*’ (Acts 2:42 CEV).

There are clear indicators in the believer as to the indwelling presence of God's Spirit. God, through His Spirit, inspired His Word (II Peter 1:21) - the Spirit's ‘sword’ (Ephesians 6:17). Always, the indwelling Spirit will guide the believer to that Word, the Christian Scriptures. It's a ‘two-edged sword’ that cuts deeply into our psyche, indicating how we should behave, directing our thoughts towards Christ-like action: ‘...*What God has said isn't only alive and active! It is sharper than any double-edged sword. His word can cut through our spirits and souls and through our joints and marrow, until it discovers the desires and thoughts of our hearts*’ (Hebrews 4:12 CEV).

It's by that Word that we discern truth from fiction in our beliefs. As wrote the Psalmist: ‘...*Your word have I laid up in mine heart, that I might not sin against you*’ (Psalm 119:11).

True believers, imbued by the Spirit, will willingly submit to God's revealed way: ‘...*the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to them that obey him*’ (Acts 5:32). None of us, of course, perfectly follows God's will, however much we try!

Our beliefs and practices, then, must reflect the true Source—God's Word. We ought to be able to evidence them from the Scriptures. As wrote Peter: ‘...*and be ready always for defence to every one who is asking of you an account concerning the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear*’ (I Peter 3:15) YLT). And Paul, to Timo-

Request the article
Should You Be Baptized?

thy: ‘...*from infancy you have known the sacred writings which are able to make you wise to obtain salvation through faith in Christ Jesus*’ (II Timothy 3:15 Weymouth).

What, then, of those in Christendom who—no matter that they avidly read their Bible—yet fail to comprehend and apply many important Bible's teachings?

An analogy may be with ancient Israel. They worshipped the LORD joyfully, eagerly attending Temple services and thrilled to hear the Scriptures expounded—and on the holy convocations (eg Nehemiah 8). Yet they didn't have the indwelling Spirit (John 7:39) But the Spirit, through the ministered Word, positively influenced the worshippers.

Mixed-up Faith

A further analogy. The strangers transported into the Land of Israel (after the northern Israelites

were exiled—8th century BC—by the Assyrians) imported their own gods (II Kings 17:24-34). This they merged with the distorted version of the true worship of YHVH—a version taught by one of the renegade priests of the House of Israel (v.28): ‘...*They feared the LORD, and served their own gods, after the manner of the nations whom they carried away from thence*’.

God, however, had warned: ‘...*do not inquire after their gods, saying, How do these nations serve their gods? even so will I do likewise. You shall not do so unto the LORD your God*’ (Deuteronomy 12:29-30)

This religious syncretism is also a mark of modern Christendom. The worship of Jesus has been merged with a mix of non-Biblical practices and doctrines, so that most believers ‘...*fear the LORD, and serve their own gods*’.

How? By a range of false teachings—the ‘immortal soul’ concept and the errors dependent on it (heavenly reward, hell, purgatory *etc*), the Trinity. By the addition of unauthorized (by God) practices—Sunday, Christmas, Easter *etc*. Such are derived directly from non-Biblical religions. And by rejection of the divine Law and the substitution of ‘cheap grace’.

The good news of God's Kingdom—what it is, how to be a part of it—has been proclaimed widely in our generation. The divine written Word has been spread through most nations, the Christian Bible translated into almost five hundred *cont'd p.8*

Is Being Good—enough?

Are you more righteous than the Pharisees?

There are innumerable ‘good’ people in our world: helpful neighbours, carers, volunteers, charity workers, loving families. The list is almost endless. Yet Paul, quoting the Old Testament, says: ‘...there is none that does good, not even one’ (Romans 3:12). Indeed Jesus himself said so (eg Matthew 19:17). Neither Spirit-filled Christian nor non-Christian, is able to perfectly reflect the will of our Creator, can match the perfect life of Christ.

Test yourself! Have you ever needlessly been angry with anyone (Matthew 5:22)? Or secretly desired a woman—or man (v.8)? Have you broken promises (v.33)? Ever detested someone who crosses you (v.44)? In our frail human state it’s impossible to consistently live up to these standards set by Jesus. Yet call someone ‘worthless’ said Jesus, and you are ‘...in danger of hell fire (Gk *gehenna*)’ (v.22).

You will be unique in history if, no matter how long you have been a Christian, you have not at times succumbed to many—or all—of these character failures.

What Jesus is portraying here in Matthew 5 is the impossibility for any of us in our humanity—even with God’s indwelling Spirit—to be truly ‘good’ as God is good. (Though that doesn’t mean we should stop trying!)

Recall Jesus’ account of the two worshippers in the Temple: ‘...*The Pharisee stood over by himself and prayed, "God, I thank you that I am not greedy, dishonest, and unfaithful in marriage like other people. And I am really glad that I am not like that tax collector over there"*’ (Luke 18:11 CEV). A Pharisee, mind you—a religious leader. Haven’t we all encountered that attitude—maybe even in ourselves? Even the apostle Paul, a man with God’s Spirit if ever there was, had to admit: ‘...*I don’t do what I know is right. I do the things I hate*’ (Romans 7:15 CEV). Sound familiar?

Those sinful reactions, in fact, stem from our inborn nature. Jesus again: ‘... *What comes from your heart is what makes you unclean. Out of your heart come evil thoughts, vulgar deeds, stealing, murder, unfaithfulness in marriage, greed, meanness, deceit, indecency, envy, insults, pride, and foolishness. All of these come from your heart, and they are what make you unfit to worship God*’ (Mark 7:21-23 CEV). That’s why, when we are stripped of all our support systems (comforts, security, food and water, health *etc*) mankind sinks to depraved and violent self-protection.

How then can we escape that ‘hell fire’ judgment Jesus men-

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

tioned?

Good Works

It’s clear from this that none of us by our actions nor by our mental effort alone can be perfect. Salvation by our ‘works’ was the attitude, with individual exceptions, of first century Judaism—and indeed of every faith, then and now. Do what you believe is ‘right’ and your religion’s salvation goal (heaven, positive reincarnation, the Kingdom *etc*) will be achieved. Do ‘good works’, minutely observe the divine Law, faithfully tithe, meticulously observe Sabbath or Sunday and holy days, eat only the ‘clean’ foods and you will be ‘saved’.

Many good folk—Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim—strive for their ‘Nirvana’. And we *should* faithfully love God and love neighbour. We *should* worship God as it pleases Him. We *should* share our resources. We *should* ‘keep the Commandments’: ‘... *this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments*’ (John 14:15, I John 5:2,3).

But these are not what ‘saves’! Not our good deeds, however important. Not our religious knowledge. Not our spiritual activities. Wrote the apostle: ‘...*What if I could speak all languages of humans and of angels? If I did not love others, I would be nothing more than a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. What if I could prophesy and understand all secrets and all knowledge? And what if I had faith that moved mountains? I would be nothing, unless I loved others. What if I gave away all that I owned and let myself be burned alive? I would gain* **cont’d p.8**

Will the Church Survive?

It has already lasted nearly two thousand years. But is the church on its last legs?

By 'the church' we refer to the two billion or so (one in three of mankind) who, added to the multitude of their fellow believers now dead, profess the Christian faith.

Millions of these believers are certain that the church as we know it is indeed about to disappear. Almost literally, in a sense, as they are 'raptured' into heaven 'to be with the Lord'.

Others, sceptics, forecast a different end. They see the church as an effete and dying fantasy, nothing more than a man-made religion based on myth. They claim Jesus never existed, casting him into the mythological dustbin.

Jesus, however, said '*...I will build my church*'. Within months of his death there were thousands of believers—men and women who had experienced the momentous events of his very public death in Jerusalem. And his spectacular return from the dead in a spirit body.

Within a few years his church had reached the bounds of the Empire, touching even to the British throne. But will it, even now, burn out?

We ought to listen intently to the words of someone who has survived death! Said Jesus: '*...I*

will build my church, and death itself will not have any power over it' (Matthew 16:18 CEV). Two millennia bear witness to the truth of his words.

Contemporary Lesson

The concept of 'church' has a long history. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, refers to '*...the church [Gk ecclesia] in the wilderness*' (Acts 7:38)—a reference to Israel in her beginning. It has important lessons for us.

The apostle Peter refers to Christians as '*... an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession*' (I Peter 2:9). Just like ancient Israel: '*...you shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation*' (Exodus 19:6), the LORD said.

That was Israel in its inception—full of promise and hope. But she lost her way. Writes Paul: '*...*

What happened to them is a warning to keep us from wanting to do the same evil things. They worshiped idols, just as the Scriptures say, "The people sat down to eat and drink. Then they got up to dance around"... So don't worship idols. Some of those people did shameful things.... Don't do shameful things as they did. And don't try to test Christ, as some of them did ... Don't even grumble... These things happened to them as a warning to us. All this was written in the Scriptures to teach us who live in these last days.'
(I Corinthians 10:6-11 CEV)

Sound familiar? Not many years from Stephen's death as a witness for the true faith the Christian church went the same way. It's history is littered with 'shameful things'—sexual license (Gk *porneia*)—and, believe it, idolatry.

Christian Idolatry

The church succumbed to the idolatrous practices which then passed as religion, 'baptizing' these practices as Christian. Paul, for example, describes Israel's idolatry as '*...The people sat down to eat and drink. Then they got up to dance around*' (v.7). They feasted and made merry! Within a couple of centuries the pagan *Saturnalia* was re-baptized as *Christmas*.

There was, even in those early apostolic days, a wholesale departure from the pure faith of Jesus—just as with God's 'holy nation' Israel centuries before.

So, both Israel and the church failed to '*...contend for the faith once for all delivered to the saints*' (Jude 3), But has God washed His hands of His church—despite all those two billion believers, most led astray by false teaching? Has the church died?

Alive and Well

Well no. Not by any means. Didn't Jesus say his church would never disappear, that death ('*the gates of hell*'; *ie hades, the grave*) wouldn't conquer it? The church Jesus built is alive—if not too visible.

The Father emphasizes his personal sovereignty over His church: '*...No one can come to me*

[Jesus], unless the Father who sent me makes them want to come' (John 6:44 CEV).

'Recruits' to the church are drawn to Jesus by the Father. Those willing to count the cost of discipleship and to commit to it form the essence of 'the church'. They are begotten by God's Spirit, taught and nourished from God's Word—the Christian Bible.

Through the centuries they have fought off heresies, been persecuted and even killed—usually by agents of paganized Christianity. But always there is a remnant to carry forward the torch of the true faith.

Before returning to the Father, Jesus said: *...Go to the people of all nations and make them my disciples. Baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teach them to do everything I have told you. I will be with you always, even until the end of the world.*' (Matthew 28:19-20 CEV).

The true church of God through its various branches marches on. Jesus supporting it, overseeing it '...until the end of the ages'.

It is far from perfect in its understanding, but ready to learn. Its members are far from perfect, though seen so by the Father through the perfection of Jesus our Saviour. **Ω**

*For a flavour of the true teachings of Jesus you are invited to request our **Statement of Beliefs** and the article **Building the Church***

TRUST ME—I'M GOD

How are you coping with the on-going global crises? We're told they will worsen, that it prove to be the 'worst recession' for a century, that we need to tighten our belts—be prepared for years of privation unseen in our lifetime. How will *you* cope?

Our financial system has all but broken down, with fortunes—and indeed meagre nest-eggs—lost. The economy, too, is creaking.

Perhaps we may now get a taste of what most of our world has been experiencing,

End of the World?

The 'prophets of doom' are on the prowl! To my knowledge none of them have a perfect predictive track record, so the LORD said '*don't fear them*'. (Deuteronomy 18:22). That's what is required of a true prophet.

But that doesn't mean one or more won't at some time burst on the scene. God has set a time limit on human incompetence, and when it is expiring He will give plenty of warning—by the 'signs of the times' or by infallible prophets who exercise divine powers.

But is this 'it'? The short answer: '*...no-one knows*'. For we have throughout the last two millennia been through similar times of 'distress among nations'.

That awesome day will come—in God's time and when mankind reaches the end of its tether, and can no longer sustain life (Matthew 24:4-13).

It is for each of us to watch, to be alert, to avoid complacency. And to be spiritually prepared.

Solutions are daily marketed for individuals

(governments don't have a clue); the newspapers are full of them, from financial advice to money-saving tips, for fuel, for fun and for food. And, of course, we should pay attention to those ideas that are appropriate to our own circumstances.

God Cares

There is, however, a sad lack of advice on a major aspect of life—the spiritual. If you profess faith then you have a secret weapon!

Nature cries out that the Creator of all abundantly supplies our needs (Psalm 50:9-10).

For the children of God Jesus makes it clear that our heavenly Father is concerned for our welfare. In response to faith He will supply our needs. Hear him:

I tell you not to worry about your life. Don't worry about having something to eat, drink, or wear. Isn't life more than food or clothing? Look at the birds in the sky! They don't plant or harvest. They don't even store grain in barns. Yet your Father in heaven feeds them. Aren't you worth more than birds? Can worry make you live longer? Why worry about clothes? Look how the wild flowers grow. They don't work hard to make their clothes. But I tell you that Solomon with all his wealth wasn't as well clothed as one of them. God gives such beauty to everything that grows in the fields, even though it is here today and thrown into a fire tomorrow. He will surely do even more for you! Why do you have such little faith? Don't worry and ask yourselves, "Will we have anything to eat? Will we have anything to drink? Will we have any clothes to wear?" Only people who don't know God are always worrying about such things. Your Father in heaven knows that you need all of these

Matthew 6:25-32

The New Testament in the Old

It surely won't escape the notice of even the average reader of the Bible that there's heavy reliance in the New Testament on the Old Testament text. Indeed in round numbers (it varies by translation used) there are some 350 direct quotations, and some 2,300 allusions and verbal parallels—some say nearer 4000. The Old is quoted or alluded to in every New Testament book except Philemon, and II and III John. About ten percent of the text is from the Old Testament.

No surprise, then that Paul tells Timothy: *'...from a babe thou hast known the sacred writings which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. Every scripture inspired of God is also profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction which is in righteousness: that the man of God may be complete, furnished completely unto every good work'* (II Timothy 3:15-17).

We are told in Hebrews: *'...unto us was the gospel preached, as well as unto them' [ie ancient Israel]* (Hebrews 4:2). What message did they receive? What 'gospel' (ie New Testament) teaching is secreted in the Old Testament?

- ***There is but one God, the Creator of the universe, who alone saves***
- ***The promise of a future Deliverer, a Messiah***
- ***The concept of resurrection, physical and spiritual***
- ***The need to shed innocent blood for full forgiveness***
- ***Salvation is by faith and not through works***
- ***True religion is heart religion and not ritual***
- ***The knowledge that salvation includes the people of all nations***
- ***An end to man's inept rule, and the earthly reign of Messiah***
- ***God meets with us at His appointed times***
- ***There is a spirit adversary who seeks to unseat God***

There is, then, a continuity of faith—from Creation to the end of time. As with the first Christian believers the 'Old' Testament is the foundation for our faith. Let's study—and heed—these inspired words of the Creator with the same diligence as in Berea: *'...they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so'* (Acts 17:11)

The *CGOM* 32-lesson **Correspondence Course** is a reference guide for these Old Testament teachings, linking them with those of the New Testament. You are invited to enroll. There is no charge, and no-one will call on you uninvited.

“The New Testament use of the Old Testament is a topic in New

Testament Studies where scholars study why NT authors quoted various OT passages. It

is an important issue within the study of the interpretation of the Bible, especially in the

area of messianic prophecies concerning Jesus. "The fourth edition of the United Bible Societies' Greek Testa-

ment (1993) lists 343 Old Testament quotations in the New Testa-

ment, as well as no fewer than 2,309 allusions and verbal paral-

lels. The books most used are Psalms (79 quotations, 333 allu-

sions), and Isaiah (66 quotations, 348 allu-

sions). In the Book of Revelation, there are no formal quotations at all, but no fewer than 620 allusions." Furthermore,

"the OT is quoted or alluded to in every NT writing except Philemon and 2 and 3 John."

Theopaedia

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6000 Years of Christianity

BIBLE *and* CHURCH

How do you 'use' your Bible in church?

Many believers wouldn't be seen dead in church carrying a Bible. For others, without their Bible—their 'sword'—they would feel naked! Assuming your preacher uses the Bible—how do you interact with it?

In some churches there's a tradition of 'taking notes' of the sermon. Every Scripture reference by the preacher is carefully noted, maybe with appropriate markings in the Bible text. But for many that's the last they see of those particular notes, and over the years filled notebooks are multiplied and go unread. So what's the point?

It's a fact that simply writing something down is a great memory aide—the shopping list, for example! And undoubtedly you will recall more of a sermon if you do so. But what do you write? *Are you listening?*

Church Culture

It's not uncommon for a church to evolve its own 'Bible culture'. It becomes a tradition. The preacher may deliver his message, and it's expected that you sit, open your Bible to the cited text—and passively listen, accepting every word spoken as 'Gospel'. No thought, no analysis, no questioning. You may as well 'check in your brain' at the door. Indeed it's not unusual for an enquiring believer to be ignored or silenced.

Then there's the established 'culture of understanding'.

Every denomination has its established range of doctrines, set in stone. What you read in your Bible is seen through that prism of denominational teaching—right or wrong. Again—no questioning invited.

When we open the Bible—in church or wherever—we also come with our personal pre-set opinions about the text. Another pair of 'dark glasses' to obscure its meaning!

Yet 'church' should be an opportunity to not only listen, but to share your own questions and insights in a peaceful and courteous manner. That way your own misunderstandings can be rectified, and you can more effectively allow the Scriptures to impact your life.

Interactive Church

Unlike church meetings among the first Christians, modern church services are not conducive to dialogue. An elevated pulpit towers over the seated ranks of the faithful. No opportunity for questions there. Just listen and heed! Contrast that with an interactive setting.

STUDY THE WORD
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

Clearly, an interactive church must be of limited size—perhaps around a dozen: twenty max. This encourages participation, giving opportunity for the presented topic of the day to be examined and clarified in the light of the Scriptures, and for each individual to self-apply, and to contribute personal insights.

In the first century, Christians often met in homes. [see our article **The Small Church**]. The informality promoted personal spiritual growth. Notice how Paul 'talked'—Gk *homileo*, to converse—with the brethren in Troas (elsewhere *communed* (eg Luke 24:15). It wasn't a 'sermon' as we know it! Conversation is more than a monologue.

This is the 'church format' promoted by the *Churches of God Outreach Ministries*. We will be pleased to share our experience with any individual or group.

When we open our Bible, then—in church or in private study—it's vital for understanding that we are aware of these hurdles. Don't assume that your view (or the preacher's or your denomination's) is correct, but be open to a course correction.

With Timothy '*...know the holy Scriptures which are able to make you wise to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus*' (II Timothy 3:14-17; for him that meant the *Old Testament*). Or be like Paul's hearers in Beroea who '*...received the word with all readiness of mind, examining the scriptures daily, whether these things were so*' (Acts 17:11). **Ω**

Being Good ...cont'd

nothing, unless I loved others' (I Corinthians 13: 1-3 CEV).

No—there's something else. The missing ingredient, says Paul, is *love* (Gk *agape*). That is an attitude that willingly submits to the divine Law—not the normal human condition. It 'ain't natural', Paul says elsewhere (see *sidebar*: Romans 8). Echoing the words of Jesus— that sin arises from within us—he wrote: ‘*the mind of the flesh is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can it be*’ (Romans 8:7). By reason of being born human we naturally resist the spiritual!

We Need the Spirit

What, then, makes a difference? What can break this chain that binds us?

Our ‘good works’, however important, certainly won't release us. In the true faith—outlined in the Old Testament—from man's beginning they never have. Always it has been by faith working through love (Galatians 5:6).

Love—a deep committed concern (for wife, family, neighbour *etc*). It's not sexual, not just brotherly, love. Like other positive characteristics of the human condition it is a love that reflects the caring concern that God has for us.

All of humanity has the potential to reflect these qualities. They are transient, however, in the ‘natural man’—dependent on external circumstances. Note how love for family can suddenly dissolve in anger or neglect. But with God's Spirit implanted in us they (the

'fruit of the Spirit' Galatians 5:22) are seeds that grow the nature of God in us, including that prime ingredient, love. It's our responsibility to nurture it.

True Goodness

Goodness' in other words, is not

There is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus made me free from the law of sin and of death. For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God, sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: that the ordinance of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the spirit. For they that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the spirit the things of the spirit. For the mind of the flesh is death; but the mind of the spirit is life and peace: because the mind of the flesh is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can it be: and they that are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not for all in the flesh, but in the spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if any man has not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his Romans 8:1-

only what we do—however ‘religious’— but our willing expression of the divine nature that is given us through God's grace.

The perfection of Jesus is what the Father sees in each of His Spirit-begotten children, whatever our failures. Real goodness is the reflection in us of that divine nature. However much we strive for ‘perfection’, our every failure is hidden from the Father by his shed blood—the perfect sacrifice.

Only so may our righteousness ‘...exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees’ (Matthew 5:20). Ω

The Source... cont'd

languages. Yet how many have heeded? How many have made the commitment to follow its teachings? How many are willing to ‘walk the talk’?

Wrote the prophet Jeremiah: ‘...you shall seek me, and find me, when you shall search for me with all your heart’ (ch 29:13). God through His Word calls mankind to faith. Make a start by diligently seeking out truth from the Scriptures. When you find it—make it part of your life. Then the door opens to further understanding. Seek out sound Bible teaching.

It's a journey into the unknown, but firmly rooted in God's revelation to us, the inspired Scriptures. And the end is a productive life for all eternity as one of His sons and daughters. Ω

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MiniStudy**The Unforgivable Sin**

I say unto you, All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the holy Spirit shall not be forgiven unto men' (Matthew 12:31)

Is there something so sinful that God cannot forgive it? What about sexual sin - adultery, homosexuality, fornication? Or murder - can a murderer receive forgiveness? How about a Christian 'backslider'? Christian pastors not infrequently encounter a believer who is convinced he or she cannot be forgiven. Just what is the 'unpardonable sin'?

- All of us - atheists, agnostics, believers - have sinned, for *'...all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God'* (Romans 3:23). Whether or not we believe it *'...sin pays off with death'* (Romans 6:23 CEV). But death doesn't end it, for *'...it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment'* (Hebrews 9:27)
- The Father, however, has provided a way out, through Jesus: *'... So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many'* (Hebrews 9:28), and *'...if we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us'* (I John 1:9). But when we are in a relationship - as sons and daughters - with the Father: *'...he doesn't punish us as our sins deserve.'* (Psalm 103:10-12 CEV). He is *'...The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin'* (Exodus 34:6-7). He delights in mercy (Micah 7:18) The apostle Paul is an example (I Timothy 1:13)
- Forgiveness is available for all - except that *'... if you speak against the Spirit, you can never be forgiven, either in this life or in the life to come'* (Matthew 12:31 CEV). Scary! Such will never be saved, never have opportunity to be a part of the Family of God throughout eternity. They are *'...guilty of an eternal sin'* (Mark 3:29 ASV)
- The Scribes and Pharisees here addressed - they had travelled up from 'headquarters', from Jerusalem, to bait Jesus - were presumptuously and willingly blind to the divine power exercised in Jesus before their eyes. They knew his credentials, as testified by a leading Pharisee, Nicodemus: *'...you are a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that you do, except God be with him'* (John 3:1-2, and see Acts 10:38)
- In this Pharisaical frame of mind there is contempt for God and His Word: *'...the soul that does ought presumptuously... the same reproaches [reviles, blasphemes] the LORD; and that soul shall be cut off from among his people'* (Numbers 15:30). Such have reached the depths of opposition to God and all He is. Jesus 'knew their thoughts' - they were corrupted at heart, evil through and through (Matthew 12:34f). These particular men attributed the work of the Spirit to Satanic forces, claiming *'...He has Beelzebub, and by the prince of the devils casts he out devils'* (Mark 3:22). They claimed that Jesus had *'an unclean spirit'* (v. 30) - that he was possessed of devils. It's a claim Jesus demolished by logical argument. It is indeed 'the unpardonable sin'. Perversely, they attributed the Spirit's activity to Satan (John 8:44)
- Have you ever encountered such individuals? Most unlikely. On occasion Christians have become distraught, assuming that a one-off or a 'besetting sin' means they are guilty of 'the unpardonable sin'. For such there is always a way out, a way forward - repentance
- Once we have the indwelling Spirit the Father continues to work with us - even (especially) when we stray. Until we die there is space for the backslider to repent: *'...Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ'* (Philippians 1:6). Only if you have turned away from a loving Father, rejected His work in your life through the holy Spirit and attributed His work and power to Satan will you be eternally accountable for your presumptuous sin. While you have a flicker of concern as to 'the unpardonable sin' in your life you certainly have hope of restoration to fellowship - you have not sinned without the possibility of forgiveness: *'...if we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness'*. Paul's admonition to Timothy is apt: *'...stir up, re-ignite, the gift of God'* (I Timothy 1:6)

Ω

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