

new **Horizons**

Vol 14 No 1

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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

Who We Are

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

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

To these ends we publish Bible-based literature - eg our bi-monthly Newsletter OUTREACH, NEW HORIZONS magazine, the BIBLE BASICS on-line home study course, and the 32-lesson Study Course. The *Outreach Ministries* also supports a network of independent fellowships and scattered brethren

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

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

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If you would like a copy of our *Statement of Beliefs* please request it from any of the addresses listed

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new

Horizons

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Christianity is under attack by 'militant atheists' who claim Christianity is just another man-made religion. Are they right?

How many atheists inhabit our planet? To judge by Western media coverage you could be persuaded they form a majority! And in the real world? Ten percent? That's six hundred million plus, or about the combined populations of the United States and of Europe.

In reality, true atheists are a tiny, if vocal, minority while the overwhelming majority of humans are, in some form, God-believers.

Around one-third of mankind profess a belief in Jesus Christ, but it is specifically Christianity that inspires the ire of the atheist pen. Scorn is poured on its teachings, on its history, on its origins, on its Scriptures and on individual high-profile Christians such as the Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury. On the other hand there's a grudging admiration for the recorded teachings of Christianity's founder, Jesus.

It must be confessed, however, that many claims of these militant atheists are largely true! If the teachings of Jesus were indeed diligently practised by all mankind then our world would be a

vastly different and far happier place—with no need for atheists!

*[For an insight into how that world might be request our free article **A Message of Hope**]*

Historical Inaccuracy

The seemingly impregnable Roman Empire entered a state of hibernation in the mid-sixth century following calamitous moral and economic decline. The six Roman centuries of 'global warming' (Grapes at 56°N! gave way to climatic cooling—leading to failed crops, starvation, depopulation and widespread disease.

The church had been awarded State support under Constantine,

CHRISTIANITY...

...an 'apology'

and now began to dominate politics. Indeed it became a secular church assuming all the powers of state-hood—including torture.

Under successive Popes the 'universal' church's bloodstained hands inflicted countless well-documented martyrdoms for dissent, and dominated Europe throughout the cold Middle Ages. The misused secular power wielded by the dominant religion, entered a decline, influenced by the availability of the Scriptures in the common languages. It

sparked the Reformation. By the tail end of the eighteenth century twelve hundred years of religious barbarism was suppressed as the 'Enlightenment' (the 'Age of Reason') took hold.

So—not a pretty picture for the 'Christian' church. And far from the kind of church Jesus built!

Christianity Usurped

For what historians fail to note is that the church of God suffered a *coup d'état*—absorbed into the prevailing pagan culture and losing its 'first love'.

Only a remnant of true believers survived the onslaught by pre-Christian beliefs and the fearsome persecutions by the now dominant 'pagan Christianity'. The light of the true Gospel—the message of Jesus—was dimmed. But not extinguished. It survived despite the strenuous effort of the dominant church to eliminate it.

As said Jesus: '*...I will build my church and the gates of hell [Gk hades—the grave] shall not prevail against it*' (Matthew 16:18). [Request the article **The Faith Once Delivered**]

Copy-cat Religion

Is Christianity, then, just another of the multitude of belief systems that infest—and afflict—the planet?

Analysis of mainstream Christian teachings certainly align it with

pre-existing faiths. The concept of the resurrection of a dead god (and in three days), for example, is echoed in other, older, faiths. As is much of Christian symbolism—water baptism, bread and wine, priestly vestments, the cross, the sun. And Christian festival practices mirror ancient ‘pagan’ celebrations: rites of spring, Christmas, saints days (Valentines day, All Saints day *etc*).

Not surprising that Christianity’s opponents have all the ammunition they need!

Unique Faith

Yet Christian apologists claim their faith is unique—indeed the only true faith. The apostle Peter: ‘...*Only Jesus has the power to save! His name is the only one in all the world that can save anyone*’ (Acts 4:12 CEV). How do we resolve this dilemma?

As alluded to earlier, what passes for Christianity for most of the last two thousand years is a travesty of the true teachings of Jesus and the original apostles. But what do we make of Christianity’s similarities to other faiths?

Understand that true Christianity is indeed not a ‘new’ religion. Rather it is a fulfilment of the original faith revealed to Adam! Over the centuries that faith was overlaid by practices dreamed up from the imaginations of godless men and women, often influenced by the spirit world (I Timothy 4:1), and which often reflect the elements of the true revealed faith. The result is ‘mythology’.

Ancient Faith

The concept of sacrifice, for ex-

ample, is God-appointed, but was distorted into human sacrifice—an abhorrence to the Creator. The idea of a suffering Saviour is also revealed religion, rooted in the aftermath of the sin of our first parents (Genesis 3:15) and later incorporated into man-made belief systems. The symbols of ‘bread and wine’ when incorporated in worship is a logical expression of our thankfulness to the Creator for His provision of our material sustenance. And an appropriate symbol of spiritual provision through the body and blood of the Saviour.

Not surprising, then, that such powerful symbols impacted later mythology, and were an element of ancient but deviant religions.

As mankind departed from the Living God they sank into the darkness of their imaginations, spawning the religious confusion that today envelops our world. Only Christianity—but stripped of its pagan practices and non-biblical traditions—expresses the pure faith delivered to mankind by the Creator in the beginning.

In other words, the original faith as revealed by the Creator, was—in the hands of faithless humans—distorted, but retained key elements of the true faith. Contrary to common belief religion did not *evolve* to a ‘higher form’ but, in reality, *degenerated* from its original purity.

Roots of Morality

Unbelievers—and atheists—

claim they don’t need religion to impart moral behaviour. And that’s true. But it, unknowingly to them, supports this concept of the original revealed religion.

Without the ‘Judaean-Christian ethic’—as summarized by the Ten Commandments—the necessity for its behavioural principles (apart from the first four, which identify the one Creator God) would in time become painfully obvious. (If someone kills your child, for example, the need for law would become obvious!)

However, there’s more to it. God, as notes the apostle Paul, ‘...*has made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth*’ (Acts 17:26). That’s confirmed by scientific enquiry. He also at that time created man to function optimally when we walk along a moral pathway—as summarized by those ‘Terrible Ten’.

Paul backs the logic of this: ‘...*when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another*’ (Romans 2:14-15).

Sadly, human sin has obscured such a sensitive conscience, and we are on the slippery slope to oblivion. Unless—unless we return to the true faith, and to Jesus who alone, through his willing sacrifice, can obliterate that sin and its harmful consequences. Ω

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Given that our actions can't earn salvation—what is the role of faith?

John Morton

Faith is the key to salvation! Salvation cannot be bought - nor can it be earned. It comes by faith. Because mankind fell from grace through loss of faith they can only be saved and restored to grace through faith.

Faith is the confidence we have in what we believe. If we believe in God then we must also have confidence to trust Him. That confidence and trust, which is faith, brings us into His grace, or favour, so we can receive eternal life.

Fall from Grace

Man's fall from God's grace occurred in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve were confronted with a false accusation against God and believed the accuser rather than God.

God had told them not to eat from a particular tree because, "... *in the day that thou eat thereof thou shalt surely die*" (Genesis 2:17). But when the serpent said, "... *You shall not surely die*" they believed *him* and through their actions demonstrated a tragic loss of faith in God.

Their loss of faith led them to disobey God's instruction. This put them in the power of the one whom they chose to obey, "*Know you not, that to whom you yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants you are to whom you obey,*" (Romans 6:16). By putting themselves in the power of the

serpent, who is Satan, the righteous (or good) nature with which they had been created became corrupted with Satan's unrighteous (or evil) nature.

The resulting mixture of good and evil prevented them from entering God's Kingdom, "*Know you not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God?*" (I Corinthians 5:9). In that state neither they nor their descendants can inherit eternal life "... *flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; neither does corruption inherit incorruption*" (I Corinthians 15:50).

Their loss of faith in God brought death upon all humanity, "*Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin*" (Romans 5:12). They lacked the faith to believe God and brought suffering, pain, sorrow and death upon billions of people yet to be born (Genesis 3:16-19). God warned that this would happen, but they still disobeyed His instruction. That is why they fell from grace!

Until we are rescued from the power of Satan mankind will remain under the threat of eternal death.

The only way back into God's grace is to believe and trust in God. That is why salvation comes through faith, "*For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God*" (Ephesians 2:8). Salvation

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

Why Faith?

is a result of faith, "Receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls." (I Peter 1:9). It brings us back to the promise of eternal life, "*And this is the promise that he has promised us, even eternal life.*" (I John 2:25). In His mercy and love for those whom He created God has provided this way of escape. It is His gift to mankind. Faith is the key to salvation.

The Way Back to Grace

The only way back to grace is through faith backed up by obedience. Everyone is faced with exactly the same dilemma that Adam and Eve faced - do we put our faith in God, or in Satan. The choice we make is expressed in whom we obey, "*Know you not, that to whom you yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants you are to whom you obey*" (Romans 6:16).

If obedience to God is not forthcoming then nothing has changed - we remain yielded to Satan. God does not want reluctant obedience, or obedience through fear. He wants obedience because the believer has absolute faith, trust and confidence in Him.

Faith is expressed by obedience to God's word, *i.e.* the law. The law of God comprises ten basic commandments that govern human behaviour. They determine how to worship God and treat our fellow man. Obedience to the law does not justify man with God, "... *by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his*

sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin.” (Romans 3:20).

The law is merely the instrument with which to gauge our lives. It is faith that justifies, “...a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.” (Galatians 2:16).

Faith Substantiated by Works

Faith must be substantiated by works, “Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law.” (Romans 3:31). It is established because we express our faith through works of the law.

The law in itself is an expression of the divine nature of God in whose image we are being created, “Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these you might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust” (II Peter 1:4). That divine nature is described as love, “God is love; and he that dwells in love dwells in God, and God in him.” (I John 4:16).

Our faith is expressed by obedience to laws that epitomise the mind of God, “For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous” (I John 5:3). Faith is expressed by love toward God and to fellow man, “Jesus said... Thou shall love the Lord your God with all your

heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:37-40).

The outcome of the law is love, “Now the end of the commandment is charity [love] out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned” (I Timothy 1:5). The Apostle James who was adamant that faith without works is dead, “But will you know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?” (James 2:20), said that his faith was substantiated by works, “... shew me your faith without your works, and I will shew you my faith by my works” (verse 18). He also said that Abraham’s faith was made perfect by his works (James 2:21-11).

By expressing true faith through keeping the law we escape the corruption with which Satan has ensnared mankind, “That... you might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world...” (II Peter 1:4). This brings us into the grace of God and salvation.

The relationship that man originally had with God was damaged by lack of faith which led to disobedience and consequently the fall from grace. We can only be restored to grace and salvation by faith substantiated by works that express the divine nature of the one in whose image we are being created. Faith is the key to that salvation. Ω

according to *cont’d p.4*
One Body ...cont’d from p.6
his sovereign will (Ephesians 4:8). It is for each of us to identify and develop them.

As part of the Body we are called to be at peace (Colossians 3:15) and to be honest and truthful with one another (Ephesians 2:25). Such goes a long way to cementing the unity Jesus desires!

The Head

The apostle adds to his analogy of the church of God as a Body by describing Jesus as its Head. He has total authority over all of creation—and of the church (Ephesians 1: 22-23). As ‘the Head’ he personally oversees the work of his church. It is subject to his authority and Jesus uses it to lovingly correct individual assemblies. (To see this in action read the book of Revelation chapters 2 and 3.)

When a denomination or a congregation or a member is in harmony with his purpose for them they are ‘...filled with the Spirit’ (eg Acts 2:4, 4:8 etc). But where there is division, or false teaching, or party spirit the Spirit isn’t being listened to. Jesus may eventually just move on to perform his purpose by other means, leaving behind an empty shell. Some churches may seem outwardly unchanged but are ‘dead from the neck down’—severed from the Head!

It is for each individual Christian to become, when at all possible, part of a local assembly (Hebrews 10:25), and to exert every effort to contribute to the unity of the whole Body. You and your spiritual gifts are needed so that the Body can function more perfectly. Ω

With our world in a shambles, how do we relate man's suffering to a loving God?

The Christian Scriptures are adamant that '*...God is love*'. Yet when tragedy occurs the response—even by believers—is often *Why does God allow it?*

It's a question wrestled with by both lay person and theologian. And there is no glib answer. We can, however, feel towards a response by careful examination of the Scriptures—and life itself.

The Human Factor

Suffering takes a multitude of forms—material, physical, mental. But in whatever form by definition, *it hurts*, and sometimes it overwhelms us. Best, of course, where possible to avoid it. As said King Solomon: '*...When you see trouble coming, don't be stupid and walk right into it-- be smart and hide*' (Proverbs 22:3 CEV).

That highlights one big reason for our suffering—we do 'walk right into it'. We fail, for example, to kick a destructive addiction, whether nicotine or alcohol or another drug, or food or a sexual addiction. Or we don't learn to control an unruly temper. So we suffer the consequences—perhaps personal injury resulting from a fight. Or facing the hassle of a law suit. In such events we can't pin the blame on God!

But what about those Biblical texts where God appears to be 'inflicting punishment' for sin?

Consequences

The idea of 'sin' is very much on the back-burner in our world. But it is a serious matter, and accounts for much of our suffering.

We were created to function in accordance with basic moral prin-

ciples. And like any piece of technology, to deviate from the basic operating system 'throws a spanner in the works' and disables the machine.

Physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually mankind functions best when we conform to the pattern established by the Creator in the beginning. The essence of our humanity conforms to in-built spiritual principles'

To ignore these principles is defined in the Scriptures as 'sin'. The consequences at all levels of human life (personal, national, global) can be catastrophic—it causes *suffering*.

On a *personal* level abuse of basic health laws—diet, cleanliness, hygiene, substance abuse, exercise, emotions—or simply carelessness—too often results in suffering and even death.

A *nation's* leadership intervenes illegally and unnecessarily in the affairs of another nation perhaps based on lying testimony. There's a consequence—needless deaths, unnecessary destruction, economic ruin.

Globally, exploitation of natural resources coupled with greed contributes in part to pollution,

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unsigned articles are by the Editor

Why Suffering?

desertification, a loss of water resources *etc* and their consequences. We could also cite the universal greed that has led us to the brink of global economic depression. (Anyway, why do they need all that money!)

Self-inflicted

The suffering that results from our sin is its natural and inevitable consequence. God doesn't inflict it! He does, however, reserve the right to postpone, moderate or withhold the consequential penalty.

Ancient Israel is an example of postponement. Up to the neck in sinful practices they ignored repeated warnings from God's appointed prophets. The inevitable consequence was delayed to allow time for change. That didn't happen—and invasion and exile followed. Suffering.

Back in Noah's day mankind had descended into irreligion and violence: '*...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*'. Worldwide destruction was inevitable. But God postponed it for over a century (Genesis 6:3).

The Creator may also, out of His mercy and compassion for His creation, moderate the effects of our sin. Ezra pondered Israel's tribulations resulting from their sin: '*... after all that is come upon us for our evil deeds, and for our great trespass, seeing that you our God has punished us less than our iniquities deserve, and has given us such deliverance as this*' (Ezra 9:13).

Sin upon Sin

What, however, about 'undeserved' suffering—when it is *cont'd p.8*

‘All one body we...’ works’: ‘... *It is useless for you to worship me, when you teach rules made up by humans. You disobey God's commands in order to obey what humans have taught. You are good at rejecting God's commands so that you can follow your own teachings!*’ (Mark 7:7-9 *CEBodyV*)

This popular hymn invites the charge of hypocrisy. Just what is ‘the Body’?

The apostle Paul—alone in the New Testament—introduces us to the concept that the church of God is ‘a body’. It is a logical and useful analogy, though the idea of *unity* may raise eyebrows!

In essence the body functions as a unit—one, but with many members. All the body parts have specific functions and contribute to the well-being of the whole. It is, in theory, an apt analogy.

Membership

The church is composed of many individual members, each designated as a part of ‘the Body of Christ’. Wrote Paul: ‘...*As for you, you are the body of Christ, and individually you are members of it*’ (I Corinthians 12:27). He, Jesus, is the Head of the Body (Ephesians 5:23), and assigns spiritual gifts (functions) to each member.

A key to ‘membership’ of the Body is our personal relationship with Christ—a relationship entered into through baptism: ‘...*by one Spirit we are all baptized into one body*’ (I Corinthians 12:13). Another is belief in Jesus as the one sent by God as our Saviour. As with Abraham, ‘...*if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead*’ (Romans 4:24) our belief, our faith, our trust is ‘...*counted for righteousness*’.

That, of course, is not an *empty* belief. For Abraham ‘...*obeyed my voice, and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws*’ (Genesis 26:5). Jesus also warned of a ‘faith without

works’: ‘... *It is useless for you to worship me, when you teach rules made up by humans. You disobey God's commands in order to obey what humans have taught. You are good at rejecting God's commands so that you can follow your own teachings!*’ (Mark 7:7-9 *CEBodyV*)

It’s a warning no professing Christian should ignore!

One Body

Note also that there is *but one* Body. Despite obvious divisions God sees His church as ‘one’. It is a unified spiritual entity, despite all that the members do to it. Divisions are a result of what Paul labels as ‘...*carnal*’ (I Corinthians 3:1-9).

[In New Testament parlance *all* brethren, *including the leadership*, are ‘members’ of the Body.]

In the beginning the church of God was unified—but as a spiritual organism. There were, as there is today, no ‘denominations’ but each congregation was independent, answering directly to the Head, Jesus, but co-operating willingly with other assemblies.

Human nature inevitably intervened. Brothers in Christ, even in a single congregation, allied themselves with their chosen leader. Leaders vied for superiority and to gain a personal following. They bickered over points of doctrine—usually minor and of no consequence. And some were, frankly, heretical. *It was just like the Church of God today!*

Unity in Diversity

As the Gospel spread throughout the world, congregations were established when the converted sought fellowship with like-minded brethren. These assemblies multiplied when, for exam-

ple, individuals—Jewish and Gentile converts—returned home from the Jerusalem festivals. One such was the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:27-39). Separate congregations, but part of the ‘one body’, a single spiritual organism.

It should be noted that a local congregation includes not only members of the Body but also ‘seekers’—those genuinely drawn to Jesus by what they hear preached but not yet fully committed and baptized. It may also include secret heretics and disruptive hangers-on! *See*, for example, I Corinthians 14:23-24. There is no room for ‘closed—*ie* exclusive—congregations’.

Unity in Diversity

While a healthy body functions as a unity there are, as Paul points out (I Corinthians 12:20-27), a variety of functions: ‘...*God put our bodies together in such a way that even the parts that seem the least important are valuable. He did this to make all parts of the body work together smoothly, with each part caring about the others. If one part of our body hurts, we hurt all over. If one part of our body is honored, the whole body will be happy. Together you are the body of Christ. Each one of you is part of his body*’

[So, too, the spiritual Body. When a member ‘hurts’ the pain is—*should be!*—shared by and with the whole congregation.]

Different Functions

Each individual drawn to Jesus by the Father (John 6:44) is endowed with spiritual gifts enabling a variety of functions on behalf of Jesus. None are without significance, not all are high profile—but all are essential for his service. We are all inter-connected.

A wide variety of spiritual gifts is listed in the Scriptures, imparted

The following is an outline attempt to reconcile the varied strands of debate on this vital matter

The *evolution v. creationism* debate continues. Too often heat rather than light dominates the argument—on both sides—but it should not affect our relationship with our Creator.

By definition, believers accept the existence of God (Hebrew 11:6). For Christians, the process of creation comes down to how we interpret the Scriptural account. *But the debate doesn't define who is a Christian.* (Non-believers enter the debate to disprove God's existence, to disparage Christianity; for them, formation of the material universe out of nothing is accepted on faith.)

One strand of argument implies that to disbelieve evolutionary theory you must throw out the concept of the Christian Bible as the inspired Word of God. If it is proved that God didn't create in six literal days then who can trust the rest of Scripture? Is the Bible just another hoax? Is it mere poetry? Just primitive ignorance? Or, do we simply misinterpret it?

Indeed there is room for discussion on all sides of the argument. Modern research has ripped holes in some aspects of evolutionary theory. And there seems little doubt that creationists have much yet to explain.

'...In Six Days'

It has been acknowledged that the Bible 'order of creation events' in Genesis chapter one is a remarkable fit with scientific investigation. The challenge is to explain the 'six days' of the creation account. Were they six literal 24-hr days? Was each 'day' a year or a thousand years long—symbols used elsewhere in the Scriptures? Were they *eras* of indeterminate length? All have been proposed.

It can be assumed that God has the power and resources to do as He pleases (*cp* Nehemiah 9:6, Psalm 33:6). We must therefore admit that each day *could* well be literally twenty-four hours and creation complete in a literal week, and all elements of creation formed some six thousand years ago in accord with the received chronology.

But was creation done and dusted in

a *literal* week? What if God did indeed perform each stated daily work (itemized in Genesis chapter one) in one twenty-four hour day. But what if each creation day were followed by an undisclosed period of development before the next step of creation on the next creative day?

It is only assumption that all six creation days formed a literal week. It is not unreasonable that our week—which has no relationship to sun or moon—*symbolizes* those six creation days. The *seventh day* is not recorded to have ended yet, and symbolizes the *eternal* divine rest. The week-long *Tabernacles*, for example, symbolizes a long time period.

It should be noted that—Genesis 1:1—the Bible account begins with an existing Universe, created '*...in the beginning*'. It was then in a chaotic state—*tohu* and *bohu* (v.2)—the ultimate configuration of which is not yet complete. (the universe continues to expand.) It was not destined to remain chaotic, but to be inhabited (Isaiah 45:18). The remainder of the chapter in Genesis explains the process.

God's Decrees

Genesis one lists a number of decrees by the Creator: '*...let there be...*' *etc.* Because the Creator decreed an action, however, doesn't necessarily mean it all took place in that instant. The Universe, for example, is still 'evolving'.

In the same way that we can advance-programme an activity (*eg* a TV recording, or a night light), so the Creator can decree an activity to take place when His specified conditions are ready—as, *for example* I Timothy 2:6, Ephesians 1:4

Take, for example, *day three*. (Genesis 1:9-13). The planet had

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The Evolution Debate

until now been enveloped in water. Now God issues the decree that the waters should recede. The process isn't described but may have included huge earthquakes, volcanic action, mountain-building *etc.* And may have lasted millions of years.

Then at a suitable moment (before the *fourth* creation day) the rest of the decree (v.11) is enacted—creating vegetation. Ages pass by, as the newly created DNA diversifies in accordance with in-built natural law as designed by the Creator.

So also for *day five*—when God created the templates for marine and aerial life, each '*...after its kind*'—which would then diversify prolifically through succeeding ages. And continues to do so.

Mankind

Day six was special. God created the DNA templates for land animals each reproducing '*...after its kind*' (*ie*, each species was designed to remain separate, not evolve from one species to another). The process was replicated, the animals reproducing and diversifying, and some species becoming extinct as time rolled by.

Then comes the climax and purpose of creation—the pinnacle of all creation, mankind. And created at God's pre-determined, pre-programmed, time. The LORD created man and woman from earth's elements—created perfect in their beginning—as a unique species, endowing them with a unique higher spirit capable of communicating with and forming a relationship with Himself.

All the templates for living creatures (including humanity) were in their beginning perfectly equipped with all the necessary DNA, and with the potential for diversity (within each kind). There was also the potential for degeneracy—the consequence of broken natural law.

'Cave-men', for example, were not a primitive form of *homo sapiens* but contemporaries of the patriarch Job (*ch* 30:1-8)! There were, too, degenerative genetic abnormalities— (Genesis 6:4). Ω

Suffering ...cont'd

not the fault of the one suffering? A child dies in childbirth, leaving a distraught family. Or the innocent victim of a crime or an accident. Or a populace enslaved by a tyrant. Why such suffering?

The effect of sin is cumulative. Sin brought early death to Adam, and the record shows moral decline over the following fifteen hundred years as sin piled upon sin. Writes the apostle Paul: '*...as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned*' (Romans 5:12). The ultimate consequence of our sin—death—is experienced by all, '*...for that all have sinned*'.

The habit of sin became ingrained in mankind and as Paul also noted, '*...evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived*' (II Timothy 3:13).

Time and Chance

Then there's '*wrong time, wrong place*'. Arrive at *Point A* ten seconds later or earlier and you may

have avoided injury. King Solomon writes '*... I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happens to them all*' (Ecclesiastes 9:11).

The increasingly complex technological world we inhabit also brings its suffering through misuse or accident. Indeed Jesus predicted intense suffering in the 'last days'—so intense as to annihilate (unless God intervenes—which He will) all of mankind.

Spirit World

A further element in human suffering is the direct intervention of man's arch enemy—Satan and his demonic forces. A prime example is his effect on Job—'*the greatest of all the men of the east*' in his generation (Job 1:3). He had a close family, had amassed great wealth, was righteous and was highly respected. But Satan was on his case, and inflicted on him terrible suffering (*cp* I Peter 5:8). God permitted it (Satan needs His

leave to attack the righteous) for Job while righteous yet had character flaws. God used his suffering to correct them, having in mind Job's future role in the His Kingdom.

The suffering experienced by the people of God through all such (*see* Romans 8:28) means reflect this divine purpose for them. As His children He uses our inevitable suffering as partakers in a fallen world as a form of correction—setting us on the right course.

Note this in the book of Hebrews: '*...Be patient when you are being corrected! This is how God treats his children. Don't all parents correct their children? God corrects all of his children, and if he doesn't correct you, then you don't really belong to him*' (*ch* 12:7-8 CEV).

God, then, is not responsible for man's suffering. *We* are. Christians are not exempt, but can be assured that a loving Father carefully oversees our afflictions for our eternal good. **Ω**

2010

The incoming year is set to be a tough one for most of us. The reckless over-spend by banks aided and abetted by the general public's debt burden and Government incompetence has generated a serious economic crisis that is likely to take many years to abate. Add in the worldwide hysteria over climate change and the drain on the world's purse in a vain attempt to correct it.

Such conditions are not unique to the twenty-first century, of course—though our perilous state is worsened by political instability, water shortage, population increase and the presence of nuclear weapons—*real* WMDs!

Jesus, however, did warn of a cluster of such dangers in the years preceding his return. Christians need not fear. Whatever the outcome of the present crisis (it may pass) we are confident that the times are in God's hands—as are our lives. Let's use 2010 in His service.

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MiniStudy**Religion: myth and reality*****'...in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men' (Mark 7:7)***

There are two world-views: one assumes there's no God, the other that there is a God. For the former, all religion is a figment of human imagination, our attempt to explain life. For the believers - again two camps. For some, man has evolved ways and means to contact and please God. Others recognize that God has determined how He should be approached, and all deviations from that original faith are human distortion. How, then, did 'religion' begin?

- Uniquely among the major faiths, at the heart of Christianity is the claim to represent the one and only way to God the Father. Said Jesus: *'...no-one comes to the Father but through me'* (John 14:6). And Peter: *'...Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved'* (Acts 4:12). Exclusive! Jesus, Christians claim, is the sole channel that leads to God. The superficial Christian observer, however, may focus on the glaring similarities between his belief system and that of other faith systems - Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, Mithraism. The circumstances and sayings of the god (or gods) are often seen to parallel the life and teachings of Jesus
- Perhaps Judaism and Islam are readily explicable, since both have roots in the Bible. *Judaism*, for all its additions to the Old Testament text through oral tradition better reflects the original true faith. *Islam*, because of its 'moon-god' antecedents, includes elements foreign to the Scriptures though recognizing Jesus as a 'prophet' and even as a Messiah. But what of the *other major faiths*? Kersey Graves (*d.*1883), for example, details many similarities between Krishna and Jesus - though researchers have discarded many of them
- From the perspective of the Christian Scriptures, the Father through the Word created the material universe, setting man as the pinnacle of His creation. Our first parents initially had face-to-face contact with the Creator, YHVH, carrying out their appointed function and worshipping Him through lives dedicated to Him. He taught them the way of life - later incorporated in Israel's legal system - which perfectly reflected their physical, mental and spiritual nature. That intimate contact ended because of their sin, but JHVH provided a way to maintain contact - the beginning of true 'religion'. It was maintained through the millennia by individuals such as Abraham and the prophets in face of worldwide apostasy (Genesis 26:5)
- Mankind retained knowledge of the Creation event and its sequence. But the reality became distorted, the revealed way of life was abandoned and man descended - into ignorance. We should know better, for: *'... the invisible things of him since the creation of the world are clearly seen, being perceived through the things that are made, even his everlasting power and divinity; that they may be without excuse'* (v.20).
- Literary history spans some six thousand years and the Old Testament includes some of the earliest written historical records (*eg* Genesis 5:1) and 'wisdom literature' (*eg* incorporated in Proverbs). These records and sage sayings were also incorporated into emerging religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism. And, of course form the backdrop to the teachings of Jesus
- As the years rolled by *'...they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served the creature [what was created] rather than the Creator'* (Romans 12:25). Bizarre religious practices were conceived, practices based on the primitive revealed truths. Modern Christianity has itself - contrary to Scripture - absorbed much of this distorted version of the divine revelation, especially from Mithraism from which, as an example, were taken Sunday worship, 'communion', Christmas, sun symbolism
- The true account of creation (Genesis 1:1) became wrapped in weird myth. The promise of a Deliverer (Genesis 3:15) was relayed through generations of confused ignorance. Powerful rulers arose (Genesis 10:8 *ff*), were deified and were worshipped by their cowed subjects. Divine ordinances (*eg* animal sacrifice - *ch* 3:21) were debased (*eg* human sacrifice). They *'...changed the glory of the incorruptible God for the likeness of an image of corruptible man, and of birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things'* (Romans 1:23)
- The modern supermarket of religions was formed from the original material but woven into sometimes barely recognizable patterns. It's time we returned to the original faith as magnified by Jesus Ω

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