

new Horizons

Vol 15 No 6

November/December 2011

addressing the important issues for today and tomorrow



inside...

CGOM in Perspective

Authority in the Church?

Do you Just Pay and Pray?

Why Evangelize?

Who are the Clergy?

Jesus Birth: fact and fiction

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 e-mail Newsletter OUTREACH, the 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

It is distributed free on request, being a co-operative 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.

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

Churches of God Outreach Ministries
P O Box 54621
Tulsa, OK 74155-0621
USA
e-mail: information@cgom.org
1-800-611-8080
Editor: James McBride
e-mail: coguk@aol.com

The Churches of God, UK
PO Box 2525
LINCOLN LN5 7PF United Kingdom
Regd Charity No 283358
e-mail: coguk@aol.com

The Churches of God Outreach Ministries
PO Box 476 Don Mills Station
Don Mills Ontario M3C 2T4 Canada
www.canadianchurchofgod.com

or from:

Tulsa, OK 2011

New Horizons is distributed without charge, and is financed by the gifts of associates and friends of the *Churches of God Outreach Ministries*. Readers are invited to obtain a free subscription by writing to any of the addresses listed. You are under no obligations, and no-one will call uninvited

new Horizons

Issue No 90

November/December 2011

When our habitual life patterns change - whether imposed or self-imposed - it can take years to adjust. For those of us in the Churches of God Outreach Ministries, those changes began some fifteen years ago. Since then we have 'evolved' - and matured. It may be helpful - and encouraging - for us to review our current position in the Church of God world. What makes us different? What challenges face us?

It seems natural that when differences arise within a church the 'obvious' course is to 'start a new church'. Hence we have a religious supermarket of competing and conflicting churches within 'Christianity'. In the restricted world of the churches of God a number of larger denominational churches have resulted. That's not the approach we determined for the *Outreach Ministries*.

Careful study of the Scriptures led us to a different perspective. It became clear that the New Testament church was not a monolithic organization, 'ruled from the top down'. The true church of God is made up of all, wherever they are, in whom dwells the Spirit of God. The visible church, *ie* the faithful who bodily associate together, also includes unbelievers, 'learners' - but also its complement of heretics!

Early Church Blue-print

In the mid-first century, brethren met together to worship, fellowship, ex-

ercise spiritual gifts, encourage one another, instruct and be instructed, and to plan and execute evangelism. These purposes were enhanced because they met face-to-face in smaller groups - in 'home churches'. Each was autonomous but in harmonious fellowship with other such assemblies. (This harmony seems not to have outlived the first century! *A warning to us!* Only in post-apostolic times was a hierarchical structure introduced, modelled on the secular Roman state.) And each home fellowship, to a greater or lesser degree, was in voluntary submission to mature external guidance - initially by the inspired apostles, later by men schooled by the apostles.

This is the pattern adopted by the *Outreach Ministries*. Each gathering of brethren of whatever size (and indeed each individual Christian) is answerable directly to the Head - to Jesus Christ. Answerable to him for our ethical behaviour. Answerable for what we believe. Answerable for how we deal with 'the great commission'. On these we are daily 'weighed in the balance' - an awesome responsibility. But it can be lonely out there! The 'Letters to the Seven Churches' are an example of failure to communicate. Each cluster of fellowships in a city developed its peculiar doctrinal aberration, while being subject to decay through general worldliness. Jesus told them to tighten up - or lose their status as part of the Body.

The pattern adopted by *CGOM* is for these individual fellowships to voluntarily work together through a non-

coercive but supportive association. It's the principle that 'the whole is greater than its parts'. By combining our resources - spiritual gifts, human talent and financial - we can in combination accomplish more than can any single fellowship.

An example was our ad in *USA Today* following the September 11 atrocity, and the related special issue of *Fountain of Life*. Another is the distribution of our outreach magazine *New Horizons* and our other literature. Another is making available combined fellowships and festival sites. Such projects are costly, and are made possible only by supportive joint-funding by the brethren.

To this end, any project requiring substantial financial support is costed and submitted to the associated fellowships and supporting individuals. Those who wish to get behind the project decide locally how they can support it. This may be financially or in other ways appropriate to it (*eg* distribution of leaflets). In this way, local fellowships and even individual brethren can have worldwide impact!

Because each fellowship associated with *CGOM* is independent in its organization, there is no need for an expensive bureaucratic 'overlord' imposing a host of regulations, salary scales, directives *etc*. Extensive funding for 'headquarters' buildings and staff are unnecessary. Resources are thus channelled effectively and economically and without wastage. Matters of church discipline or doctrinal dispute are a local concern - though the availability of wise counsel from mature leadership elsewhere is always on tap through the association. The *Outreach Ministries* does not

CGOM in Perspective

intervene in the internal affairs of individuals or local fellowships. It is solely a service organization the purpose of which is to be supportive of all the brethren.

Oversight

As with any joint effort, a measure of oversight is essential. In *CGOM* this is achieved through several volunteer Committees (All members have secular jobs or are retired) appointed through our annual Conference. They are responsible for *Financial oversight, Outreach, Member Services, Marketing and Publishing*. Appointments are unpaid, with remuneration for part-time accounting and for Conference-approved expenses (*eg* visits in support of local assemblies or scattered individuals.) Accounts are published annually in our *Newsletter*. Delegates to Conference are representatives appointed by each local fellowship (usually elders or stewards). The Conference is open to any brethren who wish to attend and con-

tribute ideas.

Following each Conference, Committee Chairs keep in regular touch through tele-conferences, e-mail, phone *etc*. This ensures Conference decisions are implemented and any problems sorted.

Common Beliefs

The basic criteria for association with *CGOM* are simple. So we can pull together, it's important that we all 'sing from the same hymn-sheet', and we thus have a *Statement of Beliefs* which we believe reflects foundational Bible teachings. Few brethren or churches of God will find objections to it! It is a body of beliefs that have been hammered out over many decades. All brethren (individuals or fellowships) who can live with this *Statement* are warmly welcomed within *CGOM*.

There are no 'inspired apostles' today

- but we do have the Scriptures. Culture, language, geography, the filter of translation and the passage of time have, of course, obscured the clarity of some aspects of Bible teaching. But Christian tolerance, love for God and for our Saviour and for our brethren - and our passionate commitment to outreach - enable the various fellowships to work together on agreed projects despite minor disagreements.

You Are Invited!

On the principle that 'a three-fold cord is not quickly broken', *CGOM* openly invites individual brethren and any local assembly to consider association with us. As more brethren work together - without bureaucratic entanglements - much more can be accomplished in the Saviour's service. The function of the church of God is to proclaim worldwide and in every corner God's wonderful good news of salvation through Jesus, and to spiritually nourish the brethren.

CGOM—not a 'church'

Unusually though not uniquely, the *Churches of God Outreach Ministries* (*CGOM*) is not 'a church'. That is, we are not a single denomination with a leadership which gives direction to any number of subsidiary local affiliated churches.

In contrast, *CGOM* is an 'umbrella' for any number of like-minded independent assemblies who would like to extend their outreach through co-operation with other independent assemblies. To this end we support through the means of literature, speakers, festival organization, home visits where feasible *etc*.

CGOM, for example, does not dictate doctrine. There is a basic *Statement of Beliefs* which is voluntarily agreed to by associating assemblies. Nor is there any interference in any aspect of the day-to-day operation of the assemblies. They are quite independent, though encouraged to interact with other assemblies.

Joint outreach activity by any means—*eg* through *New Horizons* magazine, out-

reach projects, overseas mission—is financed by voluntary donations from assemblies (agreed by the local brethren) and from supporting individuals.

Local leadership is appointed locally, through Spirit-led elders. They are of the brethren and not parachuted in' from a distant headquarters, and are responsible only to Jesus Christ and to their congregation.

A series of *Guidelines* is available with suggestions for the day-to-day work of the assembly. They cover such topics as baptism, finance, ethics, leader appointment, funerals *etc*. The *Guidelines* may be viewed and downloaded from the *CGOM* website: www.cgom.org

The *Churches of God UK* shares the same beliefs and structure, and is the British/European arm of the *Outreach Ministries*.

Independent fellowships of whatever size, and individuals, are welcome, and are invited to associate Ω

Everyone who responds to the divine call joins an army in which he or she has a vital combative role. It's the intention of *CGOM* to thoroughly equip the brethren for that purpose. A library of support material on leadership and personal development is available and being further developed. Also at your service is the *CGOM* web site with articles addressing those questions often on the mind of those puzzled by the Scriptures—and by life itself.

If you are 'out there' on your own ('scattered') *CGOM* wants to support you on your spiritual journey. If you are a small fellowship - of two or three or a dozen, vibrant or struggling - we can together accomplish much. Nor do we turn aside larger fellowship who will be able to contribute established expertise and talented brethren. Ω

visit our web site at
www.cgom.org

In today's world 'authority' is despised. Is there a place for it in the church of God?

Most 'mainstream' churches are light on the exercise of authority. The big exception, of course, is the Church of Rome - which has a strict hierarchical structure headed by the Pope, and which exerts powerful influence over its adherents - and indeed over secular governments. Some consider such a structure to be worth emulation. What was the position among the first Christians?

All Christians recognize Jesus Christ as the supreme authority in the church. He said '*...I will build my church, and death itself will not have any power over it*' (Matthew 16:18 CEV). Jesus - one part of the God Family - was sent by the Father to perfectly reflect His will among men. He is '*the Apostle and High Priest of our confession*' (Hebrews 3:1). As part of the process he appointed the apostles as the repository of his teaching, and commissioned them to spread that teaching worldwide. During their lifetime they had, in full, his authority. They guarded the treasure-house of his true teaching, and with their passing nothing different was to be added: '*...contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered unto the saints*' (Jude 3).

The apostle Paul wrote to the evangelist Timothy: '*...the things which thou hast heard from me among many witnesses, the same commit you to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also*' (II Timothy 2:2). No longer (after the death of the apostles and to this day) were there fully inspired - and infallible - men to whom recourse could be made on matters of doctrine and church practice. Those who followed were to look to the recorded words of Jesus and the writers of the New Testament for guidance, and to faithfully teach them.

The apostles died, the last, John,

Is there Authority in the Church?

probably around 90AD. Since the resurrection of Jesus they had fought the rising tide of false teachings that swirled around the churches. It's a battle that faithful believers have fought through the intervening centuries - sometimes with success, sometimes not.

At times men have arisen who, with varying success, have - in part - restored the apostolic teachings. But the passage of time, the changes of culture and of language, archaeological and historical discovery block a crystal clear understanding or shed new light. The apostle Peter tells us that full understanding awaits the return of Jesus '*...whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began*' (Acts 3:21). In the meantime let's be dogmatic only where the Bible is crystal clear!

Today, our understanding of the Scriptures can never be 'set in stone' - there's always room for some fine tuning! We must, in all humility, acknowledge that we 'don't know it all' but are striving to '*...grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and for ever*' (II Peter 3:18) For in Jesus are '*...all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge hidden*' (Colossians 2:3).

In sum, in his day Jesus was the only authority for what the Father wanted. He passed on that knowledge to his apostles and together with the record of the life and words of Jesus in the four Gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke, John - their testimony is recorded in

the writings of the New Testament. None dare take from or add to that witness. However, our 21st century understanding of the pure apostolic teaching is at best blurred, and may include error. In humility we seek greater light.

Authority Today

But what of the exercise of authority in today's church? Do the Scriptures require 'one head'?

Unsurprisingly, the apostles not only proclaimed the pure Gospel, explained to them by Jesus himself, and established local churches but they also exercised some authority over those they planted - setting precedent by example to all generations of how to govern each local assembly. These traditions [the word means *transmission*] were to be passed down the generations (II Thessalonians 2:15). Inevitably, human frailty distorted the pure apostolic teaching.

As years rolled by the desire for power over people obliterated the pattern Jesus had set. Note Jesus prescription for his church: '*...You know that they which are accounted to rule over the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and their great ones exercise authority upon them. But so shall it not be among you: but whosoever will be great among you, shall be your minister: And whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all.*' (Mark 10:42-44).

It's an admonition so important that it is repeated in three of the Gospels. Yet dominance, not service, became the goal. Church leadership - especially in Rome - arrogated power to themselves and over the years claimed primacy and authority over the brethren - first locally and then universally. Contrary to the design of Jesus and the apostles there developed an authoritative hierarchical governance of the church.

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

Church Governance

How, then, was authority exercised in the early church?

As men and women were converted they gathered in local assemblies, based on the synagogue model - not the priesthood - from which most converts derived. Wherever located each of these local 'churches' was subject directly to the Head, Jesus. He - as illustrated in the '*letters to the churches*' (Revelation 2,3) - oversees each assembly, both encouraging the brethren and correcting them.

Inevitably there was, as in any community, a need for leadership. Clearly, there was, too, a need for order, as in any organized body. There were those who were appointed *overseers* ('bishops' in the *KJV*) - men, chosen from the brethren, who were qualified by their God-given spiritual gifts and by character to serve the brethren. And there were *deacons* - men and women chosen for their administrative abilities. Paul lists the necessary qualities for both offices in I Timothy 3 and in the letter to Titus. The apostles left clear guidance as to their appointment. Other 'apostles' - *eg* Titus - were '*messengers* [Gk *apostolos*: 'one sent'] of the churches' (II Corinthians 8:23) sent out as appointed emissaries of a local church. But 'the Twelve' and Paul are unique (Revelation 21:14).

This appointed leadership in the local churches was responsible to Jesus Christ and to their congregation to maintain order and doctrinal stability and to generally oversee the activities of the congregation. When the apostles finally died each assembly was guided by their words - words inspired by Jesus.

When John - the last apostle - died the 'Word of God' - not any leader - was the standard to measure orthodoxy. From that time each congregation looked to that Word for guidance. There was no other inspired

authority. There were men of influence - Polycarp, for example - who adhered to the true teachings of Jesus and the apostles and who were a calming influence on heresy. But none of these men exercised authority over the entire church of God scattered around the world.

The church grew in numbers and scattered, expanding into distant parts - often beyond the reach of the apostles and their direct influence. Varied administrative forms evolved - leading, for example, to the Coptic church or the Eastern Orthodox or

the Church of Rome or the Celtic church. Each evolved its own form of governance which inevitably, given human nature, sank into a hierarchical structure (or to oblivion) with the leadership lording it over the brethren.

Congregational Structure

Hierarchy persists to this day in some denominations, administered with varying degree of authority. It is an open door to the dissemination of heresy. The 'top man' has what he believes is an inspired teaching - and imposes it on the entire denomination. Fine, if it is a true reflection of the Word. But as often as not - heresy, false teaching.

It spreads like a cancer to all under his or her authority and corrupts the brethren. Modern examples could be cited. The 'top table' mentality also generates cliques further down the tree, among the brethren.

Believe the Word

Couple heresy with the tendency in such organizations for the membership to supinely and unthinkingly acquiesce to what the Leader dictates and what may have been a true church of God joins the ranks of deceased churches (though often still visibly present!) - their lampstand removed by the Head of the Body, Jesus.

The guidance from Paul to his assistant Timothy—but surely applicable to all of us—is: '*...give diligence to present yourself approved to God, a workman unashamed, cont'd p.7*

The Outreach Ministries

The *Outreach Ministries* (publishers of *New Horizons*) believes that each congregation is directly responsible to Jesus as Head of the church, and to his Word - and not to a 'headquarters' which dictates local policy, finance and doctrine

Each associated congregation voluntarily subscribes to our *Statement of Beliefs* and is independently administered. Each determines in what measure by its resources of finance and manpower it may support the work of the *Outreach Ministries*.

The elder/pastor/overseer of the congregation - qualified in accord with Biblical criteria - is chosen from and approved by the congregation and is appointed by a recognized elder of influence from an established congregation.

'Independence', however, does not mean there isn't structure and discipline in an assembly. The pastor is responsible, in love, for general oversight of teaching, order and discipline. Each congregation determines how it can support the joint activities of the *Outreach Ministries* in its worldwide mission.

As appropriate, where there is more than one Church of God congregation in an area (*eg* in a city) the elders would form a 'college of elders' working in harmony and in mutual submission.

HAVE YOU READ...

The Small Church

...the advantages of small assemblies

What Is An Elder?

...what is his function?

On Church Governance

...a Biblical view of governance

Restoring God's Government

...is church government based on the priesthood?

Available free on request

**What does Jesus Christ expect from you as a Christian?
Do you have a role of any significance within the Church?
Is there more to your life in Christ than “pay, pray and obey”?**

Many brethren - perhaps scattered around the country, and rarely meeting other brethren - are frustrated by limits they place on their responsibility as an “ordinary member” of the Church. Many focus on a negative sense of being called only to pray for the work of the Church and to support it financially. They feel they ought to be doing more. But what?

There is, of course, no such person as an “ordinary member”! Each of us is unique. Each of us was endowed, at the laying on of hands at our baptism, with one or more spiritual gifts. And we are all expected to identify, develop and use those gifts for the benefit of the Church. Unless all the brethren are active in this way the Church can only hobble along!

What your specific gifts are isn't the point of this letter - that's for another time. What I want to focus on is a matter that is often viewed in the Churches of God with some suspicion. It is an activity that ought, in one form or another, to be very much a part of our Christian walk. It's as much a part of our spiritual life as breathing is to our physical life! And in doing this we bear strong witness for Jesus Christ.

It is, simply, “good works”! For many who profess to be Christian this is a natural action - the Salvation Army is a praiseworthy example. And many others. However the Scriptures don't urge such helpful actions to our fellow man as some kind of “corporate action”. We don't

need, in the modern world, to project ourselves in high-profile church-wide social action. Our righteous actions (“alms”) are not to be publicly flaunted (Matthew 6:1).

Sadly, this text in Matthew 6 has often been used to screen out any “good works”! But you will recall that the apostle Paul urged the Christians in Galatia “...as often as you have the opportunity do good to all men...” (ch 6:10). Too often we focus only on the sequel “...especially those of the household of faith”!

Of course, good works however we define them are not the way to salvation. Paul makes that abundantly clear in Ephesians 2. But he also emphasizes that one of the purposes of our new creation in Christ is to do good works (vv. 8-10). Indeed Paul says God planned beforehand that this was what we are to do as Christians (v.10). In doing so we act as a pin-point of light in a dark world. Said Jesus: “...Let your light shine before all men that they may see your good deeds and may give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).

A useful study for each of us is to search the Scriptures on this vital aspect of Christian living. To the church in general, to the rich, to indi-

Do You Just ‘Pay and Pray’?

viduals and to widows the Word of God urges us to “...be careful to maintain good works” (Titus 3:8). We are urged to “...provoke one another to love and to good works” (Hebrews 10:24), and to be “...zealous of good works” (Titus 2:14). It is the expression of Christ in us.

Jesus “...went about doing good” (Acts 10:38), and the Gospels are abundant testimony to his untiring service to humanity. He expressed tenderness towards little children. He ministered to the diseased. He fed the hungry. He mourned with the bereaved. All men and women of every class, from the lowest to the greatest, benefited from the boundless compassion that he expressed. His life projected the whole measure of John 3:16: “...God so loved the world that He gave...”!

Are you, then, at least partially unfulfilled as a Christian? Do you want to do more than “pay and pray”? Do you wish to become more directly involved “in the work of God”? Then do good works!

What that will mean for any one of you I don't know. It will depend on your circumstances. It need not involve spending money. It will, however, involve sacrifice. Sacrifice of your precious time, mostly. Sacrifice, perhaps of home comforts on a cold night as you minister with a “soup kitchen”. Sacrifice of a favorite TV soap. But isn't that expressing the life of Christ? He was always ready to serve his fellow man. We're told that he “...took on the nature of a slave” (Philippians 2:7). And he

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

served to the point of laying down his life.

Whether you are able to minister from your home or are in a position to serve with other organizations “in the field” of human suffering is a matter for each to carefully consider, keeping all legitimate factors (eg. necessary commitments, safety etc) in mind.

Whatever way you serve, however you use your natural and spiritual gifts in serving the world, you will be reflecting Jesus Christ. Projecting him to others. Real ‘good works’!. Laying up treasure in heaven. And bringing solace to mankind for whom Christ died. Remember that during his life Jesus never once ministered to a converted person!

We don’t serve to convert - but from compassion. We don’t serve to massage our ego - but we serve from compassion. We don’t serve to draw the praise of men - but we do our good works with the same motivation as Jesus Christ, from compassion for suffering mankind.

Certainly nothing should be allowed to hinder our supplications that God will open doors and will otherwise support our personal work for Him of proclaiming the imminent Kingdom of God. Any “good works” we help with on the Sabbath should allow adequate time for rest, for worship, for study and reflection. But our good works are just as much an expression of faith as are these other vital works! As the *Church of God (UK)* we have God’s “form” of godliness - in our worship and in our teachings. But don’t let us become so obsessed with the “form” that we omit the weightier matters of God’s instruction to His people!

If we fail to have a proper balance our prayers for this work for God may go unanswered. Notice what Isaiah relayed

to ancient Israel: “...Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to Me, I am weary of bearing them. When you spread forth your hands [in prayer] I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers I will not listen”.

God’s revealed Sabbaths—weekly and annual—also are essential ‘good works’, a reflection of our willingness to serve and obey God. The foundation, however, is our relationship with our Father and our Saviour as manifest in our Christ-like character. .

Unless that foundation is there—obedience to God, faith in our Lord, Jesus Christ—then all our worship in what ever form is redundant.

So let’s each express the power of Christ to those around us, and to those we can reach out to, through our acts of mercy, through our manifest obedience to the divine will, Let’s all in a way our circumstances will permit, be careful and zealous to maintain all such good works.

As we have opportunity, let’s do good to all men! Ω

Why Evangelise?

‘Evangelism’ is an imperative for the Christian. We are to take the message of Jesus ‘...into all the world’ (Mark 16:15). And the Christian church certainly spends billions annually to that end.

From tiny ‘tent meetings’ to vast evangelistic crusades a gospel is proclaimed around the world. ‘Decades of evangelism’ are launched to bring the ‘unchurched’ into the Christian fold.

But is that the true purpose of evangelism? Most assume so, and invest their time and resources to that end. Yet, as with so many aspects of the faith, the concept needs careful examination.

Divine Plan

Jesus tells us (Matthew 16:18): ‘...I will build my church’. And as he is the Master Architect of our universe it was carefully and meticu-

lously planned.

That plan was in the mind of the Father—and executed by the Word—since before time. Having created the material universe as the launch pad, He said: ‘...Let us make man in our image, after our likeness’ (Genesis 1:26). Man, the human race, however, is but the ‘clay model’, created from earth’s elements.—but with an unbelievable destiny: *to become part of the divine Family, the very Kingdom of God.*

Now that’s a demanding challenge, and few are willing to pay the full price (Matthew 7:13-14).

But there always have been some, and a number are identified in Hebrews 12. Of Abraham it is said: ‘...[he] obeyed my voice, and kept my

charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws’ (Genesis 26:5)

Those who similarly responded to God’s invitation are recorded in the ‘Book of Life’ (eg Revelation 3:5).

A New Phase

The coming of the Messiah saw a new phase in the Plan.. Having laid the foundation by means of his life, death and resurrection, Jesus commissioned the apostles (whom he had

The Kingdom of God

It is the ‘House of the LORD’ (cf House of Israel). It is the Kingdom of the Father, the Messiah and the faithful from all ages (Numbers 12:7, Hebrews 3:6). After the first resurrection it will rule all mankind for a thousand years

The Gospel is the pathway by which man can become part of the world-ruling Kingdom (or Family) of God

tutored in the Way) to faithfully proclaim the message of his Kingdom.

Jesus, however, and contrary to common belief, is not 'trying to save the world'. Not in this age. '*Many are called*', he said. '*but few are chosen*'. There is a selection process.

The Father 'draws' selected individuals to Jesus: '*... No man can come to me, except the Father which sent me draw him*' (John 6:44). The Father individually creates a hunger, a craving for 'something' in those selected.

Evangelize!

Our question is, *How will they hear that call?* Paul's answer: through hearing the message proclaimed: '*...How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher?*' (Romans 10:14). Paul 'reasoned' with and sought to 'persuade' all who heard him. It's a task to which he, and all the Twelve, dedicated his life through much suffering—and persecution.

The task of the church, then, is to faithfully and zealously and in every place to proclaim the message of the resurrected Jesus as Messiah and mankind's only Saviour—to *evangel-*

ize. The Gospel is the pathway by which man can become part of the world-ruling Kingdom (or Family) of God. It's the true 'gospel of the Kingdom' as proclaimed from the beginning by Jesus and the apostles (Mark 1:14, Acts 28: 31).

It is, too, a privilege shared with us by the Father—and an obligation for all who respond (though few do) to that call to have a part in this vital work. Else how could the divine call be communicated (Romans 10:8-11)?

Each of us is gifted through the indwelling Spirit to contribute our resources to that end. For some it is the investment of our time in fervent *prayer* (I Timothy 5:5)—though *all*, of course, must not neglect this essential activity.

Others may be gifted with the ability to *teach* (I Timothy 3: 2). And recall that the apostle Paul also encouraged women who are mature in the faith to participate by discipling younger Christian women (Titus 2:4-5).

It is instructive that Christians escaping persecution (Acts 8:4) '*...went everywhere preaching the word [ie, evangelizing]*'. Filled with the message they couldn't 'hold their tongue' in their encounters with others!

Then there are those—well-versed in

the Scriptures and also '*...apt to teach*'—whose gifts propel them into full-time or part-time evangelism, by varied means.

All of us, however, contribute in our own way to the whole. Every Christian has his or her part to play in making the truth of the Gospel available to those the Father is inviting to participate with Him in begetting true children of God. From the 'widow's mite' through to the most powerful evangelist we all may help forward the plan God. Ω

The 'Rest of the Dead'

God doesn't want anyone to perish (II Peter 3:9). His plan is to make salvation freely available to all mankind. But not yet.

Those now called by the Father to be part of His Family are being trained in the ways of the Kingdom. Called to become Christ-like. Called to share with Him in the offering of full salvation to all mankind.

- At this time, in this age, they are to evangelize (*see associated article*).
- After the return of Jesus the Messiah their part, as Spirit-born members of the Kingdom of God, is to share with Jesus in the task of refurbishing Earth, and to lead to salvation the survivors (and their descendants) of the end-time chaos
- Then comes the opportunity for the dead from all ages, by means of a resurrection to physical life, to also become Family members of the Kingdom. (Revelation 20:11-14)

Authority ...cont'd

rightly dividing the Word of Truth' (II Timothy 2:15 *LITV*).

Writing to the brethren in Thessalonica, Paul said: '*...Quench not the Spirit. Despise not prophesyings. Prove all things; hold fast that which is good*' (I Thessalonians 5:19-21). And John adds: '*...believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world*' (I John 4:1).

Properly administered a hierarchy can give the appearance of unity and harmony. But given corrupt human nature it degenerates.

The 'synagogue model' of governance (independent congregations subject directly to the Word of God) though imperfect in the hands of man avoids the inevitable outcomes of the hierarchical model. It is a true reflection of the structure of the first Christian congregations - and worthy of emulation. Ω

Who Are the 'Clergy'?

All major faiths have their 'clergy' - mullahs, priests, vicars, bishops, elders etc. In Christianity, it would seem that you can't have religion without them. But are they Biblical?

National events are often decorated by a splendid array of clergy in multi-coloured attire - each specific to part of the many-layered hierarchy. Perhaps surprisingly all these religious offices - from Pope to Lay Reader - are unknown in the foundation document of Christianity, the New Testament.

The only 'offices' described there are 'overseers/elders and deacons' (Philippians 1:1). The inspired writers considered this as all that was necessary for the functions of the orderly assembly. [Request our article **Church Governance**.]

But such simplicity of structure is alien to most, especially episcopal, denominations. The vast array of church offices has multiplied over the centuries, and much of the dispute within Christianity stems from it.

God's Heritage

The notion of 'Christian priesthood' - the clergy - was foreign to the New Testament church. All Christians were 'brethren' - the term includes men and women. As sons and daughters of the Almighty (II Corinthians 6:18) we are, before God, all on the same level. The power and pomp of church office obscures that.

The apostle Peter addresses the issue. Writing to the church generally he states: "*You are God's heritage*". The Greek word he uses is *kleros* - from which 'clergy' is derived. To the elders he says: "*Feed the flock of God which is among you, exercising oversight not by constraint but will-*

ingly, not for base gain but readily; neither as being lords over God's heritage [Gk kleros] but being examples to the flock" (I Peter 5:3).

Elders

The apostles recognized the need for structure in the assemblies of God's people. Those men who were gifted by Jesus Christ with his prescribed qualities (eg II Timothy 3, Titus 1) were recognized by the brethren and appointed to shepherd that local flock. No great ceremonial - just a simple public recognition (by laying-on of hands) of their spiritual gifts.

Their function was to oversee the spiritual growth of all the brethren and to nourish and use the brethren's spiritual gifts for the benefit of the entire assembly (Ephesians 4: 7-16).

It didn't take long, however, for elders in some assemblies to exalt themselves over the brethren. Trappings of office were added, authority usurped, practices from the pagan religions adopted, the 'ordinary member' excluded. Hence the twenty-first century hodge-podge of church offices and hierarchies.

[Indeed in some denominations decision-making is confined to the elders, who are deemed to be the sole 'members' of that church]

Local Assemblies

Inevitably, given human nature, the apostolic pattern for the structure of the church of God was abandoned. Charismatic leaders arose - as foretold by the apostle Paul on a visit to the Ephesian assemblies: "*I know that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock* [tearing it apart]. *Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them*" (Acts 20:29-30).

That's a sombre warning to every Christian and especially to every Christian who aspires to leadership of an assembly - or already has that function.

Hence arose the unbiblical notion of denominations - which replaced the autonomy of each local assembly. The New Testament letters were addressed to these local groups of Christians, instructing them in Christian principles and in how to forward the work Jesus had assigned them.

Of course, these principles applied to *all* God's assemblies. But it is a misinterpretation to assume that the church of God was one tightly-knit organization, 'ruled from the top down', with one man - pope, apostle, evangelist or board - directing every move.

Such an approach to church structure encourages the growth of committees, rules, corporate headquarters, inappropriate business practices, unnecessary bureaucracy. It imposes a rigid doctrinal formula - which, accepted, may inflict heresy on an entire denomination. And has often done so. All such absorb the energies of the church and hinder the work of proclaiming the Gospel of God worldwide Ω

CALLING ALL INTERNET USERS!

The Outreach Ministries website lists over a hundred Bible-based articles which address issues frequently on the minds of Christians. You may download any, or request print copies. There is, too, a section of on-line audio sermons, links to associated groups, back issues of *New Horizons* and an on-line magazine for our younger readers.

Be sure to take a look at www.cgom.org

MiniStudy**The Birth of Jesus: *fact and fiction***

‘...unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given’ (Isaiah 9:6)

Fact and fiction mark the Christian world’s perception of the birth of Jesus, popularly understood to be December 25. The *reality* is hidden in the pages of history and the Bible.

- Notes Bible commentator Matthew Henry: ‘It is supposed by many that our blessed Saviour was born much about the time of [the *Feast of Tabernacles*]... to tabernacle among us (John 1:14)
- The festival lasts eight days, and is in the autumn. It is the final of three ‘pilgrimage feasts’ when the males came to Jerusalem to worship and to celebrate. The pilgrims built temporary ‘booths’ (tabernacles, Heb *succoth*) to live in, from branches of trees. These booths crowded the hills and villages around Jerusalem at the time of the festival
- Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist was a priest of the eighth ‘Course of Abijah’, ministering in the Temple in the week Sivan 12-18 (*ie* in the third month of the year on the calendar used in the Bible, our May/June). He received a prophecy of the forthcoming birth of a son, John. He was born around Passover, in early Spring, some forty weeks later
- Jesus, the ‘Light of the world’, was conceived six months later (Luke 1:26-33) in the ninth month, Kislev. This is the time of the eight-day Jew’s Festival of Lights, *Chanukkah*—our late December
- The birth of Jesus, then, would be nine months later in the seventh month—at the Feast of Tabernacles.. The fiction is that Jesus was born December 25. One fact is that Jesus was conceived—became flesh as an embryo—around that time of year: ‘...*the Word was made flesh, and dwelt [Gk skenoo—tabernacled] among us*’ (John 1:14)
- It is likely that Jesus was born on the *first* day of Tabernacles (a holy day, an annual Sabbath), and circumcised on the *eighth* day (also a holy day) (Luke 2:21-32, John 7:22-23)
- Jesus was born in Bethlehem, a town some five miles from Jerusalem. It was the ancestral home of Judah, and the family—as Jews—were required by the Roman authority to enroll there as part of a census of the whole land of Palestine. *Tabernacles* was chosen because so many gathered for the festival, and the weather was suited for travel (Luke 2:1-8), unlike late December
- The family of Jesus, because of Mary’s pregnancy, sought an inn but had to make do with a booth. The Hebrew word for a ‘stable’ is *succoth* (Genesis 33:17). The word *manger* (Gk *phatne*) is also rendered *stall* (Luke 13:15). After the festival they moved to a ‘house’ where they were honoured by the Magi (Matthew 2:11) . (The Greek word for *house* may simply refer to any place of residence.)
- King Herod [‘the Great’] sought to assassinate the infant Jesus whom he perceived as a rival to the throne (Matthew 2:16). The family became refugees in Egypt, as advised by an angel (v.13). However, it was essential that Mary return to the Temple within forty days of the birth for her rites of purification, and for the dedication of the infant Jesus (Leviticus 12:1-4, Luke 2:22-24). As it was now deemed safe for them to return to Israel (Matthew 2:19-22) the implication is that Herod had died within that period—as confirmed by the historian Josephus. He calculated Herod’s death as in the autumn of 4BC. They then departed Jerusalem for Nazareth

Request the free article **The Feast of the Nativity**

*Are you unable to attend Sabbath services in your area?
The following CGOM Associate Churches offer live streaming of
their regular Sabbath services!*

*Tulsa Church of God, Tulsa, OK — 1:00 p.m. CT
www.tulsachurchofgod.net*

*Sabbath Day Church of God, Hot Springs, AR — 1:00 p.m. CT
www.sdcog.org*

*The above also offer online access to past sermon presentations
as do the following CGOM Associates.*

*Believers in Christ Church of God, CA — www.biccog.org
Church of God New Mexico — www.cognm.org
Church of God, San Antonio, TX — www.churchofgodsa.com*

Bible Basics

The Churches of God Outreach
Ministries publish an internet
Bible home study course

If you would like to study with
us check it out at

www.cgom.org

The introductory lesson gives
some hints about how to
study the Bible

*We are pleased to reply to any ques-
tions arising from any of our publica-
tions. However, we are not yet in a
position to 'grade' your responses*

New Horizons may be viewed or
downloaded from our web-site
www.cgom.org

*e-mail: coguk@aol.com
information@cgom.org*

*you are invited to look at our website for numerous articles free to read or download
www.cgom.org*

all are also available from any of the addresses listed inside

Don't miss out on a single issue of the *New Horizons* magazine!
When you move don't forget to send us your new mailing address.

Please send your change of address to:

**Churches of God Outreach Ministries
P.O. Box 54621
Tulsa, OK 74155-0621**

or e-mail your change to:

**information@cgom.org
in Europe:
coguk@aol.com**

Churches of God Outreach Ministries
Post Office Box 54621
Tulsa, Oklahoma 74155-0621

Change Service Requested

NON-PROFIT
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
BROKEN ARROW, OK
PERMIT NO. 830