

NEW *Horizons*

Vol 21 No 3

May/June 2017

addressing the important issues for today and tomorrow



inside...

Called, chosen, faithful

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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 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

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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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God calls. Why are so many of us not listening?

On offer is the most stupendous opportunity ever. It is freely available. It is open to every human being that ever walked or ever will walk the planet. But it does have its dark side: the stark choice we are given is *unending life* or, ultimately, *oblivion*.

Science exerts endless effort to improve our lives and, if possible, to extend them endlessly. It is what we long for—as long as we can maintain our sanity, health and vigour! God's offer, however, requires no complex technology, no manipulation of genes and chromosomes, no crippling financial outlay.

The Prize

The vast extent of the universe awes us. Billions of galaxies scattered throughout space dazzle us with their beauty—and to the enquiring mind raise the question *why?* Is there purpose, or is it simply a by-product of a mysterious and mindless 'big bang'?

Yet this is indeed 'the prize', the inheritance reserved for those who choose wisely. It is, says the apostle Peter '*...an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fades not away, reserved in heaven [space?] for you*' (I Peter 1:4). Or, as said Jesus by John: '*...The one overcoming will inherit all things, and I will be God to him, and he will be the son to Me*' (Revelation 21:7). '*All things*' is just that—including the vastness of the material universe.

We've been to our Moon—a short hop. We aspire to reach Mars—a journey of some forty days to a few months, depending on its variable distance from Earth. The next galaxy? No way—not even with all the technology you can dream of. (And what's the point - we will only make the same mess as here!)

But with what God has on offer—we can.

The Divine Plan

From the invisible came that same universe with its myriad integral natural laws that sustain it. God did that. (Give a scientist the same 'nothingness' and he's stumped.) He didn't create it out

of sheer boredom—but with purpose and for us, for mankind.

The fullness of that divine plan is beyond human imagination. But the Deity wished to share their creation, and to achieve the plan they devised us—material models which could be shaped into spirit beings capable of living forever. As wrote the prophet Isaiah: '*... We are like clay, and you are like the potter. You created us*' (ch 64:8, Genesis 2:7).

That plan is widely known as 'salvation'. For most Christians and in Islam that means '*going to heaven and avoiding hell*'. Believe the Scriptures, however, and that concept limits what God has in store. For salvation is no less than becoming part of God's

Family, His Kingdom, His '*...sons and daughters*'.

Spirit Life

Given the limitations of our physical state no way can we 'inherit the universe'. Writes the apostle Paul; '*... flesh and blood is not able to inherit the kingdom of God, nor does corruption inherit incorruption*' (I Corinthians 15:50).

The Master Potter is shaping those who accept His invitation, preparing them for change—from mortal to immortal: '*...In a moment, in a glance of an eye, at the last trumpet; for a trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall all be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality*' (vv.52-53).

By Invitation

The invitation is universal. By varied means it is extended to all who hear it. It may come through a friend or relative. Or from private reading of the Scriptures. It may be *via* the media—a broadcast, a magazine article. (Are you listening?)

Once God the Father gets your attention He wants a response, an RSVP. Show interest and He draws you to His Son, mankind's one and only Saviour: '*...No one is able to come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him*' said Jesus (John 6:44), who will never reject those who come (v.37). Meet the challenge and, he says, '*I will raise him up in*

ARE YOU LISTENING?

the last day'. To inherit 'all things'.

The Sower

Jesus explained God's calling in agricultural terms—the farmer planting seed—to illustrate how his calling is received (Matthew 13).

For some (perhaps most) the message simply goes over their head. As wrote the apostle Paul: '*...the god of this world has blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them*' (II Corinthians 4:4). The 'wicked one', said Jesus, snatches away the invite before it can take root.

Others listen and happily accept it—for a while. But it doesn't put down deep roots—the invitation isn't properly mentally digested and the notion passes off as friends, family or various adverse circumstances afflict him or her. For the seed has fallen on stony ground, a mind unprepared.

Some really do 'believe the Gospel', make it part of their life until family circumstances—marriage, kids *etc*—get in the way. Or they find the pursuit of possessions occupies their interest. The weeds choke out the tender growing faith and they just don't produce the spiritual fruit required of the true believer.

Happily, some do hang in there and walk carefully along the *...narrow and difficult way*' that Jesus said lies ahead of those who commit to him (Matthew 7:14), and bearing precious fruit. Only a few, he said, find that way, producing various degrees of 'fruit': '*...The seeds that fell on good ground are the people who hear and understand the message. They produce as much as a hun-*

dred or sixty or thirty times what was planted' (ch 13: 23). These latter are those who will '*...inherit all things*'!

So - *listen, respond, commit and persevere to the end.*

Radical Change

'*Only believe—and solve all your problems*' isn't an option! To become a child of God, to become part of the Family of God—*salvation*, in other words—demands total commitment, a willingness to transform your life guided and empowered by the Spirit of God.

As Jesus said, it isn't the easy option. Paul adds: '*...Everyone who wants to live a godly life in union with Christ Jesus will be persecuted [hunted like animals]*'. The apostle adds a chilling warning note: '*...and evil persons and impostors will keep on going from bad to worse, deceiving others and being deceived themselves*' (II Timothy 3:12-13).

The Scriptures have a name for this change: '*repentance*', a radical change in our outlook, a change of mind. By it we become related to the Father, and brothers and sisters of Jesus. We diligently align ourselves with *His* ways, *His* thoughts—a whole new world-view. We no longer live by 'the elements of the world'—its values, its ambitions, its behaviour. Writes the apostle Paul: '*...Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this world, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind*' (Romans 12:2).

But you cannot do that on your own. Anyone, given the motivation, can make changes to their behaviour, but it requires the indwelling of the Spirit to trans-

form us root and branch. Peter wrote: '*... if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his*' (Romans 8:9).

A 'New Creation'

When you receive God's Spirit His way of life is imprinted 'on the heart'. You become a 'new creature': '*...Anyone who is joined to Christ is a new being; the old is gone, the new has come*' (II Corinthians 5:17).

God is preparing to share His creation with humankind. That clay model created in Adam must be shaped to conform to the image and character of Jesus Christ. He works on us, hands on: '*...God corrects all of his children, and if he doesn't correct you, then you don't really belong to him*' (Hebrews 12:8).

And the end result? We will '*...become partakers of the divine nature*' (II Peter 1:4). That is the fulfilment of God's purpose in creation.

Left behind?

However, not everyone will, during this lifetime, get to hear God's call. The Creator has designed His universe in accord with a detailed plan, and ensures all will in their turn be afforded the same invitation.

There will be a final resurrection—to physical life—when '*...the rest of the dead*' (Revelation 20:5) will have opportunity to embrace the same Gospel message, their names entered in '*...the book of life*' (v.12).

[The notoriously wicked, having made their choices for evil in this life, may be so hardened as to reject any future offer of salvation. Jesus Christ is Judge of those who will experience the ultimate 'second death' (Revelation 21:8).]

The Father is carefully selecting and training those whom He desires to work with Him throughout eternity.

Are you listening?

Ω

Faced with a world in chaos, what should a Christian do?

Hitler, Mussolini, Pope Paul VI, Cardinals Ottaviani and Martini, Franz Josef Strauss. All familiar names associated in the minds of many Christians as fulfilling specific roles in Bible prophecies of the end-time. And all still dead. Who is 'the Beast'? Who is the 'false prophet'? Who the 'two witnesses'? Who is 'the man of sin'? Yet speculation continues unabated.

Jesus will return in 1000AD, 1844, 1914, 1975. *History!* All wrong—but the speculation continues with more proposed dates. When will we ever learn?

The World Stage

For over eighty years many Christians have been warned to 'watch world events'. Various denominations have, in their view, clearly specified which nations will surely be the dominating prophecy-fulfilling powers on the world stage as we approach the 'imminent' end. Not surprisingly, not all agree.

Also, events on the world stage are, by some 'prophets', fully documented as indicators of 'the end'. Most pass into history—brief puffs of wind on the political landscape. Today's 'prophetic fulfilment' will tomorrow be lost in insignificance.

We might ask—what value has there been in four-score years of such 'watching'?

Prophecy Unfulfilled

Prophecy fascinates. There's a certain dread about the future, and prophecy lifts the curtain on its obscurity. Couple this with a personal religious impulse and 'the true church' is seen as a place of refuge. Be part of it and you will be safe. The road to the Kingdom is thus clearly waymarked. It's a strong attraction to 'join'. And many did.

But what happens when the years, the decades, pass with the 'sure prophecies' unfulfilled? When specified characters die, when institutions

fail? There's a 'falling away', a cooling of ardour, disillusionment. The world appears to carry on as usual with its ups and downs, its advances and its failures. And no return of Jesus. He said: '*...Such will be the spread of evil that many people's love will grow cold*' (Matthew 24:12). Spot on.

Hard Times

Jesus did indeed anticipate hard times just before his certain return—an inevitable time of trouble (Gk *thlipsis*, *KJV*: tribulation, adversity). Human depravity would universally culminate in gross lawlessness, the decay of civilisation, chaos. And despotism as men scramble to find solutions..

His intervention alone would stop our total extinction: '...there will be great affliction [Gk thlipsis], such as has not happened from the beginning of the world until now, no, nor ever will be. And except those days were shortened, not any flesh would be saved. But on account of the elect, those days will be shortened' (Matthew 24:21-22).

The timing of that intervention by the long-awaited Messiah is the Father's decision. And at the appropriate moment, '*...I [John] saw Heaven being opened. And, behold! A white horse, and He sitting on it having been called Faithful and True. And He judges and wars in righteousness'* (read Revelation 19:11-16). Not the 'meek and mild' Jesus of popular imagination!

Jesus did foresee real events. He signalled the advent of this chaos at a time when 'life goes on' as usual. There will be wars and peace conferences. There will be famines. There will be seismic events on earth and in the skies. As always. All such have struck before, time and again.

'...The coming [Gk. parousia] of the Son of Man will be like what hap-

Be on your Guard!

pened in the time of Noah. In the days before the flood people ate and drank, men and women married, up to the very day Noah went into the ark, yet they did not realize what was happening until the

flood came and swept them all away. That is how it will be when the Son of Man comes' (Matthew 24:37-39).

Paul, too: '*...People will think they are safe and secure. But destruction will suddenly strike them like the pains of a*

woman about to give birth. And they won't escape' (I Thessalonians 5:3).

Traditional Impositions

- Ritual washing before eating
- Sabbath day's journey
- No fire-lighting on Sabbath
- No cooking on the Sabbath
- Ritual prayers
- Neglect of parents

Prepare

What, then, should a Christian do?

Clearly, it's sensible that we must all be aware of what's going on around us and in the world at large. But the wise pregnant mother, to use Paul's analogy, will have prepared for the birth. Indeed Jesus did urge us to be vigilant (Gk *gregoreo*) in terms of maintaining the integrity of our faith, our diligence in maintaining our spiritual growth, our relationship with God.

We must constantly be on our guard in face of the lawless behaviour that is predicted to infect the world—and which, said Jesus, could undermine our faith: '*... if the master of the house had known what watch of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake [Gk gregoreo] and would not have let his house be broken into. For this reason you also must be ready because the Son of Man is coming at an hour that you do not think he will come'* (Matthew 24:43).

Doubtless, Christians will become entangled in the ensuing chaos. To his disciples Jesus said: '*...then they will hand you* **cont'd p.8**

On Sunday June 4 many Christians will celebrate 'Pentecost'. Here's the little-known origin of this celebration

Pentecost - or 'Whitsunday' - is generally celebrated as the time for mass baptisms. Dressed in white - hence 'Whit' Sunday - the year's crop of children will flock to church for baptism. Why *this* day?

On the first Christian Pentecost some three thousand Jews accepted Jesus as their promised Messiah - and were baptized. But it was the events of fifty days earlier which persuaded them to defy the wrath of their friends and family to commit to follow Jesus Christ.

Divine Power

That awesome event was the resurrection of Jesus. Notes the apostle Paul: '*...This good news is about his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ! As a human, he was from the family of David. But the Holy Spirit proved that Jesus is the powerful Son of God, because he was raised from death*' (Romans 1:3-4 CEV).

Most of those present at Pentecost—Jews and proselytes—had been in Jerusalem for the Passover when the city was alive with the rumour that Jesus had risen from the dead. They had, perhaps, peered into the empty tomb with its undisturbed grave clothes. They had perhaps asked, *How did Jesus pass through them?* It was the same evidence that had convinced Peter and John (John 20:1-8).

But the resurrection of Jesus was only another step - though the pivotal one - in the cosmic drama of human salvation.

The Wavesheaf

Let's look at a neglected Bible

God's Spring Harvest

ceremony which clearly typifies the earth-shattering and world-shaking event of the resurrection. It is known as "*the Wavesheaf Offering*".

During the *Days of Unleavened Bread* [*ie* the Biblical seven-day spring festival known as *Passover*] there was a ceremony which is of vital significance for Christians.

As the weekly Sabbath during the Festival ended, Temple representatives went to a field on the outskirts of Jerusalem and scythed a measure of the first-ripe grain - the '*firstfruits*' of the crop - which had earlier been marked out by delegates from the Jews' ruling body, the Sanhedrim.

The Law stated that it was to be offered in the Temple "*on the morrow after the Sabbath*", *ie* offered on Sunday (Leviticus 23:11). It was prepared the evening before. In the prescribed manner, the sheaf was "*lifted up*" (waved, offered) before the LORD on the morning of the first day of the week, with the appropriate accompanying sacrifice of a lamb, fine flour and oil - a sweet-smelling offering to God.

[*'The Sabbath*' here - Leviticus 23:11 - is the weekly rest-day,

Festivals 2017

Pentecost	June 4
Trumpets	September 21
Atonement	September 30
Tabernacles	October 5-11
Eighth Day	October 12

the seventh day of the week, our Saturday, largely. The annual 'high day' - the first holy convocation of *Unleavened Bread* was the previous Thursday. *It is an annual 'Sabbath']*

Firstfruits

The significance of the firstfruits wavesheaf offering wasn't lost on the early Church of God. The Law stated "*...you shall bring the firstfruits of your harvest to the priest, and he shall wave the sheaf before the Lord*" (Lev 23:10). This ceremony was traditionally (the text doesn't specifically link the two) carried out during the *Days of Unleavened Bread*, and was the starting point for the significant seven weeks leading to the *Feast of Firstfruits* - what we call *Pentecost*.

A Misunderstanding

Contrary to what most Christians believe, Jesus was crucified on Wednesday morning, and killed about the time the Jews were to sacrifice the Passover lamb in the Temple. By the end of the weekly Sabbath (*ie* Saturday) he had been in the grave a full three days and three nights - just as He had predicted: '*...just as Jonah was in the belly of the huge fish three days and three nights, so the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights*' (Matt 12: 40).

And around the time of the cutting of the *Wavesheaf* on Saturday evening - *Jesus was resurrected!* Paul's famed 'resurrection chapter' (I Corinthians 15) declares: "*But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep*" (v.20). Much of the chapter is devoted to the harvest - resurrection theme.

Here, then, embedded within the *Passover* and *Unleavened Bread*

observance, is a pattern for calling to mind the astounding events of the last earthly days of Jesus the Messiah.

As Passover lambs were being slain in the Temple, Jesus was himself sacrificed. As the *Wavesheaf* was being cut outside Jerusalem at the end of the weekly Sabbath he was resurrected. And as the priests lifted up ("waved") the firstfruits offering before the altar on Sunday morning Jesus (perhaps after a night spent in thanksgiving, and in intercession for his wayward disciples, and for their protection during the coming disturbing days) ascended to present himself to the Father - '*the firstfruits of them that are asleep [ie, dead]*' (I Corinthians 15:20).

A Curious Incident

Still early Sunday morning (the first of seven notable Sundays) Jesus was confronted by Mary. He forbids her from touching him: '*... Don't hold on to me! I have not yet gone to the Father*' (John 20:17, Matthew 28:9).

Since the darkness that descended about mid-day on that awesome Wednesday in Jerusalem (Matthew 27:45) and the tearing of the vail, Temple services—the *Passover*, *Wavesheaf*—may have been disrupted if not abandoned. Jesus perfectly fulfilled both 'types'.

[Resurrected, Jesus appeared in a new spirit body: '*... Look at my hands and my feet and see who I am! Touch me and find out for yourselves. [A spirit] doesn't have flesh and bones as you see I have;* (Luke 24:39, I Corinthians 15:44). The resurrected body has unusual qualities!]

But he would soon go to the Father, for as the *Wavesheaf* was about to be offered in the Temple He perfectly fulfilled that symbolism, ascending to offer himself, the perfect sacrifice for sin.

Why Pentecost?

So, Jesus fulfilled the typology of the *Wavesheaf* - the firstfruits of

the early grain harvest. Why, then, another seven weeks till Pentecost?

All the offerings and special times that were part of the divinely-revealed religion of ancient Israel had significance for future events - *for us*. Rooted in that firstfruits offering in spring was another celebration, this time in early summer: *Pentecost*.

God's instruction was that, depending on the beginning of the early harvest, they were to count fifty days - seven complete weeks - from the day following the Sabbath: "*Count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath...and you shall proclaim on the same day [ie the first day of*

the week, Sunday] that it is a holy convocation to you. You shall do no customary work on it" (Leviticus 23:15-21).

But what did this annual holy day signify?

That first cutting in spring of the sheaf of grain—representing

the resurrected Jesus—was the beginning of the harvest season. The *Feast of Weeks*, also called *Pentecost*, marked its culmination - a true harvest festival. Bible readers probably pass over some texts related to the Festival without putting them in context.

Firstfruits Harvest

We have noted that Jesus was '*the firstfruits*'. He is '*...the visible likeness of the invisible God. He is the first-born Son, superior to all created things*' (Colossians 1:15). But, as implied, there are others! Hear James: "*Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth that we might be a*

Paul tells us that Christians "*have the firstfruits of the Spirit*" (Romans 8:23). And in Revelation (*ch* 14:4) John informs us: "*These were redeemed from among men, being firstfruits to God and to the Lamb*".

In sum, those who 'follow the Lamb' are a firstfruits spiritual harvest. The symbolic fifty days from the first of the firstfruits - the resurrected Jesus - until the '*...first resurrection*' (Revelation 20:5) represents the entire time since that first Christian Pentecost (Acts 2) until the resurrection of all true Christians at the return of Christ.

During this 'harvest season' the Father is reaping sons and daughters to enlarge His spirit Family. They will reign with Him throughout eternity.

There's much more to *Pentecost* than merely a time for baptisms! But baptism - of mature, repentant men and women - is an early and necessary step to becoming part of that firstfruits harvest of the people of God. *Pentecost*, observed at the conclusion of the firstfruits harvest, symbolizes 'harvest home'. **Ω**

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The Church Triumphant

Despite persecution, despite division, despite heresy the church of God survives

Some belief systems survive for millennia. Think of Confucianism, Hinduism, Judaism *etc.* Nations embrace one or other and it is often the 'glue' that binds and stabilizes the nation.

None, of course, is monolithic—every faith diversifies into varied sub-groups yet largely flying the same banner. *Christianity* is no exception, and is notorious for the vast array of sects and subjects varying in size from the immensity of the Roman Catholic church (with its many divisions) to minute isolated independent bodies convinced of their unique doctrinal purity.

Such diversity—despite the plea of Jesus for harmony—is no surprise, for our human nature won't let us think we could be wrong!

The apostle Peter highlights to the church one cause for the disunity: '... *False prophets appeared in the past among the people, and in the same way false teachers will appear among you. They will bring in destructive, untrue doctrines*' (II Peter 2:1). Paul, to the Ephesian leadership: '...*after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. And from among you yourselves men will arise, speaking [perversions of the truth] in order to draw away the disciples after them*' (Acts 20:29-30).

The apostles' assessment was spot on, for even before their deaths the church was riven by heresy after heresy, and within a few centuries became corrupt. As predicted Peter: '...*denying the Master who bought them, thus bringing on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their licentious ways, because of whom the way of truth will be reviled. And in greediness they will exploit you with false words*' (vv.1-3). A perfect reflection of the dastardly deeds perpetrated by the mediaeval church. So what happened?

Before the end of that first Christian

century the church Jesus founded had all but gone underground. It has been remarked that within fifty years Christianity was barely recognizable. Here and there was a resistance movement, notably in Asia Minor. Polycarp (bishop of Smyrna) maintained the apostolic teachings in face of the heresies taking root in Rome.

The true faith was becoming submerged in a torrent of pagan worship practices as the prevailing false religions infiltrated the historic faith of Jesus. Over ensuing centuries, for example, the Biblical pattern of worship was replaced by the pre-Christian festivals now known as Sunday, Easter, Christmas *etc.*

Worse, the pure moral teachings of Christianity gave way almost universally in the established church to debauchery, greed and criminality on an industrial scale. 'Heretics'—in reality many of them true believers—were tortured and many murdered.

An Enduring Church

The church as founded by Jesus, however, persisted on the fringes of society. As Jesus said: '...*the gates of hell [ie death] shall not overpower it*' (Matthew 16:18). The church of God would never be extinguished! Faithful men and women maintained and propagated their faith in face of intense persecution by the established 'universal' church.

Unfinished Revolution

The sixteenth century saw the centuries-long 'famine of the Word' begin to abate under what became known as the Reformation. But that was 'the unfinished revolution', for many key elements of Jesus's teachings remained unaddressed by the Reformers—many of whom were martyred, and to whom we owe the subsequent freedom to freely explore the Christian Scriptures.

During the following century, and as knowledge increased, the structure, the form, of the true faith was unveiled as increasing numbers of Christians rediscovered the Biblical

seventh-day Sabbath—an observance that had never died out. Millions around the globe from east to west, north to south now observe the weekly and annual holy days.

Diversity or Division?

Today there exists a host of Sabbatarian groups united by their desire to honour the seventh day. Many also observe the seven holy days God has appointed (Leviticus 23 lists them). The latter provide a guide to the divine purpose for His creation, an outline of His plan for us.

There is a continuing unfolding of the treasures stored in the Scriptures, and which the various groups seek to explore and learn from. Not all agree! Given our varied backgrounds and diverse traditions there inevitably is some *disagreement*. This has led some to separate from the larger Sabbatarian denominations which are seen as being self-obsessive and obstructive to personal growth and development.

Inevitably, given our human nature, there also have arisen charismatic individuals who, as predicted, lead the brethren along false paths, some puffed up with self-importance and focused on building private empires. Jesus himself warned us: '...*Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inside are ravenous wolves*' (Matthew 7:16).

The church of God will triumph. The Father has selected those whom He draws to Jesus Christ. He gives each the opportunity to join His spirit Family as joint heirs with Jesus. He cares for them, nourishes them in the embrace of His church. He gently corrects their failures.

As evidenced by John's record of the seven independent churches of Asia (Revelation 2-3) Jesus intimately oversees each local church, defining their deficiencies, removing his oversight from those who reject his guidance, and don't change their ways.

The church of God, for all its perceived faults, through all its trials, will remain faithful to the end **Ω**

**‘Don’t forsake the assembling
of yourselves together’**
Hebrews 10:25

Few Christians would object to these words from the Scriptures. Assembling together is a recurring practice throughout the centuries. Indeed for all of the history of Israel the people of God have followed the divine worship pattern as set out in the Scriptures.

God’s revealed form of worship, guidance and fellowship was based around the three harvests in Palestine—*Spring, Summer and Autumn*. The festivals are known as *Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles*.

In ancient Israel they were ‘pilgrim feasts’ and males as representatives of the family were obliged to attend these in the central location where God was worshiped—from the time of Solomon, in Jerusalem. Only there were sacrifices—an integral aspect of the observance—permitted. Jerusalem is where God dwelt over the ark of the covenant.

The sacrifices represented aspects of the work and ministry of Messiah. The apostle Paul states that ‘...*Christ [Messiah] our Passover is sacrificed for us*’ (I Corinthians 5:7). The writer (Hebrews ch 8-10) makes clear that the sacrificial system, now suspended, was a pattern for the work of Jesus: ‘...*it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins*’ (ch 10:4). Peter adds: ‘...*you were redeemed ...with the precious blood of Christ, like that of an unblemished and spotless lamb*’ (I Peter 1:18).

Worship Pattern

The sacrificial system was superimposed on God’s pattern for worship, these three annual festival seasons. The first Christians held tenaciously to the same pattern.

Even before the death of the apostles chosen by Jesus the all-enveloping pagan culture began to infiltrate the church and the Biblical festivals (see Leviticus ch 23) came to be largely

overwhelmed by pre-Christian observances.

Marginalized over the centuries, the festivals are now observed by an increasing number of Christians—notably by many seventh-day Sabbath-observing Christians but also in some Protestant organizations.

Dispersion

Jesus had made clear that his message was to be taken worldwide: ‘...*disciple all nations*’ (Matthew 28:19), fulfilling his promise through the prophets that his message was for all of mankind.

God is sovereign over all of Earth: ‘...*The earth is the LORD’S, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein*’ (Psalm 24:1). He distributes territory as He sees fit: ‘...*When the most High divided to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of Adam, he set the bounds of the people according to the number of the children of Israel*’ (Deuteronomy 32:8). Abraham was deeded the area from the Mediterranean to the Euphrates, Israel being assigned to ‘Palestine’ in perpetuity—with the proviso that they remained faithful to Him.

Within the narrow confines of Palestine God established His model nation, to prepare the way for the coming Messiah, Jesus. Only in Jerusalem was formal worship permitted, in the Temple.

But as the church enlarged, because God’s relationship with His people became internalized (of the spirit and not the letter), and with Christians now dispersed over a dozen time zones, observance appropriately was centred on each autonomous local assembly of believers.

In the past God focused His attention on the nation of Israel to establish the true faith as a pattern for succeeding generations. The

Worship Me!

true faith, however, is universal and the Deity dwells in every one who has committed themselves to Him through Jesus. Peter summed up the conditions: ‘...*Turn back to God! [KJV repent]. Be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, so that your sins will be forgiven. Then you will be given the Holy Spirit*’ (Acts 2:39).

An Example

Thus we find the Corinthian brethren observing the Passover festival—the *Lord’s Supper* and the days of *Unleavened Bread*—in their home town—as described by the apostle Paul: ‘...*Purge out therefore the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, as you are unleavened*’ (I Corinthians ch 5 and 11).

Though there is no record of it (an argument from silence!) it is likely that both *Pentecost* and the autumn festival *Tabernacles* were similarly observed locally without having to travel often great distances.

The Millennium

Jerusalem remains as God’s chosen city (I Kings 9:3, Psalm 135:21) and will be restored as Messiah’s capital and power base (Zechariah 14:9). Representatives of all nations will in the Millennium be in Jerusalem for the festivals (vv.16 ff).

But, as Jesus made clear, ‘...*where two or three are gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst*’ - Matthew 18:20. Addressing a Samaritan women he said: ‘...*an hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem...the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. For the Father also seeks such, the ones worshiping Him. God is a spirit, and the ones worshiping Him must worship in spirit and truth*’ (John 4:21-24).

Christ lives in true believers wherever they assemble. Ω

Sabbath Threat

Jesus directed strong words to the Pharisees: *Hypocrites. Blind guides. Fools. Serpents. Offspring of vipers*. Listen to him, speaking of them to his audience: ‘...they tie up heavy burdens and put them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing with their finger to move them’ (Matthew 23:4).

As guardians of the written Word (‘...Moses’ seat) their guidance was to be followed. But they had imposed additional onerous layers of behaviour not required by that Law. Indeed they sometimes negated that Law in the letter and in its spirit. Modern Jewish practices often reflect that same approach to the divine Law.

Some church leaders, sadly, have similar attitudes, imposing behaviour of the brethren never asked for by God but derived from the ‘traditions of the [church] elders’.

On Sabbath we cease from our daily grind. We fellowship, we pray, we study. Some such traditions are burdensome

The practice in Judaism of a ‘Sabbath day’s journey’ (an estimated two-thirds of a mile) still colours the thinking of some churches. It has no basis in the written Law of Moses.

Another example is the prohibition of lighting *fires* on Sabbath—now extended in Judaism to the switching on of electric appliances (lights, cookers, heaters *etc*). Again, affecting a minority of Christian Sabbath-keepers. In the Law this prohibition referenced the use of fire

for industrial purposes—as in the construction of the Tabernacle and its metal tools.

What about ‘*eating out*’ on the Sabbath, outlawed by some as you thus ‘employ’ someone to cook for you and serve you. We could cite the example of Jesus who dined out on the Sabbath with a Pharisee—sticklers for the Law. What Jesus did: ‘...he went into the house of one of the chief Pharisees to eat bread [ie, dine] on the sabbath day’ (Luke 14:1). Sabbath, among the Jews, was a day for lavish feasting and entertaining. The rabbis enjoined three feasts on the Sabbath.

Deeply ingrained is the prohibition on Sabbath *cooking*. The sixth day (our Friday) is indeed a ‘preparation day’ - when the ‘debris’ of the week is put to rest, a clearing up of business matters to enable a true Sabbath rest. The smith ends his work, cleans his tools, extinguishes his fire. The labourer in the field, stacks his sheaves, ends his task and heads for home, early.

However, based on the way

manna was used (Exodus 16:23), cooking was the norm on Sabbath. The grain-like food left over and miraculously preserved from the sixth day was then cooked on the Sabbath. It is not a reason for not cooking, though ‘gathering’ from the fields (shopping!) was the preparation done on Friday.

Jesus was also particularly scathing of the religious leadership on the matter of *doing good* on the Sabbath. The Scribes and Pharisees were ‘...filled with madness’ when he healed a man (Luke 6:10-11).

Christians do not live under the heel of an ecclesiastical jackboot. Paul’s guidance to the Corinthian church is apt ‘...All things are lawful to me, but not all things profit. All things are lawful to me, but I will not be ruled by any’ (1 Corinthians 6:12). To take personal responsibility is key.

The Sabbath is a blessing for all mankind. It is a day to rejoice and not to be spoiled by petty man-made impositions. **Ω**

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On Guard ...cont’d from p.3
over to persecution and will kill you, and you will be hated by all the nations because of my name’ (Matthew 24:9). That befell the apostles—and to numerous Christians throughout the centuries since.

Christians have been born, lived a full life and died—with the expectation of certain prophetic events ringing in our ears. What is essential is that we stay faithful, that we ‘grow in grace and in our knowledge of Jesus Christ’, that we increasingly reflect his character in our own life.

Today may be *your* last—be you also ready! **Ω**

MiniStudy**The Law of Life**

The Law of Jehovah is perfect, converting the soul. The Testimony of Jehovah is sure, making the simple wise' (Psalm 19:7)

The 'Law of God' is much maligned and widely misunderstood. It encompasses and affects all of mankind in their daily walk. It is God's 'operating system' for all of mankind, and we experience its effect for good or ill through our thoughts and actions.

- *The Law never has been the way to salvation, no matter how diligently observed*
The Law condemned us but could not save us. It enlightens our path—but in the end it kills
- *The Law (Heb torah: instruction) generally refers to the body of Law handed down by God*
At the Law's heart lie the Ten Commandments: how to love God and how to love man
torah also refers to human instruction: '...the law of your mother'
- *The Law is embedded in our human nature*
Humans uniquely are created to function optimally in accordance with the principles of the Law
Transgression of any part of the Law results in automatic adverse personal consequences—sooner or later
- *The Law originated with man's creation*
Judgment was known to be required for 'ungodly deeds' in Enoch's era, before the Flood
The Law was understood—and had sanctions—in Noah's day (Genesis 9:6, 21ff)
The patriarch Abraham is credited with observing it and in detail (Genesis 16:25)
The Canaanite king Abimilech observed it, abhorring adultery (Genesis 20)
Joseph rejected the advances of his overseer's wife, calling it sin (Genesis 39)
- *The Law was codified by God and administered by Moses in Israel's national Constitution*
The new nation delivered from bondage in Egypt was governed with this Law at its heart
The discipline of obedience would make the nation successful and be an example for all nations
- *The Law with its regulations and sacrifices are symbolic of the wider eternal faith*
The divine laws statutes and judgments form a cohesive interactive symbolism
The sacrificial system has reference to the life and mission of Messiah
The festivals (Leviticus 23) are God's format for His worship, and a guide to His overall plan for man
- *The Law was perfectly observed by Jesus*
Disregard for the Law defines sin (I John 3:4)
Jesus never sinned (I Peter 2:22), and stated that the Law is timeless (Matthew 5:18)
- *The Law will be indelibly inscribed in the hearts of the restored Israel (Jeremiah 31:33)*
Everyone will then joyously submit to God's revealed way of life, motivated by His Spirit
- *The Law will in the Millennium be universally applied to govern all nations (Isaiah 2, Micah 4)*
Jerusalem will host the throne of Messiah from which he will be '...king over all the earth' (Zechariah 14:9)
All nations will come there to worship (v.16), and be governed according to this Law
- *The Law has been a guide to the people of God through all ages*
Enoch (before the Flood) had the kind of faith that '...pleased God' (Hebrews 11:5-6)
Noah was '...a preacher of righteousness' (II Peter 2:5)
King Solomon compiled 'the wisdom of the ages' in the book of Proverbs

'I deeply love your Law! I think about it all day. Your laws never leave my mind, and they make me much wiser than my enemies' (Psalm 119:97-98)

Ω

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