

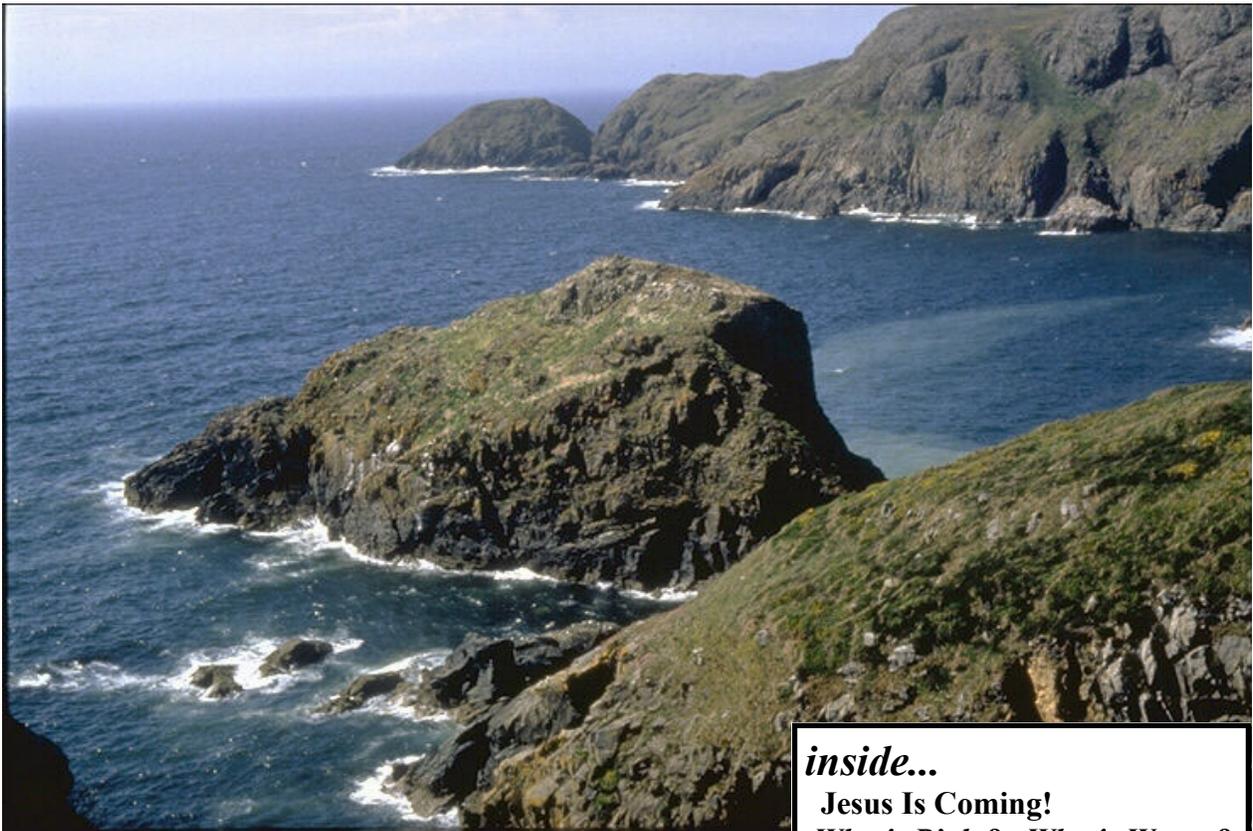
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Horizons

Vol 7 No 1

January/February 2003

addressing the important issues for today and tomorrow



inside...

Jesus Is Coming!

What's Right?... What's Wrong?

Clergy - a Biblical Concept?

After the Resurrection

Coming To Baptism

CGOM

Churches Of God Outreach Ministries

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

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

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new Horizons

Issue 37

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Jesus promised to return to our planet. What's the point?

At the heart of every prophecy uttered by Jesus the Messiah is the certain promise: *"I will come again"*. That promise is the hub around which revolves all prophecy. In his 'end-time state of the world' message his return is a cast-iron certainty. Why will he again visit Earth?

Often portrayed as 'meek and mild' the returning Jesus will however be a fierce political animal. His mission is to overthrow every human government. No political system will escape - not even so-called 'democracy'. Every pathetic attempt at human government, every form from democracy to tyranny will be destroyed to be replaced by the benign and perfect government of the Family of God.

Gone will be every terrorist regime and every terrorist. Overthrown will be all corrupt dictators and their hangers-on. Replaced will be every shade of relatively benign democracy. Because no system has worked. Western democracies, said Winston Churchill, may be 'the worst system devised by the wit of man - except for all the others'. Look at the mess we inhabit! The more government we experience the worse life becomes.

Nor will Jesus just overthrow all civil government. The returning Christ will turn the world upside down - including all forms of religion that is contrary to his revelation. For not a single world religion fully reflects the mind of God - not Is-

lam, not Hinduism, and certainly not Christianity. And hasn't religion been so often a cause for horrific conflict? And still is in 2003.

Blueprint

What would you expect from the perfect government? Certainly an end to every form of criminal activity - no murder or theft or rape or child abuse. A secure home. Walk out safely at any time day or night. An end to all war with all its attendant evils. Harmony between nations. Pure and abundant water and air - for every man, woman and child on earth. No food shortage in any corner of the globe. And food free from pollutants. Pleasant and well governed towns and cities. Abundant health for all. No blindness or other physical disabilities. Happy marriages without divorce. Respectful and contented children. A fair and just society governed by wise judges and a sound justice system. The purging of wickedness of every form. Everywhere, good neighbourliness. Government untainted by bureaucracy, greed and corruption.

That doesn't sound like our world. Human ingenuity stumbles on short-term solutions, but beyond our grasp is the ability to make things work - permanently. We see a need for reform but avarice, ignorance, competition block a solution. In the West we can 'change government' - only to replace useless by useless. The past six thousand years of recorded 'civilisation' hasn't advanced our ability to rule well. We still harbour tyrants. We still solve our problems by violence. We go from bad to worse. We substitute

human reasoning for divine revelation.

Yet that outline blueprint for a world at peace is exactly the government Jesus Christ will bring to our troubled planet at his coming. What a transformation will occur in a relatively few years of divine rule. Mankind will learn to live joyously within the divine Law: no more false religion, and perfect human relationships. We need him - *and urgently*.

When?

The coming of Jesus Christ and that new world is certain. No-one can stop it - not even the coming world-ruling dictator who will marshal humanity to oppose in open warfare the coming King of kings. Assembling the armed might of all nations and supported by the ultimate false prophet - representing the combined religions of the world - he will launch a war against the returning Jesus. But Jesus will, at last, defeat all opposition and abolish war for a thousand years.

Jesus, you may recall, warned us not to fix a date for his return. Thousands over the centuries have tried and failed. However, the times in which we live are a fair reflection of the prophetic Biblical description of the world for the years just before his return.

[Request **The Time of the Signs.**]

Not since Eden has our world been perfect. War and peace trail each other with pathetic certainty. Millions die: new weaponry invented, new means of mass murder, new killing techniques. And it culminates in our day with the ability to erase all life from our planet.

[cont'd p.3]

What's right...what's wrong?

My opinion is as good as yours. *Or is it?*

Most of the people of the world simply follow the culture of their birth 'Everybody does it'. *Or*, 'The government says'. *Or*, 'My church or religion teaches'. So - it must be right. This notion tolerated the Inquisition in mediaeval Christianity, the burning alive of widows in Hinduism, hatred of the Jews by Palestinians. In the West especially, however, there is a creeping individualism: 'I can decide what's right, what's wrong'. We make up our own personal standards.

Within the family - whatever its form - each of us takes in a hodge-podge of pre-conceived ideas and prejudices. And as we mature we modify our beliefs according to the 'spirit of the times' - novel attitudes forged by a remote elite and spread by a tame media. So ideas once taboo become acceptable: 'living in sin', homosexuality, welfarism, the blame culture, lying (even at the heart of government, business, religion). Out go marriage and personal responsibility and upright character.

Crumbling Foundations

We do, of course, have the standard of the law of the land. But that, too, now chips away at age-old standards. Those standards were hewn from the solid rock of observed human behaviour, designed to encourage the good and curb the base - as outlined in the Scriptures.

Sadly, the foundations of morality have been undermined in recent years. (Not that we have ever had perfect government.) Inevitably we have surging lawlessness. Prisons bulge at the expense of the taxpayer. Office-bearers at all levels, with absolute control of the public purse, are consumed with greed and the perverted notion that they are above the law. The commitment at the heart of marriage has been jetti-

soned in favour of wimpish co-habitation - with the resultant upsurge in foul sexually transmitted diseases, abandoned partners and failing children. With no moral compass, unwise government inflicts bad laws based on whim - 'try it and see if it works', 'if it's 'old' it must be wrong'. Having demolished ancient standards, government abandons its leadership role and now bows to the public opinion they have themselves debased.

Overtaken Values

Have we reached the place where black is perceived as white? As the prophet Isaiah wrote: "*Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; who put darkness for light and light for darkness; who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter*" (Isaiah 5:20). Little has changed since he penned those words. What is 'good'? Is there a norm?

No-one knows human nature and all its foibles better than the one who created it - God. (If you are gullible enough to believe in the fiction of evolution, then assume that our present moral stance is the pinnacle of millions of years of trial and error.) Like any finely-tuned instrument we function best when we conform to the manufacturer's instructions and guidance. Deviate and we mess up.

So when God tells us to respect those older than ourselves, and not to kill or steal or covet or perjure or have sex outside marriage it's because they hurt. When He reveals a specific form of worship it's because all other forms hurt. And when He prescribes specific penalties for those who give in to such behaviour it's because the application of those penalties is essential to an orderly society.

When our ruling elite unwisely imagine they can do better than God (or 'evolution') then chaos results. If someone close to us is murdered,

for example, our inborn sense of justice is not satisfied until the killer is dead. Postpone that death - by 'life' in prison and early release - and bitterness and the desire for revenge remains like a cancer that affects all of society. Tolerate and allow to go unpunished communication with the dead - in reality, with demons - as in the British Royal House and with Western government leaders - and the nation is on a downhill spiral. Fail to discourage adultery and co-habitation and unnatural sex and we have infertility and AIDS and rampant venereal disease and burgeoning divorce. Allow rapists and paedophiles to live - and women and children will continue to suffer. Every deviation from the divine order, in other words, is a burden on society and unchecked leads to its decline and fall.

Buck the Trend

Most of us are caught up in the general culture that envelops us. Some are not - and certainly Christians *should* not. The sixth century BC prophet Ezekiel looked down the years to our time and to our societies and noted God's instruction: "*...set a mark upon the foreheads of the men that sigh and cry for all the abominations that be done in Jerusalem* [symbolic of all Israel]" (*ch* 9:4). It was a protective mark. God's avengers are to "*come not near any man upon whom is the mark*" (v.6). His warning to ancient Israel applies no less to our own nations.

Christian Nations?

The Bible is a handbook of good government. In its abandonment our leaders are bringing upon us national destruction. The notion that your nation is 'Christian' is a deceptive fiction. If it were there would be little need for police or tax inspectors or STD clinics or prisons or welfare or divorce courts or drug rehabilitation. For true Christians, the divine laws are internal - written in our minds, a guiding light to our daily behaviour. It is that divine and immutable Law which determines what's right and what's wrong.

Definition

The 'apostle of love', John, defines right and wrong: "*Sin is the transgression of the law*", he wrote (I John 3:4). Not many who occupy a pew on Sundays believe him. Most despise and ignore the divine law, think it is obsolete. The other ninety percent (in Britain) who never darken the door of a church have swallowed the perverse idea of individualism: "*I decide what's right and wrong - for me*". Our leaders, despite parading their Christianity, are intent on erasing God from our national life by side-lining the Maker's Manual - His Law.

The result? Corruption festers at the heart of government and of our nations. Wrote one of the wisest of national leaders: "*Righteousness [good behaviour by God's standards - His commandments] exalts a nation - but sin is a reproach to na-*

tions" (Proverbs 14:34).

Our Western nations are on the slippery slope to disaster. Only, as with the ancient city of Nineveh, a turning to God's righteous laws will save us nationally - *and personally*. Challenged by God's prophet Jonah, Nineveh's king and his nobles commanded his citizens: "*...turn every one from his evil way and from the violence that is in their hands*" (Jonah 3:5-10). They did, and disaster was averted.

The definition of right and wrong is not in our hands. Your Creator decides that - and will hold you to His definition. □

Request the free articles
What Do You Mean - 'Repent'?
and
Coming To Baptism

CLERGY - a Biblical concept?

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 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' -

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

You are invited to request the free articles:

The World of Tomorrow and God's Grand Design

Jesus Is Coming...cont'd

Jesus told his disciples: "*I will come again*" (John 15:3). And as he returned to heaven from the Mount of Olives - following his miraculous and spectacular resurrection - God's messengers told the disciples: "*Men of Galilee - why do you stand gazing into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come again in the same manner in which you have seen him entering heaven*" (Acts 1:11). The prophet Zechariah sketches in

I will gather all the nations to Jerusalem to wage war. The city shall be captured, the houses plundered, the women ravished; half the city shall go into captivity but the rest of the people will not be cut off from the city. Then the LORD will go forth and wage war against those nations as he fights in a day of war. His feet shall stand in that day upon the Mount of Olives which is on the east side of Jerusalem, and the Mount of Olives shall be split in the middle eastward and westward by a very great valley. Half the mountain shall move northwards and half southwards. The LORD will become King over all the earth in that day [the political agenda of Jesus]; the LORD shall be one, and his name one [his religious agenda]

Zechariah ch 14)

further detail. He wrote: That will be an awesome time. Jesus is coming. □

If you would like to counsel about any matter related to your Bible studies or to your personal challenges our elders are eager to be of service.

They may be contacted through any of our offices in strict confidence

After the Resurrection

What will you be like in the resurrection? Is Jesus Christ a pattern for our own resurrection? What the Bible teaches is breathtaking!

Jesus Christ, according to Scripture, was raised from the dead. It's an attested historical fact. His mauled body was taken from the tree on which he was hanged. Entombed in a dark sepulchre, three days and three nights later he was raised from the dead! He burst the chains of cold death and became a powerhouse of spiritual energy.

During the next six weeks Jesus frequently appeared to the disciples. They saw him. They touched him. They ate with him. They walked and talked with him. Yet - he was different! Now clearly no longer simply a human being, he appeared - and he vanished. He walked through solid matter into a locked room. He was seen as "a gardener". He "appeared in a different form" to other disciples. He levitated into Heaven, and now shines brilliantly like the sun. Certainly no ordinary mortal!

Does the resurrection body of Jesus differ from what the Christian can expect? What will *you* be like in the resurrection?

A Heavenly Reward?

Most Christians see themselves going to Heaven in the form of a wraith or disembodied soul or spirit or an angel - perhaps having sprouted a set of wings. Increasingly, Christians subscribe to the eastern notion that they will return to life as another creature - a horse, or a mouse, *etc.* Or, with effort ("karma"), as a better human being.

Must we *guess* our future state? Must we stay ignorant? Or, does the Bible describe what we will be like in the resurrection? In fact - God leaves us in no doubt. We can

know what lies beyond the grave!

In the famous "resurrection chapter" (I Corinthians 15) the apostle Paul says "We [*ie* Christians] shall all be changed" (v.51) at the return of Jesus Christ. Any of the people of God who are alive at that time will put on what the apostle terms a "spiritual body". Different. No longer subject to decay or death. Untiring. Powerful. Spiritual.

The apostle John's understanding of this exciting concept is no less dramatic. He writes "Beloved, now are we the sons of God" (I John 3:2), and continues "Beloved we are now God's children, but what we are to be has not yet been manifested. We know that when he [Jesus Christ] appears we shall be like him...." (I John 3:2). Could it be clearer? When we slip the bonds of mortality and are resurrected at the return of Jesus Christ we will share his nature, fully reflect his person - be "like him"!

We cannot take our human flesh or our human nature with us into the Kingdom of God. "Flesh and blood" wrote the apostle Paul, "cannot inherit the Kingdom of God" (I Corinthians 15:50). He continues, "...*the dead shall be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable nature [our humanity and our human flesh] must clothe itself with the imperishable, and this mortality must clothe itself with immortality*" (v.53).

Certainly a good and loving Father has given us glimpses of what is life's purpose! Not endless strumming on a harp on cloud nine or gazing blissfully forever at God's face but imbued with boundless life and power. Like Jesus Christ. Co-heirs In his thrilling exposition of this concept to the Roman Christians Paul wrote: "Those whom He has foreknown He has also predestined to share the likeness of His

son, that he might be the eldest in a vast family of brothers" (*ch* 8:29). And in the book of Hebrews it is recorded "[Jesus] is not ashamed to call them brothers" (*ch* 2:11). Earlier in Romans 8 (v.16-17) Paul tells us "*The Spirit itself bears witness with our own spirits that we are the children of God; and if children then heirs, too - heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ*".

Did you catch that? We - now mere flesh and blood and subject to the sufferings and limitations that are part and parcel of the human condition - *we* are to be brothers of Jesus Christ, heirs of God! We, if we overcome, are to "inherit all things" (Revelation 21:7 *KJV*). That means everything. That includes the whole of creation, the entire vastness of the incomprehensible universe! As Christians we - if we overcome to the end - will inherit all there is as joint-heirs with our Saviour.

Humanly, the heir receives the "estate" on the death of the benefactor (parent *etc.*). But such is the love of God our Father for us that (just like the father of "the prodigal son") He who never dies, who has ever been and who ever will be, shares His estate - the whole of creation, all of His powers - with His "sons and daughters" (II Corinthians 6:18).

This explains why Paul ecstatically exclaims "*If God be for us, who can be against us? He who did not withhold even His own son but gave him up for all of us, will he not also with him freely give us all things?*" (Romans 8:31-32). That's the reward God has laid up for His faithful children!

It's the fulfilment of the divine purpose of creating man "in the image of God" (Genesis 1:26).

Divine Deeds

Would you, with but a word, like to make the blind see? Would you like to heal the deaf ear? Miracu-

lously feed the hungry around the world? Restore to full health the millions of acute and chronically ill? Raise the dead to life? Jesus Christ did. And he said that those who trust him will do the same. He told the disciples *"In very truth I tell you that he who trusts in me shall do the deeds I do; and he shall do greater deeds than these because I am going to the Father"* (John 14:12).

We see just an inkling of this in the Body of Christ, in the Church, today. But its supreme fulfilment will be in tomorrow's world. As Paul wrote, "You were sealed with that Holy Spirit of promise which is the earnest [deposit, down-payment] of our inheritance" (Ephesians 1:14).

Coming soon is a utopian time when all that now mars human life will be healed. When Jesus Christ returns as King of kings, with him will be today's saints resurrected to be with him as joint-heirs of the Father's Kingdom. *"Then" prophesied Isaiah "the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a hart, and the tongue of the dumb shall sing for joy" (ch 35:5-6).*

Miraculous, indeed. But administered at the hands of the resurrected saints as they exercise the powers of God.

Can you imagine a world where God's healing power surges over the whole earth? Can you imagine personally sharing this power? Can you imagine the mighty Spirit of God flowing through you in doing these mighty works? Jesus said "Whoever is thirsty let him come to me, and let him drink who believes in me. From within him - as the Scripture has said - rivers of living water shall flow" (John 7:38).

That thought almost blows the mind. Out from those who are co-heirs with Christ will flow to others the very divine life. By this, John says, Jesus *"referred to the Spirit which those who believed in him*

were to receive" (v.39). As the angel informed the apostle John, God's chosen ones *"shall reign over the earth"* (Revelation 5:10). That means unlimited power to serve with Jesus Christ. It's but a glimpse of what you will be like in the resurrection!

But...Divine?

Clearly, then, each Christian who is victorious to the end of his or her life is to share the powers exercised by our elder brother Jesus Christ - "the eldest in a vast family of brothers" (Romans 8:29).

Upon repentance, and through the gift of the Holy Spirit of God, we enter into a family relationship with our heavenly Father and with Jesus Christ - what Paul describes as "the whole family in heaven and on earth" (Ephesians 3:15).

Does that mean, then, that we actually become God? It seems a blasphemous assumption, indeed!

Yet the apostle Peter exclaimed that we will be *"partakers of the divine nature"* (2 Pet 1:4). Now that's an awe-inspiring thought! Does Peter's concept that you will share God's nature sound abhorrent? It almost seems blasphemous! And the idea lies uncomfortably with most Christians.

Yet - isn't that what Peter says?

Note again what he wrote: *"His divine power has given us all things that are needful for life and godliness through the knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and perfection. Thereby He has given us His exceeding great and precious promises, in order that through them you may become sharers in the divine nature"* (II Peter 1:3-4).

In each Christian - each person, that is, in whom dwells the Spirit of God - lies the seed of the divine. A seed that will later flower as full membership of the divine Family! The apostle Paul puts it this way: *"God has put His Spirit [His divine power and being] in us as a guaran-*

tee" (II Corinthians 1:22). If we have Christ's Spirit in us, our eternal future in the Family of God is guaranteed. If we do not disqualify ourselves.

In fact, Jesus had to straighten out his inquisitors on this matter. Certain Jews who opposed him gathered baskets of stones ready to kill him. Jesus remonstrated with them: *"Many good deeds from the Father have I shown you", he said. "For which of them will you stone me?"* The Jews replied, *"For no good deed are we going to stone you, but for blasphemy, and because you who are only a man are making yourself out to be God"* (John 10:31ff).

Jesus reply is startling. He answers, *"Does it not stand written in your Law 'I said you are gods [Psalm 82:6]? If those [men!] to whom God's word was addressed are called gods (and the Scripture cannot be annulled), how is it that you say to one whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming' because I said 'I am God's son'?"*

Jesus saw no theological difficulty in the concept of men becoming "gods"!

Is it then blasphemy for me to claim, as a Christian, that I am God's son? Of course not! Constantly throughout the New Testament, Christians are called "sons" and "daughters" and "children" of God. As we have seen there is a family relationship. The Godhead, indeed, is a Family.

Notice Paul's words in Romans 8: *"All who are led by God's Spirit are God's sons"* (v.14). He adds (v.23) *"...we ourselves, though we possess the Spirit as a foretaste, yet we ourselves inwardly moan as we wait for full sonship [KJV - adoption is a weak translation] in the redemption of our bodies [ie at the resurrection]"*. Now - though sons and daughters of God - we are lumbered with our physical limitations. *Then we shall receive full sonship*

and enter into the glorious liberty of the children of God. (Read Romans 8:14-21).

Notice what the book of Hebrews teaches: "It was fitting that he [Jesus], for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons of glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering. For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified have all one origin" (ch 2:10-11). Why can't we simply accept what the Scriptures teach! Whatever Jesus now is, Christians will become so at the resurrection of the just.

"New Age" God

Of course, the idea of the 'god in man' is nothing new! It's a concept planted in man's mind (by Satan) shortly after man's creation. "Disobey the Creator God, acquire your own standards of good and evil - and be god-like" was the Devil's message (see Genesis 3:1-7). It's a path ever since pursued by mankind!

The idea that all humans nurse within themselves a divine spark is a common one. It is fundamental to Hindu belief, to many eastern religions - and to the not-so-modern New Age movement. And fundamental to Mormon teaching. Basically it is Satan's lie dressed in modern clothes! Certainly it isn't what the Bible teaches!

Man is physical and all of us will die. We have a sinful nature - and unless that nature is transformed we will die, be buried and never again see the light of day until our time of Judgment. There's only one way for any human being to live forever (become immortal) and that's through Jesus Christ. Each of us must "die" to our human nature, be converted and cleansed of all sin through the shed blood of our Saviour.

Only then, upon baptism, can a loving Father place in a human being His Holy Spirit. It is that Spirit in us that is the spark of the divine. We are not born with it. And unless

we become converted we will die like the animals!

The apostle Paul wrote to his young disciple Timothy "[God] alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light" (I Timothy 6:16). Are men immortal? Of course not - only God is without beginning! But if you have within you the divine seed of God's Spirit you will at the resurrection be, fully, a part of - be born into - the divine Family. Truly "born again"!

After The Resurrection

Few will deny that Jesus Christ, while he walked this planet, was unique. But controversy has raged as to his real nature. Was he God dwelling in a shell of human flesh? Was he an ordinary man mightily used by God? Was he an angel? Is he different now from what he was while on earth?

The full answer to these questions is beyond the scope of this article. Write for the article **Is Jesus God?**

Clearly, during his life-time Jesus the Messiah was subject to human limitation - though he exercised perfect faith. He was subject to human emotion, he tired and had to rest and sleep, he became hungry and thirsty and had to eat and drink, he on occasion got angry. When wounded he bled and suffered pain. He was at times anguished. He was tempted in every respect just as we are. He constantly struggled against sin.

But when, because he overcame (he never sinned), death could no longer contain him Jesus had new powers. He could at will assume a solid body of flesh and bone (Luke 24:34) - yet he could walk through solid walls (John 20:19,26). He walked with his friends - but could instantly disappear (Luke 24:31,36). He appeared in different forms (John 21:4-7). He ate (Luke 24:42). He could ascend to the throne of God and return at the speed of light. He could appear shining as the sun in full strength, his eyes like flames of fire (Revelation 1:12-16).

Now he is alive for evermore. And he has all authority in heaven and earth given into his hands. And remember - we will be like him!

God All In All

Of course, Jesus has pre-eminence. He has a name above every name. Jesus Christ is "high above all other government and authority and power and dominion, and every title of sovereignty used either in this age or the age to come" (Ephesians 1:21-22). But in essence the reward of the Christian is that we inherit that same quality of spiritual life and power. We are to share these divine powers and attributes as Kings and Priests in his Kingdom.

It is in this sense that mortal man may become immortal! How can this be? It's because within the true Christian resides that same Holy Spirit which was the power on which Jesus himself totally depended. As we read in Hebrews: "He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified have all one origin". At conversion we are given the same Holy Spirit - the same Spirit that empowered and motivated Jesus Christ. At our resurrection (on the return of Jesus - Colossians 3:4) all that will remain of us is that same Holy Spirit who now dwells in us! Our human character moulded by the divine Spirit

Ahead of us lies the most exciting thousand years of all time. History has progressed according to God's own inexorable time-table. By best estimates we have now (2003) well passed the two thousandth year since the birth of Jesus the Messiah, and the sixth thousandth year since creation.

God's purpose has been "to bring many sons to glory" and the task has from the beginning been entrusted to the one we know as Jesus of Nazareth. [Request the title **God's Grand Design**]

The apostle Paul neatly summarizes it for us in the famed "resurrection chapter". [cont'd p.9]

You feel your life needs to change and that you need forgiveness. You are drawn to God's Word and want to be baptized. Are you ready?

When we reach the point of baptism each of us has faced a variety of life experiences. Some have a 'record'. Others have been 'religious since mother's knee'. Some were christened, or baptized as an adult. Some have never had any religious training or experience. Some have been associated with other churches And others have never darkened a church door. You then come to believe that change is needed. What do you then do?

The Scriptures teach a twin action: "*Repent, and be baptized*" (Acts 2:38). The baptism bit is usually easy. But - do we understand what's meant by "repentance"?

A New Beginning

Note first that baptism is "the bottom of the ladder" of the Christian life. It is a new beginning. When you step out of the water and have the laying-on of hands (to receive God's Spirit) you are a new life - a spiritual embryo, if you like. God's Spirit has united with your spirit to form a new creature. You are a "babe in Christ". And you have much to learn! You need to "grow up in him".

So, what God will seek from you as a mature Christian after years of experience is not what He expects from you at baptism! Thankfully, God doesn't reveal His specific lifeplan for each new Christian. But the way He wants us to live as Christians - the evidence that we are truly converted - is clearly explained in Scripture!

Repentance

We can't be saved by any personal works of righteousness. It is of grace, of God's mercy, out of His love for us. So why echo the question of Acts 2:37: *What must I do?* The key, as Peter answered, is - *repent!* Christianity is a way of life,

and we are expected to "live by every Word of God" (Matthew 4:4). That will mean a radical change in our daily walk. Let's look at some of these changes.

God has called you to offer you His salvation. In His goodness He leads you to repentance. He uses the circumstances of your life to induce a godly sorrow - a deep contrition for your sin and for your sinful nature. Such sorrow can be triggered by ill-health, by loss of someone close, by reverses, simply by a general dissatisfaction with your life. But whatever it is, you begin to seek, and follow, God's way. To seek and to follow is repentance. Repentance is not just a 'feeling'. *It is action!* It is a turning to God's 'narrow way'. It is willing obedience.

And you can't leave obedience till after your baptism! When God begins to call you, it is His Spirit that is working with you. You are not alone, for the Holy Spirit is with you, prompting you to obedience. It is for you to turn those prompts into action! You show your submission to God by a changed lifestyle, by starting to produce good fruit. And you start before baptism.

Check List

This article is not meant to be a substitute for counsel with a competent counsellor of the Church. You ought to discuss baptism fully, and indeed baptism, for your sake, shouldn't be carried out unless you do! Here, however, is a 'check list' to summarize key parts of what the counsellor wants you to understand.

Not surprisingly, there are ten areas of your life to make a start on before baptism. Unless you are committed to them God won't give you His Spirit. They are signposts to the life in Christ. God expects you to take your first steps of obedience before giving you His Spirit. Like any parent, He does not look for maturity from a babe - but you have to take those first steps as evidence of com-

Coming To Baptism

mitment! Let's look at them briefly.

- Determine to put God, His Word and His work first in your life. Have you made this commitment?
- Realize that true religion is of the spirit and not dependent on the physical - *eg* religious symbols, pictures, buildings. Are you looking to God for salvation and not to your deeds or religious trappings?
- All our service to God ought to reflect His revealed Word. If it's contrary to Scripture, if it does not carry God's imprint - discard it. It is 'vain worship', and idolatrous. This applies, for example, to many 'Christian' traditions. It applies also to religious 'holy days'. Only those revealed in Scripture are acceptable to God - *see* Leviticus 23. Have you begun to observe God's Holy Days, and renounced traditional Christian holidays like Christmas, Easter, Saints' Days?
- God seeks positive worship from us each week on His (7th day) Sabbath - *not* Sunday - coupled with cessation of our normal business activity. Do you now observe God's weekly seventh-day Sabbath?
- Our Christian life is marked by recognition of God's pattern of family life. Be on good terms with your family. Have you taken steps (*eg* forgiveness) to be reconciled to your parents and your children?
- Be reconciled, also, to all those to whom you have any animosity. Failure to forgive means we inwardly harbour murderous thoughts. Have you searched your heart for hatred, begun to control anger and to love even your enemies?

- Determine to discipline yourself to purity of thought: check that what you read, what you view. Do what is godly, and according to God's Word. Adultery, fornication, homosexuality, transvestitism, lesbianism *etc* are sin. God requires His people to be chaste, and faithful within marriage. Have you abandoned all unlawful personal relationships?
- Be industrious, respectful of the property of others, and generous in all your good deeds. Are you following only legal occupations, honest in your dealings - *eg* with your employer and the taxman - and God?
- Honesty and compassion should become constant companions. Are you helpful and supportive to your neighbour, willing to overlook his faults and to serve him?
- Be thankful for what you have, and don't desire what's not yours, nor what you can't afford (*eg* consumerism, gambling), nor what's harmful to your body (*eg* smoking, alcohol, drugs). All are forms of idolatry! If necessary get professional help to conquer such habits. If, however, you are actively trying to be rid of them, but have not yet succeeded, it need not stop you from being baptized. Are you actively trying to conquer harmful habits?

A False Conversion?

To repeat - you must be committed to this outline. But God knows our weakness, and does not expect maturity or perfection of a babe!

The above is a brief summary of how we should begin to live before baptism. Repentance means we voluntarily submit to this way of life. Unless committed to these ten commandments we are not truly repentant. They are "seeds" that we plant before baptism. As we mature in Christ they bring forth an abundance of godly fruit. If we are not so committed our baptism is a sham.

It will result in a "false conver-

sion" in which we worship Jesus Christ in vain (*see* Matthew 7:15-28 - especially vv.21-23). Dangerously, we will be lulled into a false security, assuming we are "saved".

Multiple millions follow this path of lawlessness, and led by false shepherds become blinded to the beautiful way of life revealed through God's Law. Such may indeed have sorrow for their sin. They see in Jesus Christ the forgiveness of that sin. But by false teachings they are then led to resist God's holy and perfect and righteous Law! That resistance is carnal, and spells death.

Obedience to God is not "salvation by works". It is an expression of our submission to His lordship and sovereignty. Joyful obedience to God's *torah* (*ie* instruction) - as expanded in all of Scripture - is one sign that we are truly being converted. No-one can expect to be converted, can expect God to give His Holy Spirit, can be sure of salvation unless they first "bring forth fruit meet for repentance".

Can you be in the Kingdom, some ask, without keeping the Sabbath? Or if you are an adulterer? Or worshipping falsely? The wrong questions! Rather we ought to ask, Will God graciously and freely give His Holy Spirit to someone who refuses to obey His revealed Word? Clearly - *no!*

Remember: God will give His Holy Spirit - without which we are none of His, without which there is no salvation (Romans 8:9) - only to those who have become so truly sorry for their sin that they are changing their lifestyle according to the way of life revealed in His Word. Only then, and wholly by His grace and mercy, do we enter His Family as new-born babes in Christ.

Are you prepared to be baptized?

[If you would like to counsel about baptism we will be happy to arrange to discuss this vital step with you. Please contact any of our addresses]

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 willingly, 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 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. Hence the twenty-first century hodge-podge of church offices, hierarchies - and heresies.

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

[cont'd page 9]

unsigned articles are by the editor

Resurrection...cont'd

He writes: "Just as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive again. But each in his own order - Christ first, and afterwards Christ's people at His return. After that comes the end when he is to surrender the kingship to God the Father, when he has abolished all other government and all other authority and power. For he must be King until he has put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that is to be abolished is death; for God has put all things under his feet... But when all things have been put under him then the Son himself will also come under Him who has put all things under him, in order that God may be all in all" (I Corinthians 15:22-28).

Did that statement somehow pass you by unnoticed? Paul says that the purpose and summation of history is "...in order that God may be all in all"!

When that time comes all that then exists that was human will be God.

Man was created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26). Clearly, the physical "mould" that was Adam and his descendants is a mere shell of that image. But its fullness comes when each and

CLERGY... cont'd

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. □

every human life will become the divine. Not an impersonal faceless mass, but a Family of all-powerful divine Beings. Each of us will express our individual character - a character forged in partnership with God's indwelling Spirit during a lifetime of training. Yet we will as did Jesus - perfectly reflect the Fa-

ther, carrying out His sovereign will throughout all eternity.

Divine Sharing

The Family of God so loves you that they are prepared to share totally with you their glory, their universe and their incredible power. If this is what you want - and it is indeed the fulfilment of life's purpose - you must here and now fully submit your will to God! For God gives the precious Holy Spirit only to those who obey Him (Acts 5:32).

How you can receive God's Spirit is clearly stated in the Scriptures. The essential fundamental first steps towards fulfilling life's purpose are, in the words of the apostle Peter: "*Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*" (Acts 2:38).

Do you want to share in the climax of God's magnificent plan? Then here and now submit your will to His will as revealed in Jesus. Do you want to know what you will be like in the resurrection? Then look to Jesus Christ and to his resurrection body.

For we will be like him! □

Who Are We?

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 quarterly *Newsletter*, a bi-monthly outreach magazine *New Horizons*, the *Bible Basics* home study course). The *Outreach Ministries* also supports a network of independent fellowships and scattered brethren.

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

HOLY DAYS 2003

Lord's Supper.....April 15
(Tuesday evening)
Unleavened Bread.....April 17*-23
Pentecost.....June 8*
Trumpets.....September 27*
Day of Atonement.....October 6*
Tabernacles.....October 11*-17
Closing Day.....October 16*
* Begins the previous evening

THANK YOU!...

Just a note to thank our readers for their continued financial support to the work of the *Churches of God Outreach Ministries*. It is greatly appreciated. With your support we can more readily forward our pioneering work in outreach to the nations. We urge you to pray fervently for our good success.

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