

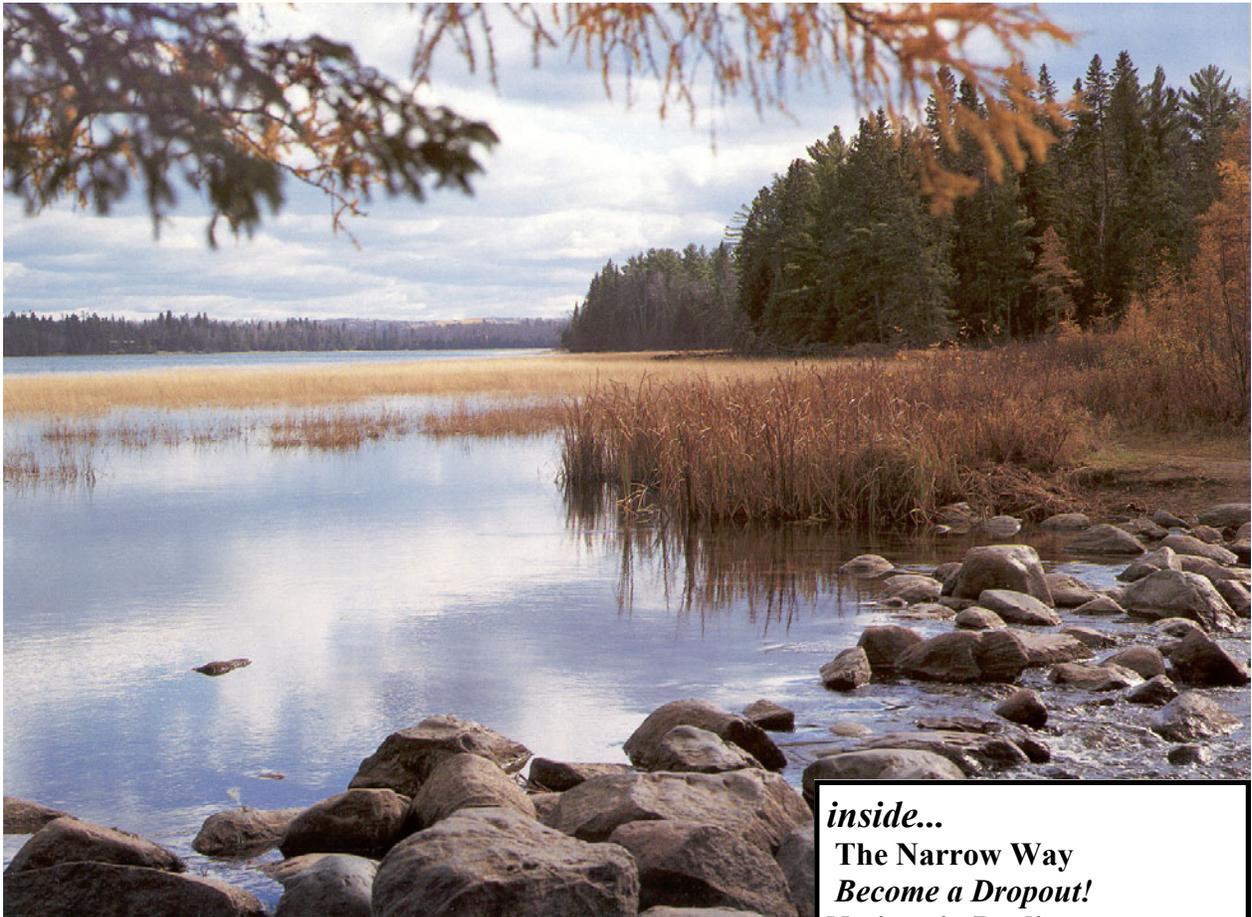
NEW

Horizons

Vol 7 No 3

May/June 2003

addressing the important issues for today and tomorrow



inside...

The Narrow Way

Become a Dropout!

Nations in Decline

What Is an Apostle?

Disfellowship - why?

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.**

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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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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
100 Northcote Street
Aberdare NSW 2325 Australia
e-mail: icg.aust@netcentral.com.au

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

or from:

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new Horizons

Issue No 39

May/June 2003

Jesus said that the way to living for ever is a 'narrow' one. What does that mean?

Christians cling to the concept of living for ever. It is 'eternity', 'heaven', 'Paradise', 'the Kingdom', the 'beatific vision'. It's the end package of the Christian pilgrimage. When life is over on Earth it's off to enjoy an eternity of blissfully accompanying God.

Perhaps two billion Christians nourish this notion, at least somewhere in the back of their minds. Yet Jesus tells us that: "...*narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and few there be who find it*" (Matthew 7:14). Picture squeezing through a narrow gap and being faced with a dangerous rock-strewn path over swamps and through dense undergrowth! On the other hand the gate that leads to destruction, Jesus says, is wide and the way broad. By this you will join the multitude of Christians strolling down a wide well-trodden boulevard - but headed for destruction. Just what did Jesus mean?

For some Christians this 'narrow way' means following a tightly restricted path of doctrinal purity. Veer marginally from that path and you tumble over the precipice to eternal death. Is this what Jesus' instruction signifies?

Let's look at some examples. Would eating - even inadvertently - a slice of pork despatch you to your knees in abject repentance, or eternal death? What about eating out on the Sabbath? Or smoking? Or forgetting - or using - a tithe, or observing a birthday, or voting in secular - or

even church - elections, or failing to wear a hat in church, or wearing make-up, or taking medication or submitting to the surgeon's knife? All such are considered by some as practices that cause the 'true' Christian to stumble from the Way.

More seriously, perhaps, would be a divorce - especially if re-marriage were involved. Then there's a failure to observe the Biblical holy days. Such practices, say some church leaders and hence many of their followers, lead to eternal death.

The What would be the penalty imposed by God for such failures? Illness? The 'Great Tribulation'? 'Hell-fire'? If so, then we need to take this very seriously indeed.

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The Scriptures certainly have strong words against those who add to - or take away from - God's revelation. One example is substituting humanly-devised days for worship for what God has revealed. The people of Israel found this out to their painful cost. They lost homes and jobs and family, were carted off to distant lands.

There are, too, certain false teachings which can 'overthrow the faith of some'. And there are strongly-condemned teachings which are 'anti-Christ'. A serious charge. Teachings that cause division - heresy, sects - in the Body of Christ are also roundly condemned in Scripture.

But is there a 'line' past which a practice becomes sin? Is it okay to

take an analgesic or set a fractured bone or extract or fill a rotten tooth or have 'alternative' treatments - but *sin* to have chemotherapy or to remove a poisonous appendix? Such matters become, for many Christians, serious doctrinal issues.

Precious time is consumed in worrying over the minutiae of doctrine. Rather than our Christian walk being a joyful pilgrimage - certainly with many ups and downs - it becomes one of painful introspection. It leads, sadly, to a self-righteous condemnation of all 'weaker brethren' and to exclusivism, a paranoid rejection of everything outside our own small circle, a 'remnant' mentality.

Consider, however, another aspect of 'the narrow way' - *how we live day-to-day*.

Human Nature

Life can be - often is - tough. Christian or not, all of us are burdened with a nature that constantly drags us from the right path - even when our standards are self-drawn and not necessarily Biblical. And how much more when compared to the standard set by Jesus Christ in his daily walk while among us. We are to be '*imitators of God as [His] dear children*' (Ephesians 5:1).

Even with the indwelling Spirit of God, a Christian is in a battle - with his own nature (different for you than for me), with the encroaching world and its ties, with the 'wiles of the devil'. What of anger, and pride, and sexual sin, and pointing the finger, and back-stabbing - even in the mind. What of covetousness and tax-dodging and selfishness.

What of consumerism and greed and 'the fat plague'. Or alcoholism and top-shelf magazines?

The apostle Paul was very specific: "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the Kingdom of God?" he asks (I Corinthians 6:9). Does he then proceed to list specific doctrinal errors? *Not at all.* Here's what excludes us from the Kingdom: "Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators nor idolaters nor adulterers nor homosexuals nor sodomites nor thieves nor covetous nor drunkards nor revilers nor extortioners will inherit the Kingdom of God".

Only 'idolaters' - false worship, a rejection of any of the first four of the Ten Commandments - can be classed in this list as 'doctrinal'. Because these are the identifying sign through all ages of the people of God. Miss these and all else could simply be enlightened humanism.

Earlier in this chapter the apostle is furious with Christians who go to litigation with other brethren (v.1ff). Elsewhere (Ephesians 5) he provides a further listing of these sins: 'don't lie to one another...don't get angry...don't allow the devil a foothold...don't steal but work to provide for the needs of others...don't grieve the holy Spirit'. All are the sure way to divert us from 'the narrow way'.

Theologians bite and devour one another over doctrinal issues which are often insoluble or open to alterna-

tive interpretation. Yet the heart is not right. But, says the apostle, 'be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another - even as God in Christ forgave you" (v.32).

As 'dear children' God permits, for each of us, the experiences we need to develop the 'fruits of the Spirit'. These are the characteristics of God Himself, the 'mind of Jesus Christ'. Given the Spirit through laying-on of hands following our baptism, over time our character weaknesses are strengthened by carefully-monitored (by God) trials. As we co-operate we stay on that 'difficult path' with the help of our Father. Our doctrinal perception may not be perfect - but we begin - as a light - to reflect the divine nature in our day-to-day walk.

Kingdom of God

"Repent and be baptized" said the apostle Peter "and you will receive the gift of the holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). Repentance is a heart-felt turning to God and His revealed way of life, a turning round of our life, our willing submission to 'every word of God'.

A newly-converted Christian simply won't have every nuance of doctrine locked in place. It's a matter of often slow and painful growth, adding doctrinal brick upon brick through the rest of life.

If his or her life were cut short before the perfect doctrinal wall were built - would salvation be lost? *No* -

our salvation depends on the merits of Jesus Christ. When the Spirit is given upon true repentance our past is forgiven and we are in the loving hands of our heavenly Father. Unless we personally choose to 'blow it' we will remain a part of His Family.

The Kingdom of God is not an opportunity to strum on a harp on cloud nine. The Kingdom is a busy, active, powerful divine spiritual force that will eventually rule the universe from planet Earth. If you have God's Spirit you will be a part of that force. Your role is determined by the degree you become, in this life, like Jesus Christ.

It's each Christian's responsibility to actively "put off, concerning your former conduct the old man which grows corrupt according to deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new man which was created according to God in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 2:22-24).

Simply 'getting it wrong' or even just partially right on some doctrine won't exclude you - usually - from that Kingdom. The important teachings are writ large in Scripture - plain for all with a willing mind to see. □

For a 'key' to that Kingdom, request the free articles
What Do You Mean - Repent?
and
Coming To Baptism

Festivals in the Law

"You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain": Commonly, the Third Commandment of the Decalogue is thought to refer to 'profane or false swearing'. *It means much more than that!*

Writes Dean Stanley in his *Christian Constitutions* (p.341): "The words are literally, 'You shall not bring the

holy name to anything that is vain' - *ie*, to anything that is unholy, hollow, empty".

Ultimately, only God can declare

FESTIVAL DATES 2003
Pentecost....June 8
Trumpets....September 27
Atonement....October 6
Tabernacles....October 11-18

what is holy! Any practice that He has not so declared simply is not acceptable to Him.

The *only* annual festivals to which God has given His name are those listed in Leviticus 23 - see previous column for some still to come this year. This excludes all those non-Biblical fasts and feasts that have been foisted on the Christian faith from pagan sources. □

To drop out of society is the challenge for all Christians!

Drop-outs get a bad press. They are feckless, lazy, preoccupied with self, unhelpful, a drain on the material and intellectual capital of the nation. Or so it is claimed. So why encourage Christians to 'drop out'? Are we not supposed to be a light, an example of industrious activity, sharing and caring, law-abiding? Well, of course we are.

Some, however, wear the Christian designer label - but their lifestyle belies their claims. The label is but a façade, a cover-up for the underlying moral nakedness, an ersatz form of the true Christian faith - and barely distinguishable from 'the man in the street'. What *they* must do is seek forgiveness, repenting from the depths of their being, and claiming the divine mercy poured out through Jesus Christ.

But true Christians are the real drop-outs.

Babylon the Great

Just look at our world. The internet is a sewer flooding society with a deluge of foul images and pornographic advertising. It exposes the innocence of childhood to twisted and poisonous values. It fuels the most perverse desires of human nature. The internet, of course, is 'neutral'. The sewage flows through it from the vile depths of human nature.

Then there's disrespect for human life. The 'free' nations are guilty of heinous genocide: over fifty million live - and totally innocent - human beings selectively aborted in the past thirty years or so. Civilized?

Our leaders compete to see who will first reach rock bottom morality. Not merely the internet but the entertain-

Request the free article:

Babylon - Fountain of Error

ment media, too, elevate filth in the name of a perverted concept of 'freedom of expression'. Laws are enacted to guarantee the rights of homosexuals to 'perform' in public. And the public love to have it so!

Look also at our personal values. In the United Kingdom an estimated thirty billion pounds is annually lavished on satisfying the unrestrained desires of children. 'Freed from debt' by means of a plastic card, parents satisfy their children's every whim: designer clothes, electronic gizmos, expensive parties. Everything, it seems, but time to care.

The 'pride of life' - vanity, covetousness, success at any price - is instilled in children as a way of life.

Effective discipline in the home is all but prohibited by a liberal governing elite. Self-restraint is no longer a priority as true values are jettisoned and replaced by '*gimme* - and now'. Truly the unrestrained lusts of youth are coming to rule the nation.

Government ministers are blind to the destruction they inflict on the 'normal' family, instead beating the hollow drum of 'equality'. Divorce, adultery, fornication, homosexuality is rampant - direct cause of the soaring increase in sexually transmitted diseases and infertility. Alcohol, tobacco, cannabis and other deadly toxins - all life-style choices - blight countless lives.

Daily, the media churn out the grotesque details of the latest muggings, today's crop of hideous murders, another round of rapes. Government ineptitude fails to curb the mayhem that is slowly strangling the nations.

In the world of commerce, lying, theft and corrupt dealing is a virtual norm. *Greed* rules.

Become A Drop-out!

Wrote the apostle Paul: "*The love of money is a root of every evil*". And that principle is a universal motivation.

So - why shouldn't a Christian 'drop out'!

Follow the Leader

Christians follow Jesus Christ. That's where our name comes from! And his way is not man's way.

Mankind, he said, should live by every Word of God. *He* did that. And so, too, should we. All we need know of that 'Word' is in the writings of the Old and New Testaments. They are not obsolete. National governments are delegated by God to protect and care for their citizens. The divinely-revealed principles apply as much today as two thousand years ago. Only when they are incorporated in society will our nations be freed from the spiritual squalor of the twenty-first century.

But what of Christians? Wrote the apostle Paul to the brethren in Corinth: "*Do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived - neither fornicators nor idolaters [ie, those who despise the first four Commandments] nor adulterers nor effeminate nor abusers of themselves with mankind nor thieves nor covetous nor drunkards nor revilers nor extortioners shall inherit the kingdom of God*" (ch 6:9-10).

As followers of Jesus we are to flee this Babylonian society. "*Come out of her my people*" said Jesus. "*Don't be a partaker of her sins*". □

NB: Many articles from back issues of *New Horizons* are now available on our website
www.cgom.org

NATIONS IN DECLINE

Nations rise and fall - often the effect of prolonged moral decline. Will our Western civilisation follow?
Bill Faith

God's word tells us that the Day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night. It will take the world by surprise. Yet, we are also told that Christians will not be surprised as will others. Wrote the apostle Paul: *"But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief. You are all sons of light, and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober"* (I Thessalonians 5:4-6).

Many are not concerned about the things of God, nor do they understand the many prophecies about the end time or the return of Christ. So it is understandable that many will be taken by surprise. In fact, the Bible also forewarns about this very thing happening. Said Jesus: *"...As the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and did not know until the flood came and took them all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be"* (Matthew 24:37-39).

Very little in our world changes. Yet if we look at past history, we can see that kingdoms came and went. In fact, ancient Rome - once the greatest nation on earth - fell because it decayed from within. Could it be that the same thing might happen to the United States, Great Britain and kindred nations?

Rise and Fall of Nations

God, speaking to Ephraim and Israel

through the prophet Hosea said, "I know

Ephraim, and Israel is not hidden from Me; For now, O Ephraim, you commit harlotry; Israel is defiled. They did not direct their deeds toward turning to their God, For the spirit of harlotry is in their midst, And they do not know the Lord. The pride of Israel testifies to his face; Therefore Israel and Ephraim stumble in their iniquity; Judah also stumbles with them" (Hosea 5:3-5).

To understand the seriousness of the matter, God states that because of

The Israel Connection

There's a centuries-old tradition (shared by many readers of *New Horizons*) that the Anglo-saxon peoples are descended from the northern Ten Tribes of ancient Israel, from 'the House of Israel' - specifically the Tribe of Joseph. (The Jewish people are from 'The House of Judah'.)

This helps to clarify the apparent puzzling absence of reference in the end-time Biblical prophecies to two important modern powers - Britain and her Commonwealth, and the United States of America - the latter arguably the most powerful nation in the last hundred years.

Our readers will find it enlightening to substitute these modern nations for Biblical references to 'Israel' and 'Ephraim' in those prophecies which refer to the time just prior to the return of Jesus.

On this basis it is clear that our nations will experience severe tribulation - even near destruction - in the years ahead, as described in the article on this page: *Nations in Decline*.

her sins, *"Ephraim shall be desolate in the day of rebuke"* (v. 9). That's the day of God's judgment against the people of the world because of their sins.

Obviously, God takes our nations immorality quite seriously. God continues in verse 11, *"Ephraim is oppressed and broken in judgment, Because he willingly walked by human precept"*. In other words, Ephraim leaned toward his own understanding and what seemed right to him instead of following God's instructions. This reminds us of what is written in Proverbs 14:12 where it is written, *"There is a way which seems right to a man, But its end is the way of death"*.

Immorality is everywhere. In the United States and the other western democracies homosexuality is accepted as just another life style. Some companies are offering insurance to their employee's same-sex partner, just as they do to an employee's married spouse. Catholic priests are accused of child molesting. Ministers of various faiths are caught up in immorality - even child pornography. The former President of the United States conducted immoral acts in the White House. Teachers have sexual relationships with their students. Prayer is being removed from schools, the Ten Commandments from public places. Our country is filled with the spirit of harlotry as mentioned in the prophecies of Hosea.

God seems to be out of favor now, being replaced by what seems right in our heart and perhaps, politically correct. The government of the United States seems to be trying to appease the various religious beliefs within her gates. But by doing so, it is violating the first commandment.

As our nations drift farther and farther away from the principles that God expects from us, we must ask ourselves, "How much longer will

God allow our nation to be the most powerful nation in the world?" After all, Bible prophecies reveal that Europe will be the ruling power at the end of this age. This ruling power is called "The Beast" and this time in history is referred to as 'Jacob's trouble'. Take the time to look around and you will see cracks appearing in our nation's foundation. After all, God will not continue to bless a nation that has rejected Him and His ways.

Bill Groce who manages \$235 billion in total assets within the PIMCO funds and who the *New York Times* named, 'The nation's most prominent bond investor' wrote the following about the United States:

While the United States rules the waves as well as turf and sky, I'm not sure that we are, or perhaps will be the economic powerhouse we once were. Three years of stock market declines, a 20% devaluation of the dollar over ten months, and an inability to serve as the global economy's locomotive despite massive monetary and fiscal stimulation suggests America's 'shining city on a hill' may have lost some of its sheen of late. The US of A, it seems, is becoming less wealthy by the minute, as foreign investment is withheld and in some cases redirected to Chinese and other more attractive ports of call. Economically, we may have begun a process of hegemonic decay....Hegemonic decay will impose costs unimagined just sixteen months ago during the innocent hours of September 10th, 2001

In addition to what Mr. Groce said in his article, the *Daily Reckoning* email investment letter followed up with the following comments:

Over the past fifty years America's net foreign trade position has gone from nearly 3% surplus to nearly 6% deficit. These are big numbers. The current deficit runs about \$500 billion-that is the amount of foreign capital required to keep Americans living beyond their means.

And now comes the Bush Administration with a \$2.2 trillion budget. The central government proposes to seize (tax) and spend about one out of every four dollars its citizens make. It also proposes to run the biggest deficits in the history of organized government - more than \$300 billion in 2003 - and a total of about a trillion dollars over the next five years.

This may not be the end of the world....but there's a whiff of decay in the air.....

Also of note is the fact that Great Britain just had the worst trade deficit in three hundred years!

The *Daily Reckoning* continued by saying that last year the dollar fell 15% against the euro and asked the question as to whether the people of the world will get tired of holding dollars and convert to another currency. If they do, the damage could be severe.

Time Closes In

Although no one knows the exact prophetic time frame, we do know

that the time of 'Jacob's trouble' (Jeremiah 30:7) is approaching. It will be a time when the United States and Great Britain along with some other English speaking nations will have calamity as never before.

It will be a time when God will place our nations into the hands of the "Beast" power mentioned in the book of Revelation to be chastised. Daniel recorded that this will be '*a time of trouble such as never was since there was a nation*' (Daniel 12:1). Yet, shortly thereafter our Savior will come and will gather His people. Israel and Judah will be once again united as one nation in the 'holy land' (Ezekiel 37:16-19).

Peter, an apostle of God, wrote: "*...The day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth, and the works that are in it will be burned up. Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness*" (II Peter 3:10-11).

It is certainly a sobering thought to realize that the world's only super-power could be destroyed economically and replaced by a government that God calls 'The Beast'. But God is not to be mocked. If we turn away from God, He will turn away from us. And the truth is, that our nation is getting farther and farther away from God and His laws. It's time that we repent and turn to God and find favor with Him.

So let us do as the Apostle Paul instructs us to do. "*Let us not sleep as others do, but let us watch and be sober, so that this day will not overtake us as a thief in the night*". □

Request: The Time of the Signs

TABERNACLES

2003

October 11-18

This year the *Outreach Ministries* will host the annual Festival of Tabernacles in

**San Antonio, Texas
Collingwood, Ontario**

Our readers are invited to join with us in these eight days of fellowship, Bible instruction - and fun. etails from any of our offices, or from info@cgom.org

WHAT IS AN APOSTLE? *tion" (Acts 24:24). Another time he said: "Many will say to me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in your name, and done many wonderful works in your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you. Depart from me you who practice lawlessness" (Matthew 7: 22, 23).*

In some Christian circles there's much ado about 'end-time apostles'. Was there - is there - such a person? If so, how can he - or she - be identified?

There can be little doubt as to who the apostles were in New Testament times. Jesus himself selected them. They are 'The Twelve' (John 6:70). And - if we are to accept the authenticity of the New Testament - Paul, also personally selected by Jesus. In later years, as recorded in the New Testament, there were other, minor functionaries designated as 'apostles' - the 'messengers of the churches'. Whatever powers were exercised by individuals in the New Testament, The Twelve have a unique and irreplaceable position. There were, too - just as today - men who falsely claimed to be apostles (Revelation 2:2).

What, then, about the centuries since? Undeniably, the teachings of the original apostles became corrupted in succeeding years - even before their deaths. The apostle Paul especially - but also Peter and John - battled those who would pervert the true message of Jesus Christ. Since then, men have arisen who sought to restore these original teachings. Are they, too, apostles?

What Is An Apostle?

It's important that we define apostleship. Essentially, they were men (always) directly chosen by Jesus (Luke 6:13) and sent out by him. (The word means 'one sent forth'). Following the apostasy and death of Judas, Peter outlined the necessary qualifications for a replacement: *"Therefore of these men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John to that day when he was taken up from us, one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrec-*

Jesus directly taught these men during the six weeks between his resurrection and his ascension to heaven (Acts 1:3). Paul, too, was directly taught by Jesus (Galatians 1:12). Jesus inspired them to establish his true teachings after he ascended to the Father, and to write them down for our learning. What they taught was *'the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints'* (Jude 3). Their legacy is the bench-mark by which all teaching through the Christian ages is to be judged. And in our day.

Signs of an Apostle

Their apostleship was confirmed by the visible fruit they bore. Says Paul: *"...in nothing was I behind the most eminent apostles, though I am nothing. Truly the signs of an apostle were accomplished among you [the Corinthian brethren] with all perseverance: in signs and wonders and mighty deeds"* (II Corinthians 11-12). The available brief record of the lives of the apostles testifies to these signs in them. They - through spiritual gifting - healed the sick and the disabled. They raised the dead. They miraculously opposed their adversaries, as did Peter with the Samaritan sorcerer Simon (Acts 8: 9-24), who sought to profit from his spiritual work.

Of course, there were *and are* false apostles. To the brethren in the late first-century Ephesian assemblies, Jesus said: *"...you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not"* (Revelation 2:2). Whatever 'signs and wonders' they are reported to perform, the brand of Christianity the false apostles purvey is far removed from the teachings proclaimed by Jesus and his apostles. Of them Jesus warned: *"...false christ and false prophets [ie political and religious leaders] will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect"* (Matthew

24:24). Another time he said: *"Many will say to me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in your name, and done many wonderful works in your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you. Depart from me you who practice lawlessness"* (Matthew 7: 22, 23).

Integrity

Another mark of apostleship was *personal integrity*. God will forgive even transient denial - as with Peter. That same apostle was, too, guilty of moral weakness and hypocrisy when with the brethren in Antioch. Although un-stated, it is certain that Peter humbly repented on both counts (Galatians 2:11-21). By contrast, Judas Iscariot by his transgression - he became a guide to those who arrested Jesus (Acts 1:16) - fell from his apostleship (v.25). Otherwise, whatever their personal characteristics as human beings, the lives of the apostles were holy and righteous and in submission to the divinely revealed standards of behaviour. They lived simply, worked with their hands, did not have many possessions, lived by faith.

The behaviour, therefore, of anyone claiming to be an apostle - or who is described by others as an apostle - will be above reproach at every level. The personal qualities of the overseers of an assembly (*see I Timothy 3, Titus 1*) are the minimum for one who claim to represent Jesus at the level of apostle.

Doctrinal Orthodoxy

Further, anyone whose teaching is in conflict with the teachings of The Twelve and Paul - as recorded in the New Testament - abrogates the right to claim, or be acclaimed as having, apostleship. As an addendum to the writings of the New Covenant, the apostle John warns: *"If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this proph-*

ecy, *God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city and from the things that are written in this book*" (Revelation 22: 18-19). It's a solemn warning for the end-time (v.20).

Authority - Then and Now

There's no doubt that The Twelve and Paul exercised oversight on all the assemblies in their jurisdiction. It was the authority to highlight false teachings and to point out false teachers. It was the authority to correct the behavioural and doctrinal aberrations they encountered. It was the authority, too, to be *'helpers of your joy'*, to encourage, to support. The authority to exercise oversight firmly but with humility and gentleness. Above all it was the authority to relay to the church the mind of Jesus Christ (I Corinthians 2:16).

But the apostles did not exercise their power within the context of an organized hierarchy - a system rejected by Jesus (Luke 22:25-26) as the form of worldly governments. The assemblies in a city - and especially its leadership of overseers and deacons - were directly responsible to Jesus Christ for how they taught the brethren, and for the moral integrity of the brethren and of their assembly. All will be held to account! When a man - or woman - is elevated in the minds of brethren to a position of dominance rather than service, almost inevitably their critical faculties are numbed. They come to believe just about anything 'the great one' dictates (*cf* Acts 8: 9-10).

In those days there existed few if any written statements with apostolic authority. However, God saw to it that the essential teachings of Jesus were recorded for future generations (John 17:20). It is to these writings, to the New Testament, that we look for our twenty-first century apostolic authority. Every Christian is obliged to personally prove from the Scriptures the doctrines of any teacher to

whom he or she gives credence (Acts 17: 11-12)..

In sum, those who claim apostleship for an individual should note that individual's personal lifestyle and carefully compare what they teach with the Scriptures.

Should you follow someone acclaimed as - or who claims to be - an apostle? Hear the authentic apostle, Paul: *"Follow me as I follow Christ"* (I Corinthians 11:1). □

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 quarterly *Newsletter, Fountain of Life*, 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* are available from any of our addresses. We are pleased to offer you, without charge, any of our publications.

Disfellowship...cont'd from p.9

Hopefully, a complete resolution of the adverse situation. Sorted - and within the confines of that local assembly.

But what if the 'accused' individual still doesn't agree despite all this? What if he or she refuses to be personally reconciled to you? Or continues to be a busybody, or to spout destructive false teachings, or to undermine the work of the assembly?

Then, said Jesus, treat him as you would someone who isn't a brother - just as you would your unconverted neighbour or family or work-mates. It's possible that the shame of exclusion from the heart of the fellowship will shame him into a change of attitude - and reconciliation. The individual may well still have the Spirit of God but in His mercy may need such pressures to restore him to fellowship.

In context of the way Christian fellowships were first organized - and ought to be today - the administration of discipline was local. It was not, as in the Roman Church, and others, a matter for an entire remote administration to resolve. Though this does not, of course, the seeking of wise counsel from outside the group if appropriate.

Temporary exclusion from a local fellowship is an important step towards the reconciliation of brothers or sisters in Christ. It is not a weapon to remove 'trouble-makers'! □

HELP - here

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

DISFELLOWSHIP...why?

In some churches a member may be disfellowshipped almost at the drop of a hat. Is it deserved? Who does it - and how? What's it for?

On occasion the secular press highlights the spectacular fall from grace of a high profile Christian evangelist or other functionary of 'high rank' who has been expelled from his church organization. But such expulsions - 'excommunication' or 'disfellowship', or 'casting out' - are not uncommon in many church circles. (And it can happen in the Golf Club, too!)

In general it means that the individual has been excluded from the company of fellow believers. The reason varies. For some it may be the uncovering of serious unchristian behaviour that threatens the reputation of the organization. For others it may be because the person refuses to wear a hat in church services, or uses the 'wrong' Bible translation, or expresses a 'politically incorrect' opinion. More usually it's because of a dispute over an obscure doctrinal point. Or criticism of the minister!

However, although the practice of excommunication is indeed 'Biblical', its application is too often misunderstood and can cause unnecessary grief, even division. Let's look at what the Scriptures teach us.

Limits

We need to understand that disfellowship is a concern of the *local* assembly. The apostle Paul, for example, only intervened in the church at Corinth because of their initial inaction. In some churches today the case becomes federal! A local dispute is ferried ever upwards to a 'higher court' ultimately to be decided by a remote committee or by the 'great man at the top'. It may take years

and much bitterness to settle. *Corinthian assemblies* (v.4).

The heart of the matter is that the concept of 'church' has been so distorted over the centuries that abuse of the practice of excommunication is inevitable. There was no rigid hierarchical structure in the primitive church of God! [Request the article *Governance in the Church of God*]

The church of God is 'one body'. It is an organism, with its membership widely scattered in time and place - and even dead! The one body is distributed in fellowships of its members. They may be a couple assembling in their home or they may be an assembly of a score or more brethren and their families. In first-century Rome, for example, there were in the city several of these assemblies (*see* Romans 16).

What we need to know is that each fellowship - although in co-operation with other Christian fellowships - was autonomous. Each was separately organized, and responsible only to Jesus Christ. We have an example of this in the seven churches of Asia Minor (Revelation 2, 3). The sole 'reference upwards' was to the one who 'walked in the midst of the churches'. There was - is - no higher authority, although in those days there were inspired apostles who advised. (Not any more; we now have the inspired Scriptures.)

Case Study

Many of the New Testament letters were written to God's church in specific cities - *eg* Corinth, Philippi, Colosse, Rome. As in Rome each city may, depending on size, have hosted several fellowships all in fraternal communication. In Corinth - a problem church if ever there was one! - several disputes had surfaced. One of them stemmed from what appears to have been a financial irregularity, a matter of fraud among the brethren (I Corinthians 6:1-8). The apostle Paul castigated the brethren for failing to peacefully resolve the matter *within the local*

Corinth also provides a case study in regard to disfellowship. A particularly sordid sexual sin was openly tolerated in the Corinthian assemblies (*ch* 5). Paul goes for the jugular: "*You are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you*" (v.2). He continues: "*In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh that his spirit may be saved in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ*" (vv.4-5).

Clearly, it was a matter for the brethren *in Corinth* to sort. Paul intervened because they had neglected this responsibility. *All local fellowships require internal order!*

Why Disfellowship?

All too often a brother or sister is disfellowshipped for reasons that have no basis in Scripture. Perhaps he 'asks too many questions' or is a paid-up member of the awkward squad or his face doesn't fit. But as we can see from that example in Corinth, it's a serious business. The individual - called of God, a joint-heir of the Universe with Jesus Christ - is being separated from his eternal lifeline. Certainly no trivial matter merits it. Paul '*delivered such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh*'. Sounds horrific!

Note, however, that this man is not being separated from 'the church' but from that local Corinthian fellowship. There remained the possibility (v.5) of salvation. Too often in some parts of the Body of Christ a disfellowshipped individual is forever shunned. Brethren will, literally, cross the street to avoid him or her. The individual is viewed as spiritually dead, a non-person.

Back to Corinth. The church was

suitably chastened by Paul's admonition - they put out the deviant from the assembly. But that was not the end of the matter. When he again wrote to the church Paul, apparently acting on received information, now urged the church to restore the man: *"This punishment [rebuke] which was inflicted by the majority is sufficient for such a man [who had apparently repented] so that on the contrary you ought rather to forgive and comfort him lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with too much sorrow. Therefore I urge you to reaffirm your love to him"* (II Corinthians 2:6-8).

So there's a limit to the exile. Every Christian can sin, but if we respond to the promptings of the Holy Spirit we can conquer it. On occasion we may slip too far, and our church - our local fellowship - must act to protect us and the fellowship. The prime purpose of excommunication is to bring about a change of heart. To restore the sinner to fellowship. Full loving forgiveness.

The Corinthian example focuses on sexual immorality. Paul then extends the list. He told them *"not to keep company with anyone named a brother who is sexually immoral or covetous or an idolater or a reviler or a drunkard or an extortioner - not even to eat with such a person"* (I Corinthians 5: 11). Christianity and its integrity is a serious business! Its reputation in the community must be preserved. And a fellowship which tolerates such perversions will itself suffer - the foul disease will spread through the brethren like a cancer. Note that the apostle limits this restriction to the brethren - not to our contacts with those outside the church of God. There is here no paranoid urge to separate from family, friends and colleagues.

And heretics

The church and its work, then, can be seriously undermined by toleration of this leaven of immorality. But

the church can also be undermined by other means.

Despite Paul's perceptive admonition to the Ephesian leadership, the churches there had, late 50s, become a hot-bed of discontent and downright heretical teachings. Timothy was sent to set matters right. (With some success, as the church was reasonably stable by the time John wrote at century's end.) Timothy, however, was faced with powerful teachers who were undermining the faith of the brethren. As in Corinth, Paul 'delivered them to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme' by means of their false teaching. As elsewhere *'their mouths must be stopped'* - by exclusion.

The church of God is to be 'a light set on a hill' - a living example of the heavenly. Brethren are to reflect the attitudes and behaviour of our Saviour. So Paul had to instruct the brethren in the church in Thessalonica about their 'disorderly conduct'. Some were sponging off other brethren, negating the principle of being self-sufficient when they could be working. It gave time to be interfering in the affairs of others. With perhaps too much time spent on endless 'doctrinal research'! Such were to be 'noted' and as little time as possible spent in their company (II Thessalonians 3:14) with the intent of shaming to encourage a change of lifestyle.

The church is a 'family', a spiritual 'nation', and as with both it requires discipline to survive - a balance between openness and purity. To this end those who disrupt, cause disunity, are disorderly, teach contrary to God's Word sometimes need to be excluded from fellowship. Such, in Bible terms, is *heresy*. It means one who has an opinion not supportable from Scripture which leads to forming a 'sect'.

How?

It's not unknown for a pastor to

without warning announce from the pulpit that 'X' has been disfellowshipped - often without explanation. Is that the way to do it?

In fact, Jesus gave the pattern: *"Even so it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should perish"* (Matthew 18:14). *Always it is with the view of reconciliation*. As Paul said, restore *'lest he be overtaken with sorrow'*. There is a way.

In the beginning it may be personal. We can just quietly - and usually - overlook an offence: 'why not suffer wrong', says Paul. However, it may need more than that, in which case - sort it out privately if possible. The problem you face may well be the tip of the iceberg of the other brother's sin. Be wise.

And if he or she persists, refuses to co-operate? Take a couple of impartial [implied] witnesses (brethren) to 'talk sense' and to counsel and to note the discussion 'that every word may be established' (v.16), said Jesus. Remember - in all of this *reconciliation* is the goal, and several face-to-face encounters may be appropriate! But be aware that *you* may be the one at fault!

Still no response? Jesus takes it further - and *he* is now much involved in the process (vv.18-20). Presuming a negative outcome to the discussion, for the sake of the church the whole fellowship also becomes involved.

It's as Paul told the Corinthian brethren: "in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, *when you are gathered together*, and [his power]" (I Corinthians 5:4), and with the wise counsel of those who 'labour among you and are over you in the Lord' (I Thessalonians 12-14). That's how important Jesus sees sin and disharmony and divisive teaching in his church.

And the consequence? *[cont'd p.7]*

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