

outreach

The Newsletter of the Churches of God, UK

PO Box 2525
LINCOLN
LN5 7PF
England

Telephone: 01526 861217
e-mail: coguk@aol.com
web-site: www.cgom.org

Regd Charity No 283358

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Matthew 28:19-20

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"I DON'T BELIEVE IT!!!" So - what's wrong with Christmas? Why can't we find it in Scripture? Would God ignore such a vital part of His plan?

The British comedy character Victor Meldrew is famed for his expression "*I don't believe it!*" Victor's problem is with a society that does the oddest things, is politically correct, can't see the obvious.

Isn't 'Christianity' a bit like that? Take *Christmas*. Cutting down a tree and bringing it into your home and decorating it for twelve days is a decided oddity. Despite the absurdities of the Christmas season few dare to challenge it. And any student of the Bible must be reading it through opaque glasses if he or she can't see that Christmas simply isn't in its pages.

Yet millions of sincere Christians will year after year lap up 'the spirit of Christmas' with its red-nosed reindeers, its red-cloaked bearded Santa, its excesses of food and wine, its outpouring of often precious and scarce finances, its never-ending shopping mall 'Christmas music'.

Nestling in all this secular - and pagan - debris is a visit to the school Christmas play or Christingle service - and perhaps the annual visit to church: 'See you next Christmas', says the vicar!

The only Biblical element in it all - ignored by most - is the occasional reference to the birth of Jesus. Yet that's perhaps the most momentous event in all history: the Word of God become flesh. Certainly an event to cherish and on which to ponder, for the divine entrance into the world of mankind is our only hope of living for ever, and of making sense of the ups and downs of this life.

We are told that God doesn't change: "Forever, O Lord, your word is settled in heaven" (Psalm 119:89) Immutable. Unchanging. And revealed fully - as much as we need to know - in the Scriptures.

The people of God are not to add to the Scriptures. Not to 'learn the ways of the nations' - especially their religious practices (Jeremiah 10:2). As an example the prophet proceeds to give a passable likeness of the Christmas tree (vv.3-5)!

But all this is 'just fun' isn't it? It's a harmless mid-winter (for some) distraction. And don't the children love it. Maybe so.

Back to the Bible

Christians, presumably, derive their beliefs from the Bible. Yet study the New Testament from now till doomsday and you will find no trace of a mid-winter festival celebrating the birth of Jesus.

Now look in the Old Testament - which was the only 'Bible' of the first Christians. Here's what the unchanging God tells us:

...take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow [the religious practices of the Gentiles]...that you do not enquire after their gods saying 'How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise'. You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way; for every abomination to the LORD which He hates they have done to their gods. ...Whatever I command you be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it (Deuteronomy 12:30-32)

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IS YOUR NUMBER UP?

Numbers are fascinating. Our universe, say some, is based on them. And when we look at the world's religions we are assailed by numbers: a billion each under the banner of Islam, Hindu, Catholic, Protestant. A few million here or there don't make much of a difference.

Visit the other end of the scale. Virtually every denomination within Christianity, for example, boasts of its percentage increase in church attendance, or the number of its churches, or the value of its assets, or the size of its annual income or percentage growth. Or, they whimper at the decline in various numbers. 'How much, how many' is a pre-occupation with their statisticians. Size, strangely, is seen as a mark of divine blessing - never mind the weed-like growth of the error-ridden!

'Look at how many attend our church and our festivals'. 'See how much literature we produce'. 'Stand in awe of how we have grown'.

Not that number crunching doesn't have its uses. It's vital in the commercial world - and even in church to a degree. But are numbers the ultimate measure of success?

All Overboard

All Christians, presumably, are on the same side, on the same boat. The same mission to take Jesus Christ to the nations and to nourish every Christian to maturity. Each 'work' on board ship has its own emphasis, it's own technique, its own programme.

Yet we see each group has launched its own lifeboat. They stand in the gunnels fending off - and offending - all comers with their doctrinal oars, oblivious of the gathering storm and the crashing billows. Oblivious of the dark enemy forces gathering on the horizon. Oblivious of the circling sharks.

A Measure of Success

If not numbers, then, how can Christians measure their work, their successes - or their failures?

On the personal level it's easy. *How well am I reflecting in my daily life, in my thoughts, the mind of Christ?* Avidly study the Scriptures and seek enlightenment and the Spirit in us will highlight our success or failure. The divine commands are clear. The 'fruit of the Spirit' (Galatians 5:22) is written large - the hundred percent score against which we measure our spiritual state.

Indeed success at the personal level is a key to the success or otherwise of the church we attend. Here -

and not in numbers - is how we can judge our group success. Are the brethren supportive of one another? Is each and every one contributing his or her spiritual gifts for the welfare of all? Are minor differences tolerated, heresy stamped on? And - is the group focused on 'taking Christ to the nations', expressing his love to all?

Growth is a result of the interaction between God and His church. The Father by His Spirit draws certain individuals to Jesus. But the church - you and me - is the vehicle by which He issues the invitation. It's the good news of salvation through Christ. Hence the incredible effort of the apostle Paul in face of fierce opposition, physical hardships and the ever-present threat of death.

Numbers may be useful for internal accounting. But they are not a measure of true success - a tally that is calculated in heaven. Let's all - individuals and churches - not 'think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think'.

Let's each actively develop and deploy our gifts as Christ has distributed them to each of us - and leave the tally to him. ف

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

Don't Believe It!...cont'd

So - what about Christmas? How does it measure up to *God's* standard? Every encyclopaedia, every newspaper - and your Christian magazine - acknowledges that the festivities are a rag-bag of practices gathered from pagan religions! Even the time of its observance, which is a frank celebration of sun worship.

Back to the Bible. Does the Creator God tell us *when* He delights in our worship? It's clearly spelled out in the Scriptures. And the first Christians - Jew and Gentile - didn't hesitate to observe the days He has prescribed. To this day many Christians observe these ancient divinely inspired practices.

Every Christian who respects the Word of the eternal God and desires to serve Him will abandon the 'way of the heathen' - which leads to death - and worship God as He has prescribed. ف

Request....

God's Holy Days

The Plain Truth about Christmas