

outreach

The Newsletter of the Churches of God, UK

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Regd Charity No 283358

January/February
2008

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Matthew 28:19-20*

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Blueprint for the Church

However distant an ideal solution may appear, it's always worth dreaming - solutions to intractable challenges can emerge! No less so with the church of God. It is divided, often at loggerheads and badly in need of some dreaming!. What was the New Testament pattern? Can it help?

Even in the church it is usual to think in terms of 'multi-national conglomerates' as the way forward: Roman, Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, World-wide, United *etc.* Or, merge the lot - let's all get together in one big happy family. A nice thought, but one that conflicts with human nature, reason - and the structure of the early church as inspired by Christ and his apostles.

One Church

The true church of God, of course, is 'one'. All its members are called by God, and their numbers and identity are fully known only to Him. They are those men and women throughout the ages in each of whom actively dwelled the Spirit of God. The New Testament teaches us they will be diverse, and that simply becoming a Christian does not do away with innate personality. Hence the inter-church conflict.

The church of God in all its two thousand year history has never been fully united. Even its early years under apostolic guidance were strife-torn. And persecution down the centuries scattered it worldwide. It is quite clear that this is reflected in today's church. There's a basic shared 'creed' but beyond that, diversity - difference of language or culture, or the special emphasis on a specific teaching. And beyond that there's heresy!

The New Testament pattern for the church allows for such diversity

within the bounds of sound doctrine. As said Peter: '*...in every nation he that fears him, and works righteousness, is accepted with him*' (Acts 10:35).

In a city such as Rome or Ephesus where the church was well established there were multiple congregations - *but all the 'one church'*, in co-operation with one another, sharing leadership and serving the one Jesus Christ.

Each congregation was small - 'house-sized' - with its own elder. But the 'presbytery' - all the elders in the city - co-operated in serving the church there. This led to a common local church culture while allowing for diversity in non-essentials. Apostolic letters circulated around the various congregations in each city and specifically addressed the challenges shared by Christians in that area (*eg* Colossians 4:15-16).

21st Century Pattern

It's a pattern for the church of God in our day to follow. For example, a larger city - London, Los Angeles, Brisbane, Dallas - may host several 'denominations' and independent fellowships with generally shared beliefs. Each, however, is caged by its own traditions and often in competition.

Some, owing allegiance to a central HQ, jealously guard their 'special relationship with God' to the exclusion of other brethren. Every jot and tittle of doctrine must, in contrast to the apostolic church, be agreed before fellowship is permitted. Others are shackled by the bureaucracy that inevitably grows to hold together diverse views and impose uniformity.

Hence the work of God suffers. Evangelistic outreach is *cont'd p.4*

I BELIEVE...

There are things I believe, and there are things I don't believe. There are things I don't know I believe or am not sure if I believe. Things I've forgotten that I used to believe. *And things I no longer believe.*

My 'church' denomination for seventeen years taught me lots of things - supposedly from the Bible. I pretty well accepted all of it, for - as I had not been a diligent Bible student until then - it seemed to make sense. Believe it or not I *still* believe the basics of what I was taught because I have since put it to more intense scrutiny.

Sound Bible teaching has largely fallen by the wayside. But tell me, from the Christian Scriptures, if you can dispute the following teachings. (My Methodist Sunday-school teachers certainly didn't, for most points, convince me otherwise.)

- Jesus Christ died and was resurrected - for me
- Jesus will return to reign over all mankind for a thousand years or so
- the Christian '*sabbath*' is not Sunday but the seventh day - Saturday
- Jesus did not 'do away' with his Father's *Law*
- I won't go to *heaven* when I die - nor will anyone else
- '*hell*' [hades] is not a place of eternal torment but simply everyone's final resting place
- the *soul* has no pre-existence nor does it survive death
- everyone will be *resurrected* at some time, for judgment
- the Christian Scriptures know no other divinely-sanctioned '*holy days*' than those in Leviticus 23
- Jesus said he would build a *church* - and records show it existed since founded early in the first century, however now deviant from his teachings

I repeat - show me evidence that these beliefs are not Scriptural. They are the basics, though experience and study has somewhat modified my understanding.

Sceptics, of course, will say '*You can't trust the Scriptures*'. Well, the Scriptures - the Bible - make sense. They are true to life. They are consistent over thousands of years. They seem 'wrong' only where I am ignorant - of language, translation, culture, customs *etc.* And - since Jesus survived death surely he can apply the Word to anyone personally despite any imperfections in transmission since written down.

My seventeen years in the 'one true church' were not wasted, but were a solid if imperfect foundation for personal growth towards Christian maturity - a goal still to be achieved. None of us can say '*That's it - I*

'Love' Defined

In human terms, 'love' has varied meanings. 'I love chocolate'. 'I love to swim'. 'I love you'. 'And I love your new hair-style'. *Etc.* Definition runs from a simple 'like' through to intense passion. What about *love* in the Bible?

One Bible teacher instilled the notion that love was the observance of God's Law. He drew on Paul's words in Romans: '*... love is the fulfilling of the law*' (ch 13:10). Of course, if I love God I will do my best to obey Him: '*...For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous*' (I John 5:3). Indeed that's what Jesus said his followers ought to do: '*...If you love me, keep [watch, guard] my commandments*' (John 14:15).

But is not that the position of good observant Jews? They are diligent to observe all points of the Law of God - all 613 as they count them. I can't lay claim to that! So - is my love lacking? Could there be more to 'love' than commandment-keeping?

In the famous 'love chapter' - I Corinthians 13 - Paul tells his readers that if they don't have *love* (Gk *agape*) they are all noise and no substance. Jesus praised any who would die for their friends. Paul adds that martyrdom is useless if there is no *love*. And without true love all the good works we can muster are pointless as far as salvation is concerned.

Minutely to observe the letter of the Law earns few brownie points with God. As Jesus demonstrates in the 'sermon on the Mount' true religion goes far beyond, far deeper in the human psyche, than the external act (Matthew 5-7).

agape love is used rarely outside the New Testament. It is of the mind and the emotions rather than of the body. It is commitment. It is the love *God* has and is. Obedience to God doesn't define love but stems from it. Willing service to my fellow man, too, is one of its fruits. True love is everything that Jesus was - and which we are to become. Ω

now know it all'. Always there are new treasures to extract from the Word.

Disillusioned with a particular church denomination some contemptuously dismiss everything they learned, not having the sense to filter out the dross and retain the nuggets of truth. (*Baby and bath water* come to mind.)

Our relationship with 'God' is personal and in the end independent of man's attempts to explain Him, however much we are indebted to our 'teachers'. Ω

The Bible – West v. East

Sceptics have a horse-laugh at some sayings of the wisest man who ever walked our planet - Jesus Christ. Didn't he realize camels can't go through the eye of a needle? Or that you can't move a mountain by praying? Isn't it unproductive to forgive someone *'seventy times seven'*, as Jesus urged his disciples? And what philosopher would encourage disciples to cut off their hands or pluck out eyes for offences? (Some have done this!) Or give away all your clothes because asked? Or *'...give to him that asks you'*.

Of course, if you believe every word of the Bible is to be understood literally you may have cause for concern. For it says *'...holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit'* (II Peter 1:21). Indeed some believers almost worship the *King James* version of the Christian Scriptures, and even view its archaic English as 'sacred'.

Given our modern western use of language this approach is understandable. Every word has a precise meaning. In general we mean what we say. With, of course, exceptions - *idioms* and *metaphors*. What about the *'storm in a tea cup'* or *'kick the bucket'* or something costs *'an arm and a leg'*? But we don't usually - except as children - tend to exaggerate. Should we not expect something similar in an ancient language?

Picturesque Language

Not so in times past in Bible lands! Language was colourful, over the top, picturesque. What was important was the *impression* of your words. One writer recalls his early life (early twentieth century) in Palestine. On a visit the host insisted his home was yours. You could burn it down if you

wished to. Or do as you please with his wife and children. (Remember Lot!) And before you stayed for a meal you refused several times - before accepting.

No-one believed the form of words. It was the harmless, courteous cultural form. And it was the background for the text of the Scriptures - Old Testament and New. So everyone understood, for example, the meaning of the parable of the *'mustard seed faith and the removable mountain'*: the smallest contrasted with the largest. But not literal! Nor - until Islam and Sharia - would anyone expect literal removal of hands and eyes. Nor to forgive four hundred and ninety times for a repeated offence. *'Seventy times seven'* simply means an indeterminate number (cf Genesis 4:24).

The invisible God (I Timothy 1:17) himself is similarly described. He chooses to appear to man in human form - but it is also said that *'...he shall cover you with his feathers, and under his wings shall thou trust'* (Psalm 91:4 and see Deuteronomy 32:11-12)). It's what we call *metaphor*. Then there's the *'eye for an eye'* principle. All it means is balanced justice - the punishment (usually monetary) is to be proportionate to the crime, tempered by mercy when judged appropriate.

Much of the 'distress' in our Bible study is alleviated by an understanding of this simple principle. We inhabit a vastly different world, a different culture from Biblical Palestine, a very different language.

Take this on board and much of the aggravation between brethren can be dissipated. Minor disputes on interpretation can thus be avoided. Ω

Terrible Troubles

'Thank God I'm an atheist!' So writes a noted columnist commenting on the violence of religion down the centuries. Whether Islam, Christianity, Hindu - even Buddhism, it seems 'religion' all too often finds expression in violence. The lust for power stimulates it. Territorial ambitions. The urge to dominate. A 'divine imperative'.

Mediaeval 'Christianity' has its own horror story. Islam, both anciently and today, seeks world domination by all means. The 'age of reason' largely swept away Christian excess but still deserts Islam. Given opportunity and means, any dominant faith will seek to get its hands on the rudder of world opinion, to impose its own ideology on all mankind. But as is said: *'You ain't seen nothing yet!'*

Reports say atheism is in decline, but perhaps one in five of us - worldwide - still claims to be 'secular' in some form. That's over a billion 'souls'. And, of course, secular states are not themselves averse to violence. The human heart - religious or secular - can all too quickly peel away the superficial veneer of civilised behaviour!

Give us peace, prosperity and security and we roll along in harmony with neighbour and nations. But when the storm gathers? Comes along famine or drought (*see p.4*) or severe privation and the lust for survival becomes all-consuming.

Not that severe stress will necessarily turn anyone to their

Creator. No - we can sink so low that we would rather die than turn to the one true God! Note what the apostle John (Revelation 9:20-21 *CEV*) relays: *'...The people who lived through these terrible troubles did not turn away from the idols they had made, and they did not stop worshiping demons. They kept on worshiping idols that were made of gold, silver, bronze, stone, and wood. Not one of these idols could see, hear, or walk. No one stopped murdering or practicing witchcraft or being immoral or stealing.'*

'Terrible troubles' do indeed sweep the world from time-to-time: Germany, Cambodia, The Balkans, Rwanda, Sudan - even Britain and America. All have hosted 'killing fields'. For all are driven by a nature that has fallen from its original 'golden age' of innocence. Who will bet there isn't more to come? That one - or some - of the twenty-first century's major faiths won't again seek to enslave the world with its own 'brand loyalty'?

The Christian Scriptures, certainly have been prescient about human frailty. Be sure its warning of *'things to come'* will indeed come to pass. Best to be prepared. Ω

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WATER AT RISK

Water is in such short supply in many areas that it is limiting economic development. The problem can only intensify as rising population pressure, pollution, industrial development, and global warming increase the demand for the dwindling supply. Consequently, water rather than oil may become the most critical natural resource shortage of the decade.

Water is in such short supply in many parts of the world, it is leading to disputes that sometimes become violent. For example, the civil war in Sri Lanka is partly about water. Israel has its eye on the Wazzani River in southern Lebanon. Iraq, Syria and Iran are furious about Turkey's plans to dam the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The Darfur tragedy in Africa was triggered by a lack of water, not religious differences. India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh are at loggerheads over the Ganges and other rivers. Disputes about limited water supplies are also becoming common throughout Asia. [Ed: add south-east Australia to the list, and Cyprus] The list goes on and on.

Many parts of America also lack enough water. Regions with shortages include much of the Great Plains and most of the Southwest. Several large cities in the East and the Midwest are also experiencing water shortages.

Water is in such short supply in many western states, historical water rights that go with properties are often worth more than the land itself. Many ranchers have started selling their water allotments to nearby cities, and are letting Bambi and the tweety birds enjoy the land. One rancher near Denver recently said, "Water is the most profitable crop I ever had."

Many private water utilities are also becoming very profitable. Because their output is so large, even small price increases per thousand gallons can generate millions of dollars in extra earnings. *quoted from John Mauldin*

...I, the LORD, took away the food from every town and village, but still you rejected me. Three months before harvest, I kept back the rain. Sometimes I would let it fall on one town or field but not on another, and pastures dried up. People from two or three towns would go to a town that still had water, but it wasn't enough. Even then you rejected me. I, the LORD, have spoken! I dried up your grain fields; your gardens and vineyards turned brown. Locusts ate your fig trees and olive orchards, but even then you rejected me. I, the LORD, have spoken!'

(Amos 4:6-9 CEV)

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The Birth of Jesus

Few professing Christians are unaware that Jesus was not born in late December. It's general knowledge that this time of year was celebrated anciently as the *Saturnalia* - the rising of the sun (northern hemisphere) following its long slow decline. A time to rejoice - and the festivities were a welcome break from the dark days of winter.

But how did this pagan celebration become 'Christian'? In large part it was a fourth-century ploy by the church to 'capture' the pagans into the fold. Simply Christianize the celebration by giving it a Christian twist. It became known as '*the mass of Christ*', now Christmas.

There's another element. It's well understood that Jesus was born earlier in the year - around late September. That means, of course, that he '*became flesh*' (John 1:14) as a human embryo sometime late December. That's when Mary was impregnated by the Father through His Spirit (Matthew 1:18). The exact time - as with any pregnancy - is not pinpointed, though the birth was, likely, at the autumn festivals when the church already celebrates the 'tabernacling' of God with mankind: '*...the word became flesh and dwelt [Gk tabernacled] among us*'.

As the sun rises and gives light to the earth so, as prophesied by Malachi (*ch 4:2*), '*...the Sun of Righteousness shall arise*' - Jesus '*...the light of the world*' (John 8:12). Mankind early began to worship the sun - seeing it as a symbol of the promised Messiah (Genesis 3:15) - a practice condemned by JHVH (Deuteronomy 4:19). Ω

Blueprint... cont'd

stifled. Brethren are isolated. Deprived of strong outside spiritual influence, heresy flourishes. A self-righteous attitude becomes deeply rooted.

But the dream *can become reality*. It's time for the churches of God around the world to abandon isolationism and work together in love and harmony, *while accepting diversity!*

Checklist...

- Encourage the leadership and brethren to be open and accepting of like-minded brethren
 - Be tolerant of variant beliefs
 - Implement 'small group therapy' (*see above*)
 - Co-operate on outreach
 - Meet together socially
 - Assemble together for festivals
 - Share leadership and pulpit
 - *Pray and think unity!*
- Ω

Read: **The Small Church**
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FINANCES (COGUK) Nov/Dec 2007
Income...£321 OUTGOINGS... £585