

outreach

The Newsletter of the Churches of God, UK

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Matthew 28:19-20

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Time to 'Do God'

We are in a mess. Not many would quarrel with that assessment of the world's economy. World 'leaders' in summit after sumptuous summit in exotic locations discuss the current challenges and endlessly produce lengthy anodyne reports that fail to address them.

Economists (and Prime Ministers) draw up multi-point plans to tackle the dilemma of public and private debt. All very useful—but spectacularly missing the real problem.

The core of our on-going financial catastrophe is the attitude—shared by individuals and by governments—'eat, drink and enjoy yourself; The multi-trillion dollar US debt, the profligacy of the previous UK Government, the feckless refusal in Greece to pay their due taxes, the reckless borrowing in Ireland and Spain—all exemplify this adage.

In the beginning...

The missing dimension in economic theory is ...God. Do you ever hear our politicians mention the 'G word'? 'We don't do God' - and even though we are forever bombarded with 'God bless America' yet God's solutions are not just sidelined there but reversed.

Until the divine principles are embraced nations will continue to stumble from crisis to crisis. Western democratic societies have been beneficiaries of long-promised divine blessing. All we have and are derives from our in-born ability to properly exploit the planet's resources. It never was

When you become successful [KJV: 'get wealth], don't say, "I'm rich, and I've earned it all myself." Instead, remember that the LORD your God gives you the strength to make a living. That's how he keeps the promise he made to your ancestors. But I'm warning you—if you forget the LORD your God and worship other gods, the LORD will destroy you, just as he destroyed the nations you fought

Deuteronomy 8:17-19 CEV

'ours'. Hear God's warning:

It applies universally—far beyond the bounds of ancient Israel, for it is God who '... has made of one blood all nations of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; That they should seek the Lord

Acts 17:26-27

Principles

The Psalmist asks: '...If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?' (Psalm 11:3). In our day the foundations of good and wise government

have, worldwide, crumbled. And the man in the street asks this same question. As does our confused and inept leadership

The 'world' is too committed to 'doing its own thing' to make the change necessary for survival. That change will come—but in God's good time. But at this time the Father is calling out a people for Himself and preparing them for

rulership in tomorrow's world.

So—what can we do, as followers of Jesus the Messiah?

In short, do what Jesus did. The detail may be disputed, but the broad outline is clear. He has laid the sure foundation for his people to follow. *cont'd p.4*

Wedding Ceremonial

*Marriage within the Churches of God needs to be viewed in contrast to the general trends of society as a whole. We try to follow a Biblical pattern, but too often are caught up in the secular or religious distortions of marriage. Any change to the received pattern will require a shift in our perception. This article addresses the **Wedding Ceremony**.*

Marriage is joyous, and the wedding ceremony should reflect this. There are few requirements derived from Scripture for a wedding: expression of mutual consent, exchange of vows (the marriage contract including a 'dowry?'), celebration, State registration. In Israel certain practices, not all necessarily recorded in the Scriptures, became tradition, *eg* a canopy, the veil, procession, ring, fine clothing, witnesses, feasting (for seven days) and rejoicing. They were symbolic. In Israel a blessing was pronounced on the bride by the families, expressing the hope that she would be fertile

But weddings today are, increasingly, considered as a 'fun thing' – frivolous in dress, in location, in ceremonial, in choice of music. So - many pastors face a dilemma when asked to 'perform' a wedding, especially when the couple is unknown to them.

Conflict and Counsel

Conflict can arise, for example, when a minister isn't happy with the suitability of a marriage on any of several grounds. Do the couple understand marriage and its potential ups and downs, joys and pains, its times of prosperity and its times of distress? What if either party is divorced once - or more often? Or a serial adulterer? Or if it's a 'marriage of convenience' – for example, to ensure citizenship? Or a 'forced marriage' as in Islamic circles? What if it's a teen fantasy? Or there's an abusive or a criminal background? Or he or she is a 'gold-digger'? What of a huge age difference, or incompatible background, or a 'mixed' marriage? What if it's a same-sex couple seeking Christian marriage? Or if one (or both!) partners are trans-sexual?

Is the pastor responsible – and to whom - in any degree should the marriage fail or its legality is questioned? Proposed legislation in the UK may place the church at odds with the State.

In counsel before a marriage, the elder should when necessary make clear any reservations he may have. However, it is the couple's own responsibility to make the final decision. The assembly leadership is an interested third party only, whose role is to prepare a Christian couple for life-long marriage.

[A suggested outline for godly counselling *before* a proposed marriage is available]

Pastors would be better, it seems, not to touch a wedding ceremony with the proverbial barge-pole!

Tradition

On the other hand it is generally expected that a pastor or priest or minister conduct the ceremony. It's part of Western Christian culture. Yet such involvement in a marriage is certainly *not* a Biblical requirement. The arrangements for a wedding, in the Biblical context, are a matter for *both involved families*, though there are also State legal considerations. The couple should seek to involve both sets of parents, though the latter are likely to favour a traditional 'white wedding', with 'clergy' officiating.

But the involvement of 'clergy' in a wedding *ceremony* is a tradition born of the enhancement of control by the medieval church priesthood and does *not* derive from Scripture. Consider the following:

- "According to ancient patriarchal custom, marriage among the Israelites was the affair of the parents..." (C F Keil: *Manual of Biblical Archaeology*, v.2, p.167)
- "Marriage [in Israel] , being a private affair of the parties and their respective families, required no public ceremony religious or otherwise for its legalisation" (E Neufeld: *Ancient Hebrew Marriage Laws*, p.148)
- "The human joy of a Roman bridal procession was denounced [by the church] as obscene, and the church regarded the marriage-rite as a ceremony to be conducted by its own ministers in an attitude of great gravity" (Joseph McCabe: *The Influence of the Church on Marriage and Divorce*, p.59)
- "Marriage [in medieval Christian Europe] was still a civil contract - there was no obligation to be married in church until many centuries later - and it was dissolved on civil grounds" (*ibid.* p.79)
- "The obligation to marry in church [*ie* a priest officiating] was not imposed until the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century, and until that date even Romans [Catholics] married without a religious ceremony" (*ibid.* p.94)
- "In Rome itself marriage remained until the sixteenth century a domestic rite" (*ibid.* p.116)
- "Luther saw that the conversion of marriage into a sacrament was an ecclesiastical trick designed to increase the control of the Papacy" (*ibid.* p.150)
- In Judaism it is not required that a rabbi officiate at weddings
- The Scriptures have no direct instruction for a wedding ceremony – or for church involvement in it
- Marriage is not, however, merely secular: God is involved in a Christian marriage. Whether or not an elder officiates at the ceremony does not affect this
- The bride and groom (and their families) should work out a ceremony that will be special to them
- A suggested ceremony can perhaps be drawn up by the elders

Conclusion: Within the Churches of *cont'd p.3*

Wedding... *cont'd*

God Outreach Ministries an elder need not feel obligated to conduct a wedding ceremony – or indeed give 'a blessing'. (There must, however, be *proper registration* with the State authorities.)

We should, of course, counsel brethren regarding godly principles – especially on the permanence of marriage - before *and* after a wedding. Church support for newly-weds is vital. But whether or not to marry is a decision to be taken by the couple, as is the form and conduct of the ceremony. [A *study outline on Marriage Counselling* is available]

In sum: Marriage has clear analogies with the spiritual – Christ and the Church - but the 'joining' belongs to the secular. God has enjoined and set in motion the process, but has not joined individual marriages: 'what' God has joined and not 'who' (Matthew 19:6). There is no Biblical reason for the church leadership to be involved. All the brethren in an assembly - not just the pastor - should be supportive of the newly-weds. Ω

[See also the articles *Spend a Lifetime – Together, The Edge of Divorce*]

Letter from England

Hello from Lincolnshire

The Christian's walk is often likened to a pilgrimage, as highlighted by John Bunyan in his book *Pilgrim's Progress*. It's worth noting that the pilgrim sets out with a specific goal. It's not a pointless ramble.

Of course—as several of my Christian neighbours will testify—for them there is a goal: *heaven*. (Though what that means for them is somewhat hazy.) The trouble is, that's *not* the goal God intends. But believe *heaven* is the goal and you obscure the purpose of our pilgrimage.

Our life in Christ is 'a wilderness experience'. We sometimes fall into the 'trough of despair' - but always there's a way out as we trust our loving Father in heaven. Many are even now suffering the effects of the selfishness of others and of bad government. But, in the words of the hymn: '*We know we at the end, shall life inherit*'.

That's not some nebulous aspiration but a divine and unbreakable promise backed by the Creator of the Universe. We will not, come the resurrection, perish (John 3:16)—die, be annihilated, wiped from memory—but will live for ever as an active and integral part of the eternal Family of God, working with Him throughout the vastness of the Universe.

Insight from Paul

The apostle Paul's letters shed a bright light on our walk with God

The apostle Paul had a clear understanding of 'the end time'. His panoramic view extended from his own time and culminates in the coming of the Father to Earth after death has been abolished.

In his day, for example, he perceived the rise of deceptive false prophets within the local assemblies. He noted, too, the tendency for the brethren to focus on the return of Jesus—an understandable longing for his presence—to the detriment of spiritual growth. Some even quit their daily work.

But Paul's view of the last days—that time between his day and the return of Jesus—was structured. He gives an outline in writing to the Corinthian brethren: '*...as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. But every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming. Then comes the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign, till he has put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death*' (I Corinthians 15:22-26)

The apostle's focus, however, is the reality of what the apostle John (Revelation 20:5) terms 'the first resurrection' of the saints, and he expands on this throughout his letters—notably in 1 Corinthians 15 and I Thessalonians 4. But it won't happen yet, he says—for terrible events will precede that momentous earth-shaking occasion.

Paul foresees a falling away from '*the faith once for all delivered to the saints*' through Jesus and his apostles—a falling away that began in his own time. He sees the development of a 'man of sin' - probably a series of 'office holders' culminating in one notorious individual at the end -time (II Thessalonians 2). He predicts a mass moral decay in society at large (I Timothy 4).

Mankind always experiences such times of distress, but, he says, this age *will* consummate in the return of Jesus and the resurrection of the saints. Ω

Whatever life throws at us during our pilgrimage it is filtered through the loving hands of our Father. At the end He will have refined us, removed the dross, shaped us into vessels perfectly equipped as His beloved offspring.

James

DECEMBER 21

Prophetic dates come and they go. What about December 21 2012?

A day of doom. No point taking to the hills, for earth's billions will not see tomorrow's sun. Alignment of planets, a colliding planet (Nibiru), a shifting polar axis, reversal of earth's magnetic field, a 'beam' from the centre of the Milky Way, catastrophic earthquakes and tsunamis. All coming to focus on December 21 this year.

You may as well forget your silver and your gold and your investments. Nor will what you have stashed under the mattress be of any further value. Make peace with all you have offended—and with God. It is the end.

That's the scenario that is being painted, based on an interpretation of an ancient Mayan prophecy.

Books, films, theatre—there's no shortage of information about December 21, 2012. Millions believe it marks the 'end of civilisation as we know it'. It's even asserting that there is a conspiracy by the world's scientific and political authorities to hide the facts. But is it true? Is this 'the end' for all of us?

The End

Not that the Mayans predicted such for this now infamous date. For them it simply marks the end of one time period—as, for example, did the rolling over of the twentieth century into the twenty-first. But it makes for good telly!

Written into the folk memory of all peoples is the concept of an 'end'. It may be a subconscious memory of the worldwide destruction of mankind by the Great Flood. But terrible disasters do happen—and not infrequently. And predictions of such an end abound—one estimate was of 'thousands' of failed predictions of world's end.

Let's focus, however, on the Bible, the Christian Scriptures. What is meant by 'the *'...end of the world'* (Matthew 24:3)? More accurately '*...the consummation of the ages*'. The disciples asked Jesus about this.

But for these disciples 'the end' signified the introduction of a new order—the overthrow of Roman dominion, the establishment of a Jewish Kingdom with Jesus' presence as King, just as predicted by the prophets. *It was not a 'December 21' scenario!*

What' the Time?

Many 'prophecy buffs' are getting quite excited by the thought of 'the end'. That end, Biblically, while being catastrophic for the majority of mankind yet heralds a new era. An era of peace among nations. An era of even-handed justice. An era—a thousand years—of prosperity, of abundant resources properly used, of health and well-being. All resulting from an almost universal change in the human heart.

Many Christians infer from various texts of Scripture that God has assigned mankind six thousand years to 'do his own thing', following which He will intervene through the return of Jesus to set us right. The start point—and the end—of that period is disputed. Some believe the end point is imminent, though the Hebrew calendar denotes this year as 5772 (years from creation). Based on creation as 4004BC (a date accepted by many) the six thousand years now should have expired.

What must be emphasized, however, is that God always acts on time—*His* time. Yet there are many siren voices focusing on a variety of dates for 'the end'. At this time there is no 'sure word of the

Lord' as to when Jesus will return. No matter when—this year or in 228 years—it is for each of us to be daily serving God and preparing to reign with Jesus. Ω

Do God...cont'd

In contrast to 'the world' God must be our constant companion (Psalm 10:4). We constantly evaluate our thoughts and our actions in the light of His revealed Word. It is a signpost to the true values in contrast to the 'me, me' culture that has brought our nations to their knees—economically, socially, sexually.

The apostle Paul sums up the Christian position: '*...if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world*' Ω

Today's Lesson

The Food Stamp Program, administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, is proud to be distributing the greatest amount of free meals and food stamps ever.

Meanwhile, the National Park Service, administered by the U.S. Department of the Interior, asks us to "*Please Do Not Feed the Animals.*" Their stated reason for the policy is because the animals will grow dependent on handouts and will not learn to take care of themselves.

This ends today's lesson.

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