

The Newsletter of the Churches of God, UK

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Matthew 28:19-20

representing



A Planned Family

We don't have to delve far into the Christian Bible to learn that the Creator is big on families. He told our ancestor Adam, for example to take a wife and have kids.

God, however, doesn't lock man in a straitjacket. There were no 'forced marriages'. He provides the guidelines for a successful family to continue through many generations and it is for us individually to apply those guidelines. We have, that is, freedom to choose.

A Spirit Family

It's no surprise, then, to discover that this is a mirror image of His own desires. He, too, is planning a family—a spirit Family. The plan was laid before mankind existed, and indeed man was created for that very purpose.

A foundation guideline for the family is compatibility—we are to become '*...one flesh*', united in our life's goals. Writes the prophet Amos '*...can two walk together if they don't agree?*' Amos 3:3). And Paul reflects this message for Christians: '*...don't be unequally yoked with unbelievers*' (II Corinthians 6:14).

Another foundation principle for the family is total commitment: '*...he that endures [perseveres] to the end shall be saved*' (Matthew 24:13). Those who will join Jesus at the first resurrection are '*...called and chosen and faithful*' (Revelation 17:14).

God applies these same compatibility guidelines to His own 'marriage', and to the planning of His own children. For they will be '*trained up in the way they should go*' to reflect His

standards, His goals. (Remember—He will be working with them throughout eternity!)

A Divine Plan

Man to fulfil the divine plan, was created in God's image (Genesis 1:27)—uniquely with an indwelling human spirit capable of a relationship with Him.

Humans, of course, have little choice in their children. But the all-wise God does have a choice, for out of the multiple billions of men and women born on earth over six millennia He is careful *at this time* to select only those who will be compatible, and who will remain committed.

Divine Template

God's firstborn—Jesus the Christ—was the perfect reflection of God's desire. He was sent from heaven having first created all that is, including mankind. In the flesh he set the perfect example, the template for a child of God. This he taught to his disciples—the Twelve and others—by word and deed through several years of intimate face-to-face training. They are the nucleus of 'the church'—the means by which the Father would issue His invitation to sonship, actively drawing to Jesus those who respond in the manner He prescribes (Acts 2:38).

For those who do come to Christ, life becomes 'boot camp', the training ground for the co-heirs with him of the Father's eternal Kingdom. Setting out the programme, Jesus says: '*...Go in through the narrow gate, for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and many there are who go in through it. Because narrow is the gate and constricted is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it*' (Matthew 7:13-14). It's no easy 'believe and be saved' message.

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Why Evangelize?

Just why *do* the churches ‘evangelize’? It may seem a ‘no-brainer’ but there is some misunderstanding as to the purpose of the church. Certainly we must take the message of Jesus worldwide—but are we directing our efforts, our resources, most effectively? Is its purpose ‘getting people into church’, on presenting the Gospel as a means of self-fulfillment, on solving personal issues, on feeding the poor, on ‘saving from hell-fire’?

Whatever merits such approaches may have, they often miss the fundamental purpose of the Gospel, failing to take account of those statements of Jesus and the apostles. That purpose is *God’s planned family*, as outlined on *page one* of this issue.

How then does this affect the outreach of the church?

Lay the Foundations

Jesus made some powerful statements which impact on our outreach methods. He tells the listening crowd in the synagogue:

- *‘All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will in no way cast out’* (John 6:37)
- *‘No one can come to Me unless the Father who has sent Me draw him, and I will raise him up at the last day’* (v.44)
- *‘It is written in the Prophets, “And they shall all be taught of God.” Therefore everyone who hears and learns from the Father comes to Me’* (v.45)
- *I have revealed Your name to the men whom You gave to Me out of the world. They were Yours, and You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your word’* (ch 17:6)
- *‘He who has ears to hear, let him hear’* (oft repeated)

Paul adds further insight:

- *‘you see your calling, brothers, that not many wise men according to the flesh are called, not many mighty, not many noble*

And the apostle Peter tells his hearers:

- *the promise is to you and to your children, and to all those afar off, as many as the Lord our God shall call*

Divine Invitation

There is, then, a specific *calling*—an invitation, a ‘calling towards’, a ‘drawing’ to be part of the divine plan of salvation. So we must ask, Who are ‘the called’?

Paul bursts the vanity balloon—God doesn’t often invite the noble or the powerful but ‘the weak of the world’ and ‘the base’ so that *‘...no flesh should glory in His presence’* (I Corinthians 1:26-29).

The life story of the apostle Paul clearly shows a pattern of intense energy and dedication in executing the ‘great commission’. It is global. It is dangerous. It invites persecution, even death. But it is rarely replicated today!

Modern evangelism, too often, has a focus on Christianity as a road to prosperity. Conversion—‘coming to Jesus’—is often viewed as an easy passage to eternity, or as a way to avoid ‘the coming tribulation’. Or the focus is on a specific aspect of prophecy, an example being an emphasis on what happens when Jesus returns—often called ‘the gospel of the Kingdom of God’. [See p.3: Matthew 24:14]

Action Plan

The apostle Paul, as we noted, certainly understood the concept of the Father’s calling, and expended his life in promoting the Gospel. While much of his preserved writing was to combat error, yet his focus—as in his letter to the Ephesian brethren—was on the Christian’s role as co-heirs with Christ.

His initial emphasis in evangelism is summed up in his first letter to Corinth: *‘...I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified’* (ch 2:2). Paul (to Jews and Gentiles) proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah who alone through his death and resurrection is the sole access to reconciliation with the Father. He, Jesus, is the ‘door’—the only access point—to participation in the Father’s plan for mankind (Acts 4:12).

Those who *‘...had ears to hear’* this message (the ‘Gospel’) were drawn by the Father to Jesus, changed their lives around, were baptized—and, sin forgiven, became sons and daughters of God and part of the Body of Christ. As ‘new-born babes’ they are nourished within the church in the ways of the everlasting Kingdom—trained, writes Paul to Ephesus—*‘in works of service’* as joint-heirs of the Universe with Christ. For eternity.

Generation succeeds generation—and still the Father withholds His Son from returning for the next phase of His master plan. Prophetic interpretations fail and merely generate scepticism. The church and its leadership grows older and feebler, while the focus is on material empire building. It is time to dynamically present to the world. Jesus Christ, the awesome Son of God, and his much misunderstood teachings.

The focus of evangelism, then, is to herald God’s invitation to the world to become members of His eternal Kingdom, His spirit Family, persuading those who listen concerning Jesus the Messiah. Ω

Letter from England

Greetings from Lincoln

If you knew with certainty that something you do, some habit, would lead to horrible personal injuries or serious illness, even death—would you not take every possible step to change that practice? Yet millions of our fellow countrymen walk around with just that deadly threat. They are sleepwalking, guaranteed, into ultimate oblivion.

And the deadly habit? *Sin*. It's not much spoken of today, even from the pulpit. Thus for most there is no real consciousness of sin—yet without 'the cure' spiritual death is inevitable. Have you at all '*...come short of the glory of God*', from His perfection? Or ever done anything you think is wrong? *That's sin*, and death awaits.

The trouble is, we have lost sight of God. For most, He—if you *ever* think of Him—is a distant, vague nonentity, Jesus Christ His representative 'meek and mild', a softie. Yet can you imagine the awesome power needed to create the vastness of our universe? The depth of mind that conceived the physical and biological perfection of life? Jesus Christ did that. Writes Paul, '*...our God is a consuming fire*'. Certainly worthy of worship and One to whom we must submit.

In past times folk were *scared* into a usually temporary 'repentance' by the erroneous and *unbiblical* threat of an ever-burning hell-fire. Nevertheless, God *will* judge each of us, and if through Jesus we turn to Him—turn from sin—we will, free from every impairment, be on the path to an active life throughout eternity.

If not, we will die—permanently. Not 'hell' but a missed opportunity to live eternally, to fulfil our incomprehensible potential. For we will have spurned the purpose for which we were each born.

God our Father invites everyone to become part of His spirit Family. When he 'taps you on the shoulder' (through hearing His Word, or through illness or tragedy *etc*). If you do show interest the Father will lead you to Jesus Christ—even if you don't yet know who he is. Only in him by means of his sinless life, his sacrificial suffering on a stake, and his resurrection from the tomb—only thus way may we enter a relationship with the Father, the Creator of all.

You must, however, be ready to pay the price, to walk the talk: '*...Go in through the narrow gate*' said Jesus, '*for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and many there are who go in through it. Because narrow is the gate and constricted is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it*' (Matthew 7:13-14). It isn't an easy path, but it's value is 'beyond rubies'.

Respond positively, He says. Put on the 'wedding garment'—(Matthew 22:12-14)—*ie*, a changed life, baptism and the receiving of God's Spirit—and become part of God's grand design for mankind.

We are happy to address any Bible-related questions you may have to help along the way. And if we don't know the answer we'll do our best to find it!

James

Matthew 24:14...revisited

Matthew informs us that '*...this gospel of the kingdom shall be proclaimed in all the world as a witness to all nations. And then the end shall come*' (Matthew 24:14). Just what is '*this gospel of the kingdom*'?

The word *gospel* is itself simple—it signifies 'a good message'. Its proclamation, however, is not limited to that time prior to the return of Jesus as King of kings. For we find that in the very beginning of his public ministry Jesus '*...came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God draws near. Repent, and believe the gospel*' (Mark 1:14-15). The Kingdom was even then 'imminent', at hand.

Later, he '*...went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease among the people*' (Matthew 9:35). After his resurrection Jesus spoke concerning 'the Kingdom' (Acts 1:3). It is his continuing theme, and his final commission to his apostles was '*...teach [all nations] to observe all things, whatever I commanded you*' (ch 28:20).

No surprise, then, to find the disciples—two thousand years ago—focusing on that same message (*see* over a score of references to 'the Kingdom of God' in Acts and the epistles). It is summed up by Paul, at the end of his life. He is found, '*...proclaiming the kingdom of God, and teaching those things concerning the Lord Jesus Christ*' (Acts 28:31).

An Everlasting Kingdom

The 'Kingdom of God' is everlasting, eternal. It is the 'God Kingdom' into which the true people of God will be born (at the first resurrection). It is the God Family, of whom we know the Father and the Word, Jesus Christ. Its authority, now exercised from Heaven, will one day come on earth administered from Jerusalem, That thousand years—the 'millennium—is but a single 'day' in the eternal plan [*See the article on page one*]

It is important for us to explore the content of that message, for that is what we ought to teach *today*. Note—it is not the function of the church, nor is it in God's plan, to 'convert the world' at this time. Nor is it appropriate to focus our entire message on the coming reign of Jesus on earth—a mere blip in the great scheme for eternity.

Paul provides a pattern of evangelism. He '*...expounded, testifying the kingdom of God, persuading them the things concerning Jesus, both out of the Law of Moses and out of the Prophets*' (Acts 28:23, *echoing* Luke 24:27). The Gospel message, the 'gospel of the kingdom', is a proclamation of who Jesus is, why he became man and died, the fact of his resurrection, the significance for mankind's eternal future—and the awful effect of sin.

This is our purpose, now or at any time—to energetically proclaim this message so that those with 'ears to hear' will turn from sin, enter this family relationship with the Father, and be nourished to spiritual maturity within the bosom of the church. Thus prepared they will be qualified for whatever tasks God has for us—throughout eternity. Ω

Rise and Build!

Five hundred years before the advent of Jesus, Jerusalem was in ruins, its inhabitants desolate. Along came Nehemiah, a Jew highly-placed in the government of Persia. He inspired the residents to get to work in face of opposition. Nehemiah's watchword was '*...rise up and build*'. It's a salutary lesson for the churches today, with declining numbers and a failure to strongly impact society.

Of course, Jesus himself flagged up the difficulties of the way he taught: '*...the gate to life is very narrow. The road that leads there is so hard to follow that only a few people find it*' (Matthew 7:14). Many indeed feel the Father's 'tap on the shoulder' - but before long shrug it off: a business to run, a parent to care for, a relationship to pursue, too much to offer by the 'world'. More, as in any harvest the time for reaping inevitably comes to an end, leaving but gleanings.

Jesus, however, commissioned us to carry on his work until '*...the consummation of the age*' (Matthew 28:20)—until he is once again with us in person. There are still sheaves to be gathered in! Perhaps in your 'field'.

But where are the labourers? Churches, often, are focused on material growth, on new buildings (while loudly proclaiming that 'the end is nigh'!), on generating income. Or, they are tangled in a web of administrative bureaucracy. Or, attention is diverted by internal doctrinal dispute. Or all of these! Whatever the reason, dynamic outreach becomes mired in the doldrums.

Often overlooked is the role of laity—the 'man in the pew'. [Request our article **Clergy—a biblical concept?**] Too often encouraged to sit back and 'let the minister do the work' he or she simply goes with the flow—a waste of manpower.

As Nehemiah well understood the task of re-building the city demanded *joint effort*. Far from lethargy or being intimidated by the opposition '*...we returned all of us to the wall, every one unto his work*' (Nehemiah 4:15).

What then can you do, the so-called 'layperson'? Imbued with God's Spirit you are gifted. Not to sit on your gift but to use it to the benefit of the wider church. Not to be stifled by disinterested or oppressive leadership but to seek ways to personally develop and apply your gifts. Not to bemoan lack of growth but to fervently pray for insight as to how *you* can make a difference.

With Nehemiah—let us all '*rise up and build*'! Ω

A Boost for Your Donations

A comment by one of our regular donors reminds me that I haven't recently highlighted the opportunity for our readers to boost your donations by a quarter *with no extra cost to you*—making £1 worth £1.25 to the charity. In these days of austerity every penny helps!

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A Planned Family ...cont'd

In the 'womb' of the church that 'few'—selected by the Father—are nourished in the ways of the Kingdom, the same Gospel handed down from Jesus through the apostles and those who followed (II Timothy 2:2). It's '*...the faith once for all delivered to the saints*' (Jude 3). It is still the standard!

Purpose Driven Church

A common fallacy is that the on-going purpose of the church is to 'save the world'. While the example of Jesus has hugely impacted the world for the better (Isaiah 55:11)—often in spite of the organized church!—that is by no means the fundamental purpose of its divinely-appointed commission.

That commission is to herald Christ's message: '*...go and teach all nations, baptizing them...[and] teaching them to observe all things, whatever I commanded you*' (Matthew 28:19).

We stand—or sit!—amazed in face of the energetic commitment to evangelism by the apostle Paul. He understood that being Christian is a direct calling by the Father (John 6:44). But that didn't stop him facing incredible hardship, even death, in his dedicated presentation of Christ to the world (I Corinthians 2:2).

An example for the Church of God today! Ω