

## The Newsletter of the Churches of God, UK

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### A Mighty Army

One of Christianity's most sung hymns is *Onward Christian Soldiers*, and according to it, the church moves 'like a mighty army'.

Doubtless the church of God is at war, embattled on all sides by hostile forces. Writes the apostle Paul: '...We are not fighting against humans. We are fighting against forces and authorities and against rulers of darkness and powers in the spiritual world' (Ephesians 6:12).

A fundamental principle of any army, of course, is *discipline*—an army in disarray is headed for certain defeat. Yet despite the words of the hymn, the church at large is far from being 'one in hope and doctrine', and certainly far from fulfilling the claim '...we are not divided'.

There are nearly seven billion of us on earth, and almost a third claim to be Christian—potential there, surely, for a mighty army! But 'all one Body, we'? True believers are indeed 'one Body' - but there are an estimated 33,000 denominations parading the name of Christ!

### On the March

Each Christian, as wrote Peter, has to '...resist the devil' and all the various devices he and his minions deploy to destroy our faith and our world. One focus he has is to hinder the work of witness, as Paul experienced—and this is where the Christian army has to become militant. It is by our witness to the message of Jesus as Saviour that the Family of God increases:

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## outreach

'...how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without one preaching?' (Romans 10:14).

### Guerilla Army

Wars usually pit one standing army against another. Of late, however, the nature of wars is changing, with at least one side battling out as individuals or in small groups—guerilla warfare. (Though not an entirely new concept.)

In the church of God the pretense of a united force has failed. Having abandoned the New Testament pattern for church polity they opted for the vanity of size. The lust for power and control drove the concept of large organizations, with the inevitable consequence of wasteful bureaucracy and the 'business model' of management—to the detriment of the church's assigned purpose of proclaiming the good news (becoming part of God's spirit Kingdom), and nourishing the flock.

There are denominations which languish under authoritarian leadership, more concerned with image and power and control and buildings to the neglect of preparation of the brethren for witness and for eternity.

### Into Battle

All, however, is not lost! Dotted around the world are many local churches—each nourishing a band of warriors being trained in the art of spiritual guerilla warfare by faithful pastors and teachers, each enrolled to spearhead the good news by means of their unique spiritual gifts within their sphere of influence.

Time, then, for the churches to set free the dynamism inherent in every local congregation—power for too long suppressed by overbearing central leadership. For too long those *cont'd p.4*

**Q. How do I relate the calendar now used to date the Biblical holy days to the modern everyday 'Gregorian' calendar?**

As Christians we do indeed live in 'two worlds', for we are described as '*...strangers and pilgrims*'—temporary inhabitants of a world that rejects the Creator and His values.

How we relate to God's worship plan is no exception. In our day-to-day walk, in our business activity, in our personal financial transactions we are guided by the calendar that starts the year on 'January 1st'. So it can be confusing when confronted by the calendar on which God has set His annual holy days, in which there are strange names given to the months, when the number of months in a year varies over a nineteen-year cycle, when there are variable length (29 or 30 days) months. How can we possibly relate?

For example—when do we observe the Lord's Supper/Passover? Biblically it falls on the 14th/15th of the first month of the Bible year, 'Nisan/Abib', which this year equates to Sunday evening, April 13th. [*Abib* means 'tender green ears'.] To arrive at that date requires complex calculations! But fear not, the work has been done!

The calendar in use to date the holy days has a long pedigree, and was used by many ancient peoples of the Middle East. At the time of the Exodus of Israel from Egypt, the LORD identified to Moses when the religious year should begin—in spring at the time of the barley harvest: '*...this shall be the first month of the year*' (Exodus 12:2).

#### Administration

The calendar was under the authority of the priests, and was determined annually by them, the priests taking note of the state of the harvest, arranging at times an extra month to harmonize with the seasons *etc.* Israelites living outside Canaan were informed by courier as to when each year began. With greater dispersion—eventually worldwide, global—this was of necessity replaced by a calculated calendar, still in use today by Jews and by most Christians who observe the Biblical holy days (Leviticus 23).

The Jews had been delegated the authority, by the LORD, to determine the calendar. The apostle Paul explained that one advantage to being a Jew was that '*...unto them were committed the oracles of God*' (Romans 3:2), adding, '*...If some did not believe, will not their unbelief nullify the faith of God? Let it not be!*' (v.3).

To drive this home he later tells the Roman brethren: '*...Israelites, whose are the adoption and the glory, and the covenants, and the Lawgiving,* **cont'd p.4**

## Two Worlds

Christians inhabit two worlds. As '*children of the Kingdom*' we belong to a world vastly different from the one in which we wake up day by day. It is a spirit world that has always existed—for it is, in fact, the Family of God. The *present* reality is what Paul calls '*...this present evil world*' - a world that has rejected the Way of God and is experiencing the consequences. And we inhabit both. How do we cope?

A guide principle is set forward by Paul: '*...come out from among them and be separated, says the Lord, and do not touch the unclean thing*' (II Corinthians 6:17). The Christian's walk—as defined by the Scriptures—is directly opposed to the way of the world.

Elsewhere Paul adds: '*...I wrote to you in the letter not to associate intimately with fornicators; yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters; for then you must go out of the world*' (I Corinthians 5:9-10). We must, in other words, continue to live in this world despite its almost universal rejection of the Creator.

We must expect that the conflict between the two ways of life provokes a serious degree of pressure. God's Way affects every aspect of life—what we eat and drink, when we worship, our relationships with God and family and neighbour. Indeed our entire world view.

And those differences, that conflict, that pressure (it's called *tribulation* [Gk *thlipsis*] in the Scriptures) is what moves us towards the image of Christ in us. Paul, to the Romans: '*...we glory in afflictions also, knowing that afflictions work out patience, and patience works out experience, and experience works out hope. And hope does not make us ashamed, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit given to us*' (ch 5:3-5). By that same indwelling Spirit in the Christian we remain firm in the faith and enabled to resist those worldly pressures. Ω

### Spring Festivals 2014

Lord's Supper:	April 13 Sun evg
Unleavened Bread:	April 15-21
Pentecost:	June 8

## A Spurned Gift

A gift is something to be cherished, especially from someone we respect and love. And we delight to see our gifts to others similarly enjoyed and properly used. It's not always like that, though, when our children get their hands on a new toy! Off comes the wrapping—but the initial interest wanes and it is cast aside and soon broken.

We all appreciate gifts, and the religious—and even atheists in an unguarded moment!—will say *'thank God'*. We reflect the words of the brother of Jesus: *'...Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness nor shadow of turning'* (James 1:17). All that God gives mankind is for our good, beneficial—and He is unchanging.

### Gift of Worship

When we stand in the presence of the awesome Creator of the vastness of the universe we can do nothing but fall before Him and honour Him in praise and worship. But do we worship in a way that He has detailed? And does it matter?

The faithful have since the beginning worshipped as God has revealed. Long before Moses, for example, Abraham *'... obeyed my voice, and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws'* (Genesis 26:5). The form of worship was outlined in various *statutes*—later detailed, in Leviticus 23, for the newly-formed nation of Israel.

### The Gift Discarded

A thousand years after Moses, in the sixth century before Christ, God said through the prophet Ezekiel: *'...I gave them My statutes and showed them My judgments, which if a man do, he shall even live in them. And also I gave them My sabbaths to be a sign between Me and them, that they might know that I am Jehovah who sets them apart'* (ch 20:11-12). Jehovah doesn't change! His faithful are identified by how they worship Him. His revealed holy days are His precious gift to us.

Yet despite the miraculous intervention of their Deliverer *'... the house of Israel rebelled against Me in the wilderness; they did not walk in My statutes, and they despised My judgments, which if a man does, he shall even live in them. And they greatly profaned My Sabbaths'* (v.13). And not only in Sinai but throughout their history—until God called time and exiled first the House of Israel and then the House of Judah, *'...until the land had enjoyed its sabbaths. All the days of the desolation it kept the sabbath, to the full measure of seventy years'* (II Chronicles 36:21, Leviticus 26:34).

### And in Christianity

In just a few centuries from its beginning Christianity followed in the steps of Israel—abandoning the Sabbath and holy days—God's gift—and substituting the practices of the surrounding nations.

Sun worship was rife throughout the empire with Sunday deemed sacred, as was the all-pervasive debauched, licentious and alcohol-soaked Saturnalia, held annually in December—perhaps referred to by the apostle Peter: *'... You have already lived long enough like people who don't know God. You were immoral and followed your evil desires. You went around drinking and partying and carrying on. In fact, you even worshiped disgusting idols. Now your former friends wonder why you have stopped running around with them, and they curse you for it'* (I Peter 4:3-4 CEV). The first Christians, writes Peter, suffered the stress of derision from their neighbours for refusing to take part in the heathen festivities.

The holy days as defined by God Himself are His precious gift to His faithful. Ω

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### Letter from England

We live in the age of celebrity. Not much wrong with that—if the 'celebrity' is worthy of acclaim and not simply froth and dross set up to look good. A celebrity is worthy only if he or she is a decent role model—and, for Christians, an individual who is a person of integrity and who is of good character. Sadly, not many in public life reflect that—in any walk of life!

In matters of faith there arises an occasional star, a charismatic leader who comes to be celebrated as God's gift to the church, a man or woman who is deemed to faithfully interpret His Word, an inspired 'apostle' of Jesus Christ, a prophet. Devoted followers hang on to every word, some even pinning their salvation on him or her. So, when the guru is shown to be in error, or to have led a sordid double life, the followers lose faith. Or, in an assault on their spiritual stability, blindly cling to the decaying corpse.

Each of us is personally responsible to our Father and to Jesus our Saviour for what we believe. Having responded to God's call we must carefully evaluate, in the light of God's Word, the teachings of those who profess to be our divinely-appointed mentors. When we visit church, as it has been said, *'...don't check-in your brain at the door'*!

Where we fellowship is important for our spiritual growth—so choose carefully. Within our local assembly we can be *'...changed into the same image [the character of Christ] from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord'* (II Corinthians 3:18)—the very purpose of 'the Gospel of the Kingdom'. Ω

James

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## Where Is Elijah?

If Jesus is to return any time soon, then ‘Elijah’, according to some teachers, should be alive and kicking somewhere on earth. There have, of course, been dozens of ‘Elijahs’ down the Christian years—all so far bogus—though given the predicted fate of a true, yet future, ‘Elijah’ it’s not a role to be sought after!

Through Malachi God said: ‘...I am sending you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of Jehovah’ (Malachi 4:5). Indeed the Jewish leaders in first century Palestine expected Elijah to return before the coming of Messiah (Matthew 17:10). To this day a place is laid at table for Elijah at each Passover observance. Echoing Malachi, Jesus told the disciples—who had just seen a vision of Elijah (v.3, 9) that this was indeed the case—but also stated that *John the Baptist* fulfilled the role (vv.12-13).

The key lies in the observation of the angel who appeared to John’s father, Zechariah: ‘...he [John] shall go before him [the Lord] in the spirit and power of Elijah’ (Luke 1:17). John, in other words, was not the original prophet Elijah restored to life but one who carried on his mission with the same attitude, the same divine authority.

John the Baptist reflected the life-style of the first Elijah—rough-hewn, godly, dwelling in the desert. He had the same message, to confront ungodliness, ‘...to turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God’ (v.16)—a mission he surely accomplished Matthew 3:5-6). A people prepared for the message of Jesus.

But ‘Elijah’ will also return ‘...before the coming of the great and dreadful day of Jehovah’ Malachi: 4:5). That day—the great ‘Day of the Lord’—is ushered in by the returning Jesus who said ‘...I will come again’. Elijah’s message will be a call to repentance, a return by mankind to the true God—a call heard worldwide.

John, in Revelation, speaks of ‘...my two witnesses’ (ch 11:3ff), and their mission does indeed ‘prepare the way of the Lord’. They reflect both the work of both Elijah [eg drought] and Moses [eg plagues]. It will be an awesome time of tribulation upon those who continue unrepentant, unheeding of the call to turn to God.

Their mission will end at the return of Jesus, when they will be glorified with Him, together with the rest of the ‘firstfruits harvest’ (Revelation 11:3-12). Ω

## Calendar...cont’d from p.2

and the service [ie worship; Gk *latreia*], and the promises’ (ch 9:4). The administration of divine worship [*latreia*] was assigned to them, and backed by God. God, in other words, upholds their decision on such matters, even should they fall into unbelief, or become secular. (It is ironic that it was in Rome that the holy days were first abandoned and pagan celebrations substituted.)

It may help if we set this word of the apostle Paul in the context of these chapters (9-11) of Romans. As he here and elsewhere gives us to understand—*God is sovereign*. He has a plan. He is selective. He does as it pleases Him. All for our benefit. And here he tells us that God has given the Jewish people the authority to regulate His worship—however disobedient they may become. And even should they in the future revert to ‘observation’.

Jesus himself appears to have accepted this authority. For example, in the first century the original instruction to Moses to set aside a lamb on the 10th Nisan (Exodus 12:3) no longer applied, the Jewish authorities having so decided. Nor did they smear blood around their doors as in the first Passover (v.7).

## Confusion

However, there remains some confusion within the Church of God family as to which calendar is appropriate. Various—conflicting—calendars have been proposed causing unnecessary division among the brethren, and resulting in the holy days being observed at different times. Most Christians, however, accept what has been termed ‘the Hebrew calendar’ to predict when to observe the holy days. It is widely available in print as the *Comprehensive Hebrew Calendar*, (and on-line) and is used by most Sabbatarian Churches of God. Ω

*A calendar card covering several years is available from us on request*

## A Mighty Army...cont’d from p.1

spiritual gifts—dispensed to all the brethren by the only Head of the church—have been ignored or limited to mundane tasks by often self-serving and sometimes over-bearing overseers obsessed by form but lacking the power of true godliness.

Time for this mighty territorial army—for so long grounded—to be trained, to be mobilized, to be released from barracks onto the battlefield. Time for all Christians to ‘...confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus’ before the world. Ω