

outreach

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The Newsletter of the Churches of God, UK

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Matthew 28:19-20

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THE PENTECOST REVOLUTION

The resurrection of Jesus the long-sought Messiah revolutionized the world. His coming had been predicted since our first parents threw out divine authority for unaided human reason.

At the close of the weekly Sabbath following his death on a cross he burst from the rock tomb to change not just the lives of a handful of followers but the course of the entire world.

At that moment history fulfilled ancient symbolism. A millennium and a half before Jesus walked the Earth he - known to Israel as the LORD - introduced a ceremony that prefigured that momentous time. It was called the *Feast of the Firstfruits*.

Until that time prophets had, rarely, raised a few dead folk to a resumed human life. The resurrection of Jesus was different. He was the first human to shake off his humanity and be resurrected to an unending life. In Scripture he is called *'the firstfruits'*: *'But now hath Christ been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of them that are asleep'* (I Corinthians 15:20.)

The symbolism of 'firstfruits' is rooted in a little-known ceremony enjoined on Israel. It heralded the beginning of seven weeks of harvest. A sheaf of grain was harvested by the priests at the end of the weekly Sabbath during the *Unleavened Bread* festival. This 'wavesheaf offering' was prepared and the following morning was offered in the Temple, after which general harvesting could begin.

Firstfruits Harvest

The symbolism was fulfilled by Jesus. He is the firstfruits from among the dead and is alive forever more. On

that Sunday morning he was received by the Father in acceptance of his finished mission. It was, however, the beginning of a revolution that would turn the world upside down.

In the six weeks following his resurrection, Jesus further instructed his apostles. *'Jesus therefore said to them again, Peace unto you: as the Father has sent me, even so send I you. And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and says to them, Receive ye the Holy Spirit'* (John 20:21-22).

Into the World

Having imparted the Spirit to his apostles and having revealed more divine truth to their now enlightened minds Jesus commissioned them to continue his work and take the 'good news' around the world.

This seven week period following the 'wavesheaf offering' was a time for Israel to harvest the new barley crop. It symbolized the spiritual harvest ahead - centuries when the 'good news' experienced times of drought and times of plenty, poor harvests when the Word was corrupted by heretical teachers, and abundant harvests when the Word burst upon the world afresh.

But it signifies, too, a world in process of revolution - preparation for the thousand-year reign of the King of kings. The Father is at this time inviting men and women to take part in His master plan for eternity. Those who accept His call - through repentance and baptism - He trains hands-on through our life experiences. They, too, are part of the firstfruits harvest - a *'kind of firstfruits'* (James 1:18).

The harvest symbolism climaxed in the annual *Day of Pentecost* (the Feast of Firstfruits) - a day observed by most churches as the 'birthday' of the church, the sole surviving festival in Christendom enjoined by God for His people. 

Pentecost 2006:
Sunday June 4

request the related articles:

The Empty Tomb
The Resurrection - a Hoax?

First There Was Nothing...

"The world began without any beginning". So say some evolutionists. *How come?*

First there was absolutely nothing - not even God. No life, no Earth, no planets, no stars, no dark matter. Nothing. Total emptiness. Then out of this black nothingness magically appeared those physical laws which would be essential for future development. Next, another miracle, there emerged inorganic matter - water, rocks, soil *etc.* From these inert materials miraculously sprang the most primitive form of biological life. Over more billions of years life became more complex, culminating in the incredible complexity that is modern man.

Observing from the commanding heights of gross ignorance, pundits claim that life - having evolved gradually from nothing - has existed on our planet for millions of years. Let's analyze that a little.

Origins

Assume the impossible presence of the first and simplest primitive living creature - maybe a bacterium. Let's call it Eve - the 'mother of all living'. There she quivers in a rock pool complete with the incredible genetic complexity even a bacterium must have to sustain life.

By some miracle she divides and reproduces herself. (Did 'she' have male or female chromosomes, or both?) Many generations later - perhaps a million years - one of them acquires a new gene that has formed itself out of the nothingness. Multitudes of changes (mutations) follow - eventually, millions of years later, enabling a *Tiktlaalik Roseae* to crawl on newly-evolved shoulders from the sea to become the first land creature, and in time becoming the first pre-human. Our ancestor.

Unnatural Selection

The changes essential to leap from pre-human to human would result from random mutations - which are almost always deleterious. According to evolutionists they take vast aeons of time. (We could ask *where* the new genetic material came from to make this miraculous leap.)

Homo Sapiens is by definition wiser, more advanced, than his predecessors. Picture it. Two pre-humans have been happily procreating their own kind as did their ancestors for countless generations. But one of the pair has an 'attack of the genetics'. (Perhaps he or she was struck by a bolt of lightning.) A gene mutates and there is, at most, a fifty per cent chance the change will be passed on to the offspring. And so on for uncounted generations of similar change. But get this - each tiny change would have *negative* impact, resulting in something *inferior*.

We could ask how an eyeless amoeba could *gradually* evolve an eye - even over millions, billions, of years. The eye is functional only if its 'evolution' were complete in one giant step, and until that moment is useless. The process of natural selection can do nothing about that. Vision requires a complete eye linked to and interacting with a prepared and fully-functioning brain.

This applies, too, to other body systems - to hearing, to

LET'S WORK TOGETHER

being eager to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3)

'*We are not divided*' goes the great Christian hymn, and the Church of God aspires to the noble concept of *unity*. But '*One in hope and doctrine, one in charity*', sadly remains a dream. The *hope* may be there - we all look for the release of the resurrection - but doctrine? Charity?

Christianity is divided - now, perhaps, as never before. Think up a teaching vaguely related to the Scriptures and someone will start a 'church' around it. And as for 'charity' - well, denominations are ever at each other's throats.

The New Testament church doesn't offer much encouragement. There were no halcyon days of universal harmony, no oneness. Even before the church joyfully embraced the surrounding pagan culture unity was scarce. The apostles time and again had to counsel the brethren to forget their petty differences - to be '*eager to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*'. Human nature got in the way. A major stumbling-block was - and is - the desire to be different, to leave a mark, to gain a following, to 'build an empire'.

We call those empires *denominations*. There are hundreds of them small and great. The leadership grasp their members in a vice-like grip. The membership 'owns' the denomination - often fed the notion that it is the 'one and only', that only their teaching is Biblical, pure. As a result false teachings are set in stone and spread throughout the denomination - often worldwide.

This approach is a major cause of disunity. [Request the free article: *The Knowledge That Counts* - or read it on the CGOM website - www.cgom.org] The New Testament example - when at its best! - shows individual local assemblies often with their differences but co-operating in support of a common outreach programme.

A Christian is an individual indwelt, obedient to and motivated by the Spirit of God. All such have the same heavenly Father. All are brothers and sisters in Christ. All serve the same Master. We may have our different traditions and doctrinal variation - always within the parameters of Scripture - but what will please our Father and our Saviour is that each of us is '*eager to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*'.

It's time to forget minor differences and to work together peaceably in the service of our Saviour, of one another and of the world. Ω

Nothing...

respiration, to the nervous system *etc.* All require incredibly complex chemical and neurological processes. In fact, the human body can function only as an integrated unit - complete in one. It is designed and created by an unimaginably superior intelligence.

The only reason to reject a divine Creator is to kid ourselves that He must not be obeyed! Ω

In Memory...

Early in April Christians around the world held a memorial service for a very important person - Jesus the Messiah. It is an annual event and called the *Lord's Supper*.

Memorial services for lesser men and women are an opportunity for the bereaved to express their sorrow for the passing of a loved one, certainly. It is also an opportunity to reflect on our relationship with the deceased.

Lord's Supper

Both elements are enjoined in the Lord's Supper. Jesus himself tells us to *'do this in remembrance of me'*. And he described how we should do it. Take some bread, he said - it is symbolic of my body. That body was lacerated by heavy-handed soldiery and nailed to a wooden stake. The Scriptures tell us that it is *'by his stripes we are healed'* - restored to physical and spiritual health.

But there is much more. Jesus also said *'this is my blood shed [poured out] for you'*. Having hung in agony on that cross for six hours a fatal spear stroke tore open his lower body and *'straightway there came out blood and water'* (John 19:34). Not just the odd drop but his life blood poured out as a sacrifice for the sin of all humanity as his internal organs were torn apart.

What a sacrifice. So it is with sadness for his suffering and with muted joy that we have - through baptism - this special relationship, this new covenant, with the Saviour of the world that we remember him.

His death was long predicted. King David wrote of it a thousand years before (Psalm 22). The prophet Isaiah, in the eighth century, predicted his suffering (ch 52, 53).

The time of his death, too, was vividly foretold. Jesus coincided with the time of the 'evening sacrifice' - that is, around three in the afternoon of the 14th day of the Hebrew first month *Nisan*. The ceremony in that month was the sacrifice of the Passover lamb - a ceremony the LORD had instituted in Israel in the time of Moses. The blood from that sacrifice, when applied to their homes, protected the Israelites from the death that swept away Egypt's firstborn. The apostle Paul tells us *'Christ [is] our Passover [lamb]* (I Corinthians 5: 7).

Passover a Celebration

In contrast to the solemnity of the Lord's Supper, Passover is a time of triumphant celebration. For Israel it signalled freedom from perhaps two centuries of Egyptian bondage. To this day that's how, in Judaism, it is remembered. Always it was, and is - in con-

trast to Christ's 'last supper' - a family celebration.

Unleavened Bread Festival

In Israel, Passover heralds the beginning of the *'Feast of Unleavened Bread'* and begins with the consuming of a symbolic portion of the Passover lamb. Since the death of *'Christ our Passover lamb'*, sacrifice is no longer required. Indeed, since the destruction of the Temple in 70AD Jews themselves no longer sacrifice a lamb but have a *seder* - an orderly family meal that follows traditional practice. Unleavened bread (flat or sweet bread) is always eaten as a symbol of their sufferings in Egypt.

For Christians the Passover, as in Israel, is celebrated for seven days with the same unleavened bread. Writing to the brethren (mostly Gentile) in Corinth the apostle Paul notes that they were at that time observing this festival: *'Purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, even as you are unleavened. For our passover also hath been sacrificed, Christ'*. (ch 5:7). Put away, he says, the spiritual leaven just as you have put already away the physical leaven. It is clear that Jesus, the apostles and the first Christians - Jew and Gentile - faithfully observed the days, but with the emphasis on its spiritual significance. (Lent, Easter were imposed on the festal calendar much later as the church departed from the true faith of Jesus.)

Jesus indicated that the leaven represents such traits as hypocrisy, false teaching, sinful behaviour. By daily consuming the unleavened bread for the seven days of the festival we signal our aspiration to behave like Jesus - a lesson to remember throughout the year.

And it's not just aspiration, for as Christians we are given the holy Spirit of God to instruct our conscience, to strengthen our will, to encourage us along the often difficult Christ-like way. Paul again: *"Be you imitators of me as I am of Christ'*. Jesus himself urged on us to *'be perfect [ie mature, complete] even as your Father in heaven is perfect'*.

The Christian way of life is to willingly submit to the divine instruction. Said the apostle Peter: *'...the holy Spirit that God has given to those who obey him'* (Acts 5:32). Through obedience we can be sure that we are indeed partakers of the new covenant between ourselves and our Saviour. Ω

NOTICE:

Apologies to those readers who have not received the printed version of **OUTREACH** for a couple of issues.

This resulted from financial constraints

An Independent Church

"...he that has ears to hear..."

"All the churches of the first age, however closely united by the bond of faith and love, and however ready to lend to each other all mutual good offices, were under their own jurisdiction, and governed each one itself without foreign aid, or any external authority.

"Nowhere, either in the sacred books or in any other ancient documents, is anything recorded from which we might learn that some churches were dependent on the authority and will of other churches larger or more dignified than they. On the contrary, evidences meet us on all hands which place it beyond doubt that all had an equal right and were entirely peers and equal to one another.... Each society [*ie* local assembly] was a sort of little state governing itself by its own laws - laws either introduced or approved by the people"

*Mosheim, church historian,
quoted in Alexander: Anglo-Catholicism not Apostolic*

"The societies which were instituted in the cities of the Roman Empire were united only by the ties of faith and charity. Independence and equality formed the basis of their internal constitution"

Gibbon: Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire

"It appears plainly from the sacred narrative that though the many churches which the apostles founded were branches of one *spiritual* brotherhood - of which the Lord Jesus Christ is the heavenly Head - though there was 'one Lord, one faith, one baptism' for all of them yet they were each a distinct independent community *on earth*, united by the common principles on which they were founded and by their mutual agreement, affection and respect; but not having any one recognized head on earth, or acknowledging any sovereignty of one of these societies over others"

Whateley's Essays on the Kingdom of Christ

GEORGE HOLLASETER

Many will remember George as a much-loved, diligent and loyal Christian brother for very many years. Sadly, he was attacked near his home in Wallasey (March 3) by a trio of thugs who had demanded the keys to his flat, and died March 26th. He was 60. Murder charges are being brought against three youths. The funeral is not yet arranged.

George is survived by his mother, and son David and his wife.

Where Does God Place His Name?

The Israelites were forbidden to choose for themselves where they would keep the holy convocations. So how do Christians know where to observe them?

The Israelites was indeed obliged to keep the feasts only in a place appointed by God - eventually in Jerusalem, previously Shiloh. 70AD ended that when the Temple was destroyed. Since then the Jews have other arrangements. For example, they do not strictly speaking 'keep the Passover' but a '*seder*' at the appointed time and in their homes. The other festivals are also observed by them locally.

The festivals are, of course, God's - passed on by Moses. They are typical of Jesus in all his aspects, and also outline God's plan for man. Our observance complies with the will of God, and teaches us many lessons.

Jesus gave a mandate for change from the former regime. Talking to the woman in Samaria he said: '*... Woman, believe Me that an hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is of the Jews. But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. For the Father also seeks such, the ones worshipping Him*' (John 4:21-23).

Within the context of the Festivals it is a matter of the heart and not external observance only. See also Isaiah 1:11-17 where the prophet addresses this..

We have the example (I Corinthians 5:6-8) of a local church - and a 'Gentile' church at that - observing the *Festival of Unleavened Bread*. Paul apparently observed it at Philippi (Acts 20:6). It's a fair assumption they were also observing the other festivals both in Jerusalem (Acts 18:21) and elsewhere.

In writing to the Hebrew Christians, the author urged his readers not to be '*forsaking the assembling together of ourselves, as is the custom of some, but exhorting [one another], and by so much more as you see the Day drawing near*' (ch 10:25). An important admonition to each and every Christian in whom dwells the Spirit of God - which makes us '*the Temple of God*' (I Corinthians 3:16). In the absence of divine direction it is for each assembly to harmoniously determine the most appropriate place to observe these festivals of the LORD. Ω

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