

The Newsletter of the Churches of God, UK

PO Box 2525
LINCOLN
LN5 7PF
England

Telephone: 01526 861217
e-mail: coguk@aol.com
web-site: www.cgom.org
Editor: James McBride

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providing
leadership
information and
Biblical teaching
Matthew 28:19-20

representing
Churches of God Outreach
Ministries

Alpha...just the beginning

Alpha International continues its onward march, with almost 200,000 visitors in 2007 in the United Kingdom - up 15% on 2006. Internationally there are over 35,000 courses in 163 countries. The course impacts many from all walks of life.

The Outreach Ministries welcomes the fact that men and women previously impervious to Christianity are finding faith through the Alpha ministry. It is claimed that as a result lives have been transformed.

However, we urge a cautionary note. 'Graduates' of the course should be aware that it is but an introduction to the Christian way.

No Easy Faith

There's a tendency in modern Christendom - at least in the West - to see the faith of Christ through 'rose-coloured spectacles'. Believe, give your life to Jesus - and you are a Christian: 'Heaven, here I come'. Well - maybe so. But that is just the beginning.

Nearly all the world's two billion professing Christians are *born into* Christianity in some form, and in that form most remain. Born Roman Catholic or Lutheran or Anglican or Pentecostal? Likely you will die so. Few will examine the credentials of their belief system.

But to become a true Christian demands commitment. It's not just religiously 'going to church'. It's not the possession of a Bible or a set of daily Bible readings. Luke, the biographer of the apostle Paul, records: '...*These [in Berea] were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they*

received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so' (Acts 17:11). They were open to the message, and they checked it out. Those 'Scriptures', of course, were the Old Testament writings - no others were yet written.

And when you get your nose into the Bible you are due for a shock!

You will find that the Bible has continuity. It has one message from beginning to end - from *alpha to omega*, if you like. God doesn't change. He is '...*the same yesterday, today and forever'* (Hebrews 13:8), and says '...*I don't change'* (Malachi 3:6). Now that means you will find much of what you hear in 'church' is in conflict with the Scriptures. If you are new to church (or - maybe especially - an old-timer) you ought to listen carefully - and check out from the Scriptures what you hear. Indeed it's almost guaranteed that what Jesus requires of you is a life-change on many levels.

It's tempting to accept that any 'man of the cloth' will truly reflect what God says, that you can take as 'gospel' every word preached from the pulpit. Refer to the Scriptures, however, and you will find repeated warnings - and this in the time of live apostles - of professing Christian ministers leading people astray. It's a pattern repeated down the centuries - not least today. 'Let the buyer beware'!

The apostle Paul warned of those who are '...*false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ. And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness'* (II Corinthians 11: 13-15). How can we distinguish?

Me? An Idolater?

'Getting it wrong' is a human proclivity - not least in religion. False religion has plagued mankind from the beginning, and God calls it *idolatry*. Idolatry is any practice that flies in the face of divine revela-

Alpha is an introductory course to Christianity. Visitors attend a series of talks, and what's termed a 'Holy Spirit Weekend'. At the end, attendees are encouraged to join a church of their choice. Alpha crosses denominational boundaries, from Roman Catholic to Pentecostal

tion. That's why the Bereans are singled out as examples - they sought out the truth, from the Scriptures.

From the beginning there has been but one true divinely-inspired faith, largely perverted by mankind. Elements of that faith have survived in almost every man-made religion - the concept of a Messiah, for example. But the fundamentals are clearly laid out in the Christian Bible. *All else is idolatry*. Abraham was one of the few in his generation who clung to the truth. He *'...obeyed my voice, and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws'* (Genesis 26:5). His faith guaranteed that his descendants (through his son Isaac) would inherit both material and spiritual blessings - and responsibilities. Israel were to be the torch-bearers for the faith, a model nation, and their inspired records preserved it.

But Israel - as those same Scriptures record - failed. Despite a perfect God-ordained

'Constitution' and direct divine intervention on their behalf, Abraham's descendants embraced idolatrous practices. Indeed they had barely been miraculously delivered from slavery in Egypt before reverting to idols. So seriously did God view idolatry - it undermined His plan for us - that the Israelites were exiled - Judah for seventy years, while the House of Israel remains in exile to this day.

Time and again the early Christians are praised for opposing idolatry. Said Paul: *'...flee from idolatry'* (I Corinthians 10:14). To the Thessalonian brethren he writes: *'you turned unto God from idols, to serve a living and true God'* (I Thessalonians 1:9).

And any who claimed to be Christian but embraced idolatrous practices were excluded from the fellowship of believers (I Corinthians 5:11).

Idolatry Defined

How, then, will you avoid idolatry? How do you recognize it? Despite 'professing Jesus' could you be idolatrous?

Surely every Christian has heard of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20 - see Box). They tell us how to behave towards the LORD (numbers one to four), and towards man (five to ten). The latter are behaviours shared in degree by all faiths, and by none. The former, however, are unique to the one Creator God. As it was the LORD who conceived them in the beginning we need to pay attention! Our species functions best when the Commandments are at the heart of the individual - and indeed at the heart of society.

We might conclude that the Commandments - all of

them - are how God wants us to please Him (as well as for our own benefit). They define His character, for we were created *'...in his image'* (Genesis 1:26) - and all else is idolatry. No element of the Commandments may be altered. Indeed Daniel prophesied of a future ruler: *'...This king will speak evil of God Most High, and he will be cruel to God's chosen ones. He will try to change God's Law and the sacred seasons'* (Daniel 7:25 CEV). The 'sacred seasons' are the weekly and annual holy convocations that are integral to God's revealed faith.

Anyone, then, who seeks to change or negate God's Law or who observes days other than what God reveals - no matter how sincerely observed, or whether done in ignorance - is by definition an idolater. An early king of Israel provides an example. He (Jeroboam) is branded throughout the Scriptures as

one who *'...caused Israel to sin'* (I Kings 12:32, II Kings 10:29 etc). Among other idolatrous practices he changed the divinely-appointed time for *'the feasts of the LORD'* - a feast he *'...devised out of his own heart'* (I Kings 12:33).

Yet his fellow-Israelites considered their idolatrous worship was directed towards the LORD.

The people of Israel - before idolatry set in - were influenced by the holy Spirit in the Word of the LORD [Moses, the Prophets etc], and ministered to them through their prophets and priests in the Tabernacle and in the Temple on the Sabbaths and holy days. They rejoiced

in their worship.

It should be noted, however, that they were *influenced* by God's Spirit - but the Spirit did not indwell them. The Spirit was not yet given until the first Christian *Pentecost* (John 7:39, Acts 2). With the Spirit *indwelling* us - that is, true conversion - and active in our daily walk, then we are internally motivated to worship in accord with the first four of the Commandments [see side-bar]. These identify the Creator God of the Bible.

God doesn't change the fundamentals of His worship! It's clear from the New Testament that Christians continued to respect the Law - including the seventh-day Sabbath and the festivals. Many do so to this day.

Repentance and baptism (Acts 2:38) are but the *first steps* in our Christian walk - the beginning. Ω



June Brides

June, traditionally, is the month for weddings. A joyous celebration - but just a beginning. For it is but the entrance to a new life with - hopefully - a shared life-time ahead.

Are you prepared? We offer the foundation article

Spend a Lifetime - Together

Request a print copy, or view it on our website

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A Type of Pentecost

Three times in each year - spring, summer, autumn - the Israelites attended *'the feasts of the LORD'* (Leviticus 23 2). . On the practical level all but one of the festivals were related to the various harvests in Israel. They were an opportunity for fellowship, for worship, for instruction from the Word of God.

Pentecost origins

Although incorporated by the LORD in the religion of Israel, the festivals long preceded their settlement in the land of Canaan. Indeed the three harvest festivals were widely observed by all faiths and by none. They are 'appointed times' (Heb *mo'ed*) and, being harvest-related, their timing was governed by sun and moon. We trace their origin to the Creator, who designed the earth and its solar system specifically for the pinnacle of His creation - mankind: *'...He left not himself without witness, in that he did good and gave you from heaven rains and fruitful seasons, filling your hearts with food and gladness'* (Acts 14:17). In summary: *'... God said, Let there be lights in the firmament of heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons [Heb. mo'ed], and for days and years'* (Genesis 1:14).

Pentecost is the early summer festival, celebrating the close of the wheat harvest. It is fifty days (hence its name - seven full weeks plus a day) after the weekly Sabbath during the seven *Days of Unleavened Bread*. (The latter marked the beginning of the grain harvest.) The festival, hence, was also known as the *Feast of Weeks*. Christians are familiar with Pentecost in regard to the outpouring of the holy Spirit. This momentous event was fifty days after the resurrection of Jesus.

First of Firstfruits

Pentecost is also known as the *Feast of Firstfruits*. On the eve of the first Sabbath following the first *Day of Unleavened Bread*, the priests cut a sheaf of grain, prepared it, and on Sunday morning 'waved' it before the altar in thanksgiving. It was the firstfruit of the harvest.

Consider, then, Jesus as Firstfruits: *'...now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept'* (I Corinthians 15:20). In the year of his death and resurrection the Firstfruits offering was the very time the resur-

rected Jesus was himself being accepted in Heaven by the Father - the perfect fulfillment of the *Firstfruits* type.

Firstfruits Harvest

Although *Pentecost* is observed on a single day, yet it is the culmination of activity over the preceding seven weeks. The date for it - unlike the other festivals which were on fixed dates - was 'counted'. Some sources report that the Israelites, on the day following the first *Day of Unleavened Bread*, 'tagged' the stalks of nearly ripe grain - the 'firstfruits'. Until the day of *Pentecost* these chosen 'firstfruits' were carefully nurtured, to be presented (baked into two loaves) to the LORD on Pentecost.

No imagination is needed to compare this act to 'the elect' - selected by the Father, and carefully nourished by Him until death: *'...Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures'* (James 1:18; see also Romans 8:23, Revelation 14:4). Jesus is heralded in the New Testament as the 'firstfruits': *'...as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; then they that are Christ's, at his coming'* (I Corinthians 15:22-23).

There will, at Christ's return, be a 'harvest' of these firstfruits - the people of God from all ages safely gathered in. They will *'...reign with Christ a thousand years'* (Revelation 20:4). Then will begin, under their direction, the work of the education into the way of the LORD of all those who survive into and through the 'Millennium'. Wrote Isaiah (ch 2:2-4):

'...And it shall come to pass in the latter days, that the mountain of Jehovah's house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many peoples shall go and say, Come, and let us go up to the mountain of Jehovah, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of Jehovah from Jerusalem. And he will judge between the nations, and will decide concerning many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more/

The *Day of Pentecost* celebrates the harvest of the saints from every age - those in whom dwells the holy Spirit. They are 'tagged' - training for a momentous task Ω

Type and Anti-type

Far from being random, events and people and objects and actions in the Old Testament have vital significance for Christians - and indeed for mankind. *Sacrifices*, for example, have direct bearing on the life and mission of Jesus the Messiah. So, too, all aspects of the Israelite *priesthood*. And the *festivals* - they have meaning beyond their actual observance. They are *types*, while their fulfillments are termed *anti-types*. We do well to pay attention to them.

Beware False Prophets

Most of our readers will be aware of the concept that God has a time plan, that the 'seven-day week' may represent a seven thousand year divine plan. It's a view that echoes from Christianity's early centuries.

Man's rule will, in this scenario, end after six thousand years of human existence and be followed by the thousand-year reign of Jesus as 'King of kings and LORD of lords'. This, alongside the perceived 'signs of the times', has fuelled the many attempts to establish a date for the expected 'Great Tribulation' followed by the return of Jesus to reign on earth.

Down the centuries there have been times when Christians have been confronted by events that were interpreted as being signs of the imminent end of man's rule. There was a flurry of interest as 1000AD approached, in the mid-eighteen hundreds - and in the last half of the nineteen hundreds. Even now there are self-styled 'prophets' proclaiming 'the end is nigh'.

History is littered with incarnations of wannabe 'Elijahs' and enough 'two witnesses' to fill a stadium. They have come - and gone. Sadly, they leave a legacy of dashed hopes among their deluded followers. Indeed some - remember Jim Jones, David Koresh - lead their loyal followers to gruesome deaths. Others will lead you off to some desert place or wilderness.

The Signs

It is vital we take note of God's warning in regard to these false prophets: *'...when a prophet speaks in the name of Jehovah, if the thing follow not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which Jehovah has not spoken: the prophet has spoken it presumptuously, you shall not be afraid of him'* (Deuteronomy 18:22).

Don't be cowed by his charisma or by persuasive words or his wielding of his vaunted 'God-ordained authority'. *Don't follow him*. Just observe! This, of course, assumes that you are alert and not sucked in by his 'story'. Said Jesus: *'...beware false prophets'*.

How, then, can we be sure we are not deceived by the proclamations of an 'Elijah' or a 'witness' or a self-styled 'prophet'?

One day there will indeed appear not one but two truly God-appointed prophets: *'...I will give unto my two witnesses, and they shall prophesy a thousand two hundred and threescore days, clothed in sack-cloth'* (Revelation 11:3). Their mission (in Jerusalem) is described in this chapter

- We aren't told if they are human - or angelic beings
- Their identity is not revealed in Scripture. It has been suggested that God may restore ancient prophets to life as His witnesses - Elijah and Moses have been suggested. *But no-one knows!*
- They will do their work by divine power and will have no need of financial supporters
- Likely they will have established their credentials beforehand - by a record of fulfilled prophecies
- While we should be aware of the 'signs of the times', we must be very cautious about accepting dates for prophesied events. Many Christians believe the 'six thousand years' are complete - though we are now some twelve years beyond the accepted date - based on Creation at 4004BC
- Caution, too, as to the time elapsed, for historical - and Biblical - dates are notoriously unreliable. In Judaism, for example, only 5768 (not six thousand) years have elapsed since Creation
- Further, the typology of 'the prophetic week' may simply mean that God has imposed a limit on the time man can continue to ignore Him. In *His* time He will intervene in human affairs
- The only 'sure word of prophecy' in this matter are the words of Jesus: *'...And many false prophets shall arise, and shall lead many astray. And because iniquity shall be multiplied, the love of the many shall wax cold. But he that endures to the end, the same shall be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a testimony unto all the nations; and then shall the end come'* (Matthew 24: 11-14).

The key is that we '*endure to the end*', faithful to our calling and to our Saviour. Ω

Be Prepared!

In every field of study the antidote to false information is *know the facts*. No less so in religion.

To guard against false teaching we need a basic understanding of the Christian Scriptures. To this end we recommend

Bible Basics Study Course
available on line or in print

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