

outreach

The Newsletter of the Churches of God, UK

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Matthew 28:19-20*

representing



'Paganism'—does it matter?

With the widespread seasonal media coverage of the origins of the usual Christian 'holy days' there are few believers who are unaware of their origins.

The 'season of good will' is celebrated by a mix of religious worship, decorated trees, lying to the children, fat men in red robes, flying reindeers. The death and resurrection of the world's Saviour is celebrated by fertility symbols—cute rabbits, eggs—and worship at sun-rise .

Certainly, committed believers will see through this fog of pre-Christian beliefs and practices. They will focus on the birth of the Saviour and on his death and resurrection. So does it really matter if they add such error?

One Faith

Christianity even more than Islam claims to be the 'one true faith'. Jesus himself says '*...no-one comes to the Father [ie the one and only Creator God] but by me*' (John 14:6). As Christians we believe him. All roads do not lead to God!

This 'true faith', however, has a sting. For—Jesus again—'*...Not everyone who calls me their Lord will get into the kingdom of heaven. Only the ones who obey my Father in heaven will get in*' (Matthew 7:21 CEV). We must, then, pay close attention to what the Father says about how we relate to Him.

Faith Once Delivered

In a sense, Christianity didn't begin in the first century AD! On the surface it is rooted in Judaism, but its core teachings long pre-date Moses—even to man's beginnings.

For when the Father created us He

made us to function best when we conformed to revealed principles. Those principles form the backbone down the centuries of the one true faith, and are at the heart of the revelation to Moses and in Christianity. Indeed, though obscured, they are embedded in all the major faiths.

Those principles and teachings became debased and distorted, leading to the vast array of religious practices that deface our world—practices widely known as 'paganism'.

These false faiths even mimic prophesied events surrounding the birth of Jesus, and his death and resurrection—practices (now called Christmas, Easter) later incorporated into the Christian church not long after Jesus returned to the Father.

Does It Matter?

The Creator's attitude to His creation, His *kosmos*, never changes (though He adapts His methods). The foundation principle is love for it, and to keep the divine plan on track that involves the need to apply force at times—the great Flood, for example

The Scriptures make clear that all God does is for man's ultimate good. So when man's decisions conflict with that purpose He intervenes. When depravity threatens it the solution may well be the death penalty.

In Noah's day wickedness enveloped mankind. In Abraham's time it was the perversity of Sodom. In the time of Joshua whole nations were executed at His command because of their innate evil: widespread religious prostitution, the burning of infants in sacrifice, sexual perversion. Attitudes so ingrained that even infants had to die. (Children mimic their parents' behaviour.)

NUMBERS AND SYMBOLS

Bible students widely recognize that there's much symbolism in the Scriptures. That is, words, images, numbers that have a meaning hidden within their superficial meaning.

An example is the use—as in Isaiah 2—of *mountain* to represent a nation or kingdom. *Stars* can represent angels. *Serpent* is representative of Satan.

Adding in Scripture

Less well known is the use of numbers in Bible symbolism—though *seven* is generally accepted as implying spiritual perfection. It has been noted, for example, that the first verse of Genesis has a sequence of sevens and multiples of seven.

The verse has seven Hebrew words with in all twenty-eight letters. Writes Reginald Naish: 'The numeric value of the three nouns (God, heaven, earth)... is 777' He adds, 'There are no fewer than thirty-seven combination of seven in this verse'.

Seven, of course, features in the perfect pattern God built into His weekly and annual festivals There's the seventh-day Sabbath, the seven annual holy convocations, the seven year cycle for the land and the jubilee year of release.

Then there's *eight*—clearly associated with new beginnings and resurrection. It is first associated with Adam's new beginning (Genesis 5:4), with Noah (I Peter 3:20). The final fulfilment—the eternal Kingdom—is symbolized by 'the eighth day', the last of the annual holy convocations.

Twelve, too, has its symbolism—the number for government. In Revelation it represents the fullness (*ie*, not just a literal 144,000) of the saints who will govern with Messiah after His return. The same pattern of *twelves* is demonstrated by the description of the Temple City—centre of Government in the millennium (*ch* 21:16). It is, like the Holy of Holies of the Tabernacle, a perfect cube—again the City is not literal, but symbolic of perfect government under the Father.

Divine Count

This 'divine arithmetic' permeates the Christian Scriptures from Genesis through Revelation. It is a further indication of the Bible's divine authorship—though using many mouthpieces and over millennia.

It is inconceivable that such symmetry could be achieved by so many authors over such a time span. As wrote the apostle Peter: '*...holy men of old spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit*' (II Peter 1:21). One divine mind authored the Scriptures. Ω

Paganism'...cont'd

Their religious practices had become so perverse, so evil, that the one true faith—which is the optimum way for man to live—was all but overwhelmed.

Note God's instruction to Israel. The 'disgusting things' listed are rampant in today's society—even among Christian believers—and disgust Him no less:

The nations that live [in Canaan] do things that are disgusting to the LORD, and you must not follow their example. Don't sacrifice your son or daughter. And don't try to use any kind of magic or witchcraft to tell fortunes or to cast spells or to talk with spirits of the dead. ...Never be guilty of doing any of these disgusting things! (Deuteronomy 18:10-13 CEV)

Forty years earlier God had warned His people against the vile practices indulged in by the Canaanites: adultery, incest, bestiality, homosexuality (*see* Leviticus 18). All perversions common in our world.—and destructive of cohesive society.

Condemned were such seemingly innocent practices as bowing before the rising sun (Ezekiel 8:16), and idolatrous family-oriented festivals (Jeremiah 7:18). Such '*...provoke [me] to anger*'. It has a familiar ring—especially around Easter and Christmas!

God insists that His people cast aside all pagan practices, insists that we do not pervert '*...the faith once delivered*'. Jesus warned: '*...Not everyone who calls me their Lord will get into the kingdom of heaven. Only the ones who obey my Father in heaven will get in. On the day of judgment many will call me their Lord. They will say, "We preached in your name, and in your name we forced out demons and worked many miracles." But I will tell them, "I will have nothing to do with you! Get out of my sight, you evil people!"*' (Matthew 7:21-23 CEV) Ω

New Horizons...

Almost all readers of OUTREACH Newsletter receive it *via* e-mail. And most of these do not receive our companion magazine *New Horizons*. It is bi-monthly, free, and sent without obligation.

Our readers are invited to enroll to receive a print copy. You may sample past issues on our website www.cgom.org.

The current issue includes:

- **God's Firstfruits Harvest**
- *When Someone Dies*
- **In the Image of God**
- *Why Does God Kill?*
- **The Reality of Hope**

Spring Harvest

'...unto the morrow after the seventh sabbath shall you number fifty days' (Leviticus 23:16)

'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)

The Biblical 'types' can be based on historical events (*Passover*, for example). Or, as in this case, in a natural event - the early grain harvest. Our physical life depends on the produce of the ground, and it is surely right that we recognize the source of this abundance with thanksgiving to the Creator. But the types have a spiritual fulfillment, and the seven weeks of the grain harvest in ancient Palestine are of momentous significance.

- The Biblical festivals are rooted in the physical laws that govern our planet: *'...and 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, and for days and years'* (Genesis 1:14). Note that word 'seasons'. In Hebrew it is *mo'ed*, denoting a 'fixed time'. The word is used of the divinely-appointed feasts: *'...These are the feasts [mo'ed] of the LORD, even holy convocations, which ye shall proclaim in their seasons [mo'ed]'* (Leviticus 23:4). They are appointed times for the people of God to assemble before Him in worship, and their place on the religious calendar is governed by those 'lights'
- Earth's produce, too, is dependent on these 'lights' - our sun and moon. The Creator uses these harvests as an object lesson for His creation. They depict His plan for mankind, and the spring grain harvest is at its heart. In Israel, the new corn could be consumed only after special offerings were presented before the LORD. It was called the *Firstfruits* or the *Wave-Sheaf*. Jesus fulfilled this ancient type on the Sunday morning after his resurrection. Because of the Christian's place as the *'brethren of Christ'* (Hebrews 2:11), we are called *'a kind of firstfruits'* (James 1:18). [See MiniStudy 43]
- It is these latter - faithful Christians - who represent the 'fifty days' of the spring harvest: *'... you shall count unto you from the morrow after the sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering; seven sabbaths shall be complete: Even unto the morrow after the seventh sabbath shall you number fifty days'* (Leviticus 23:15-16). The fifty days of the early harvest represent the present era, when the Father is inviting the willing to be the firstfruits of His spiritual harvest. The symbolic fifty days of harvest represent the need for the people of God - throughout the year - constantly to be spiritually nourished, to grow to Christ-like maturity: *'... but grow in grace, and in the knowledge of*

our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ' (II Peter 3:18). And to *'be fruitful and multiply'* - evangelize (Matthew 13:8)

- The apostle Paul explains the significance of the *Firstfruits* offering: *'...now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept'* (I Corinthians 15:20, 23). It represents the resurrection from among the dead. He continues: *'... for 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'* (vv.22-24). Jesus was the first to be resurrected in spirit form. Then, at his return, all those in whom is the Spirit of God will be resurrected - in the same spirit form - to reign alongside the returned Christ (I Thessalonians 4:14-17, Revelation 20:6)
- The fiftieth day, Sunday, is the *Feast of Pentecost*, familiar to most Christians as the day the holy Spirit came with power upon the disciples (Acts 2:1). The word means *fiftieth*. (This 'seven plus one' theme is common in Scripture. 7 days of *Unleavened Bread* plus 1 (Pentecost); 7 day of *Tabernacles* plus 1; 7 x 7 years plus 1 to the *Jubile* year.) The *Day of Pentecost* - also called the *Feast of Weeks* (eg II Chronicles 8:13) - represents the culmination of the divine plan for this age. It is also the forerunner of the time of Christ's return, when the entire remnant of mankind will have the veil of deception removed (Acts 2:17, Isaiah 25:7, II Corinthians 4:4) - the late harvest, the ingathering of the nations
- *Pentecost* is the only Bible festival for which no calendar date is given in Scripture. It has to be calculated, counted. Contrary to this, in Judaism the date is fixed at the sixth day of the third month - based on fifty days from the first annual High Day of the *Feast of the Passover* (Nisan 15). Note that the *Day of Pentecost* is a 'holy convocation', a High Day, but is not here (Leviticus 23) termed an annual Sabbath - thus making clear that the Sabbath referred to is the weekly one. Jesus, however, fulfilled the typology as the first of the *Firstfruits* harvest. On the day following that High Day (that year a Friday) he was still in the grave having been crucified on Wednesday. He could not therefore have fulfilled the type. God always acts 'on time'; He does nothing prematurely. For example: *'... when the fulness of the time came, God sent forth his Son'* (Galatians 4:2, 4; also Ephesians 1:10; Acts 2:1; Exodus 12:17, 41; Daniel 12:7)
- In sum, Jesus as the firstfruits to God by his resurrection was accepted by the Father next day - on the *'morrow of the Sabbath'*, Sunday morning. From that day we are to count fifty days, and that (Sun)day is *Pentecost*. He is *'...declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead'* (Romans 1:4). As ever Jesus Christ is the focus of the festival. The seven weeks represent Christians of this era - *'a kind of firstfruits'* Ω

Pentecost 2009
Sunday May 31

Passover Postscript

Passover is the annual seven-day festival in Spring most often associated, of course, with Judaism, but also increasingly viewed as a Christian celebration though with a change of emphasis (eg I Corinthians 5). It follows the annual *Lord's Supper*—the memorial of the suffering and death of Jesus held the previous evening. The first Christians observed this festival, which was later supplanted by 'Easter', an established pre-Christian spring festival.

Having been sacrificed (v.7) Jesus lay in the grave for three days and three nights—just as he predicted (Matthew 12:40). Contrary to common belief he rose from the grave as Sabbath ended (not Sunday morning). But that Sunday is indeed special.

On that Sunday morning Jesus presented himself to the Father in Heaven—prefigured in the *Wavesheaf Offering* ceremony. (It is detailed on [page 3](#).)

Passover to Pentecost

Following Passover—also called the *Days of Unleavened Bread*—on the Bible religious calendar is *Pentecost*, an observance familiar to most Christians. On this day the Holy Spirit was made available on a wider scale, having previously been given to the disciples (John 20:22). The Father and Jesus through the Spirit now came to indwell those who committed their life and their eternity to them. Pentecost is widely known as 'the birthday of the church'

[Pentecost is the only Bible festival which is not ascribed a specific calendar date. It is to be calculated—[see p.3](#)]

This fifty-day interim period from Passover to Pentecost is often viewed as a 'dead' time in the divine calendar with no special significance. The fact that each succeeding seven Sabbath days to be counted, however, shows that we need to be aware of the passing days.

On the ground, literally, in Palestine it was a harvest time, barley and wheat ripe for reaping, *Pentecost* being a celebration of 'harvest home'. And the analogy of 'harvest' is widely applied to the divine plan.

From the time of that Wave Offering—the resurrected Jesus—until God's firstfruit harvest is gathered in is what we could call 'the church age' during which those responsive to the divine call receive His Spirit and are prepared for His Kingdom.

This period from Passover to Pentecost focuses the mind of Christians on the pressing need to gather in new 'family members—a monumental task for which every true mature Christian is responsible. The end-time harvest—however meagre the fruit—is yet incomplete! See Matthew 28:18-20. Ω

Why Animal Sacrifice?

Most of the world's major faiths are familiar with the need for sacrifice. We sacrifice our *time*—as in providing practical help to others. We sacrifice our resources—our *material wealth*, for example—to support the needy or for our other religious activity. But *animal sacrifice*?

Christians, especially, would recoil in horror at any suggestion that animal sacrifice is other than obsolete, being totally superseded in Christ. *Passover* is a prime example. Perhaps we should pause for thought!

The New Testament clearly demonstrates that all those sacrifices under the 'old covenant' are mere 'shadows' cast by the reality of the awesome sacrifice of Jesus—the '*...Word [who] became flesh*'. Every sacrifice in some manner illustrates aspects of his life and work, and are superceded. Yet...

A major focus of the prophecies is the earthly reign of Messiah, Jesus (eg Isaiah 2, Zechariah 14). Each individual will—in those days and in the same manner as today—have opportunity to accept that sacrifice of Jesus to remove their sin and to become part of the Family of God.

The prophet Ezekiel adds detail, describing the millennial 'headquarters' of Messiah (chs 40-46) in Jerusalem. He notes that animal sacrifices will be reinstated: '*...I saw four tables, two on each side of the room, where the animals to be sacrificed were killed*' (40:38-39 CEV). Will also be offered at the festivals—Passover, etc (ch 45:21FF).

Sacrifices had been rejected by God (Amos ch 5, for example) because of Israel's sin. In the thousand year reign of Messiah they will be offered out of pure hearts. Ω

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