

The Newsletter of the Churches of God, UK

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September-October
2012

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providing
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Matthew 28:19-20

representing



The Christian Atonement

Given that all the ritual of the *Day of Atonement* was fulfilled in Jesus—does the Day have further significance for us? Is it not now irrelevant? Why do so many Christians continue to observe it with fasting and religious services? Is it any different from the *Passover* season which the apostle Paul indicates (I Corinthians 5:6-8) is a *Christian practice*?

In the ritual for the *Day of Atonement* all Israel's sins—sins that had accumulated throughout the year—were atoned for by the various sacrifices. Importantly, the Tabernacle/Temple, too, had been cleansed (see Leviticus 16:16, 18).

Most Christians are not completely averse to observing an Old Testament festival, of course—they continue to observe the *Day of Pentecost*, for example. And a large Protestant organization (ICEJ) observes God's *Feast of Tabernacles* every year in Jerusalem. It is a truism that frequent and regular observance of an event enhances our understanding of it (eg Christmas, for many). So with the festivals appointed by God for His people—one of which is this *Day of Atonement*.

Passover v. Atonement

It is important to note that *Atonement* is a *national* event for Israel. *Passover*, however, is personal and family, and for Christians is our annual re-commitment to the blood covenant with Jesus and the Father made at our baptism.

Passover preceded the evening before by the solemn remembrance of the suffering and death of our Saviour, represents our willingness to

live a holy life, symbolized by the eating of unleavened bread—symbolic of corruption and sin—for seven days.

A Call to Change!

Note that *national* element. Christianity, the fulfillment of the old faith, has no place for animal sacrifice, nor special 'holy garments', nor is it tied to a location as the Jerusalem Temple. But it, the church of God, is God's Temple: '*...All of you surely know that you are God's temple and that his Spirit lives in you. Together you are God's holy temple, and God will destroy anyone who destroys his temple*' (I Corinthians 3:16-17 CEV).

The Church of God—God's Temple, the Body of Christ—is *one*, though clearly not outwardly! It is made up of all in whom dwells the divine Spirit. We share a love of the truth (II Thessalonians 2:10)—yet squabble over minor interpretations. We share the same God—but disgrace His holy Name by our petty divisions. We sing '*...all one body we*'—but ostracize individuals and dissenting groups.

And, just as Israel annually cleansed the Temple by their *Atonement* ritual, so the Church of God must approach this *Day of Days* in that same spirit of confession and reconciliation. It is a momentous opportunity to heal wounds. A chance to forgive past hurts. A chance to forge common links. Opportunity to co-operate, to leave behind petty finger-pointing and protectionism, to truly come to love one another.

All such is sin and defiles our God and His holy Name. Let us, on this *Day of Atonement 2012*, confess our personal and corporate sin, as did God's prophet Daniel: '*...We [Judah] have sinned, and have committed iniquity, and have done wickedly, and* **cont'd p.2**

The Nation State

The United States of America is often viewed as a ‘melting pot’. People from all races arrive on its shores eager to become part of America with all its opportunities and its freedoms. They are successfully absorbed into the existing culture. While this may be in process of change yet it generally holds good.

Contrast what is frequently known as the ‘United States of Europe’. Of course it is a misnomer, for despite centuries of effort to form such a union it remains a loose—and dysfunctional—federation of independent-minded separate states. The Bible describes this ‘state of affairs’ thus: ‘... *This kingdom will be the result of a marriage between kingdoms, but it will crumble, just as iron and clay don't stick together*’ Daniel 2:43 CEV). [It is predicted to shrink to a core handful of prosperous, undemocratic—and warrior—nations.]

Much the same effect is experienced in other democracies under the banner of ‘multiculturalism’. The immigrants refuse to be assimilated, forming ghettos and seeking to live by the cultural norms of their homeland. The result is fragmentation—the consequence of mixing ‘...*iron and clay*’—and cultural disruption of the host nation. It’s an unstable mix.

Lesson of History

A look back at the ancient nation of Israel provides insight. It was established as a single nation through the voluntary association of twelve biologically-related clans, remaining intact for over five centuries. Therein is one key to any successful ‘nation state’.

Israel’s twelve tribes were descendants of shared parentage, and voluntarily agreed a common constitution, a common legal framework, a common faith. Immigrants were welcome—but were required to subscribe to the ‘laws of the land’. In principle, they assimilated. It was a model nation, attaining international greatness under David and Solomon (II Chronicles 9:22-28).

After the death of King Solomon, and ignoring wise counsel, the nation divided into two ‘houses’, two governments, in part due to excessive draconian taxation (I Kings 12: 6ff) and weakened by imported alien faiths. Above all, it was a common faith that had bound the nation as one. *God* reigned over them, guided them.

Democratic Deficit

Historically, before 1500BC (and after), nations were ruled by despots. Israel’s God, however, settled for democracy: ‘...*Hearken unto the voice of the people in all that they say to you: for they have*’ **cont’d p.4**

Atonement ...cont’d

have rebelled, even by departing from your precepts and from your judgments...O Lord, according to all your righteousness, I beseech you, let your anger and your fury be turned away...O my God, incline your ear, and hear; open your eyes, and behold our desolations: for we do not present our supplications before you for our righteous deeds, but for your great mercies; O Lord, forgive; O Lord, hearken and do; defer not, for your own sake, O my God’ (ch 9:5-19).

God heard, and it was the prelude to their restoration to the Land in preparation for the (first) coming of Messiah.

In these uncertain days the Churches of God should be ‘*a city set on a hill*’, a light shining in a darkened world dominated by a Satanic mind-set, demonic practices, demonic teachings and led astray by seducing spirits—I Timothy 4:1). The church of God is—should be, *must become*—an example for the world of true reconciliation and harmonious relationships between the related assemblies. (cf Isaiah ch 58).

Why is there stagnation, so little growth? Perhaps the lessons of this *Day of Days* may awaken the churches to God’s purpose for us. **Ω**

ATONEMENT 2012
Wednesday September 26
begins sunset 25th (Leviticus 23:32)

Observing the Day of Days

As the most solemn day God has gifted His people for observance, *Atonement* is certainly worthy of our celebration. But how it is observed may be a challenge to those who have never before observed it.

The Nation State

- a shared genetic origin
- shared laws
- a shared faith

The Scriptures tell us: ‘...*On the tenth day of the seventh month* of each year, you must go without eating to show sorrow for your sins, and no one, including foreigners who live among you, is allowed to work...and from now on, it must be celebrated each year. Go without eating and make this a day of complete rest just like the Sabbath*’ (Leviticus 16: 29-31 CEV).

The elements of observing *Atonement* are: the date*, fasting, observance as a Sabbath (*ie* don’t do any work), worship, fellowship.

It is a day of *fasting* for 24 hours for all able-bodied Christian believers. (It is not required of children or the sick.) The fast

cont’d p.4

Letter from England

Greetings from Lincoln

Following the excitement, the dynamism, of that first Christian *Day of Pentecost*, many then present soon came to earth with a bump. They were there in Jerusalem assembled from a huge geographical area to observe the festival—then home they went. To what?

Many of them would have been among the thousands baptized over the next few weeks. They would now return to their synagogue communities, and we can but speculate as to how the message they brought of Jesus as Messiah and Saviour would be received. The accounts of opposition to the message in *Acts* suggests disbelief, persecution—with the occasional spark of a positive response.

Acts 17 is a microcosm of the kind of response the returning believers would expect to greet them—'... Some of the people [in the synagogue at Thessalonica] were won over, and attached themselves to Paul and Silas...but the jealousy of the Jews was aroused, and, calling to their aid some ill-conditioned and idle fellows, they got together a riotous mob and filled the city with uproar' (vv 4-5).

Behind the scenes in all of this is the direct call to belief from the Father. His servants proclaim the Gospel and those with '...ears to hear' respond. Said Jesus: '...no one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him' (John 6:44). To Paul the Lord said: '... I have very many people in this city [Corinth]' (Acts 18:10).

But what if He doesn't have 'many people' where you are? If, in fact, there's just your family, or just you? It's the situation of many believers—not just in 'the Third World' but also in our Bible-blessed West and in this twenty-first century, and as it has been through the two millennia since Jesus rose from the grave, and throughout the history of the people of God (*see Hebrews ch 11*). The apostle cites Elijah—in despair at a low point of his life: '...I am the only one left...But the Lord told Elijah, "I still have seven thousand followers who have not worshiped Baal"' (Romans 11:3-4).

Since it is the Father Himself who draws to belief, we can be certain He is well aware of our isolation. *He cares, Jesus Christ cares.* He may use that isolation to help shape us into His image, focusing our attention on the heavenly realm for our spiritual support: '...my grace is sufficient for you'

This divine support is abundantly true, and available for the asking (*Read Romans ch 8*).. But we all need fellowship, even if it is derived from the resources provided in abundance from a church organization..

Insight from Paul

The apostle Paul's letters shed a bright light on our walk with God

It's clear from the record of the New Testament that it was normal practice for brethren to gather in assemblies for worship, instruction and fellowship. In that age these assemblies were in the homes of the brethren—'house churches'. [Examples may be found in Romans chapter 16.]

Indeed, we are urged in the book of *Hebrews* to '... consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as you see the day approaching' (*ch 10:24-25*). Clearly such regular contact was highly valued. So what was Paul's practice?

The apostle established this Christian principle: '... Neither against the Jewish Law, nor against the Temple, nor against Caesar, have I committed any offence whatever' (Acts 25:8). [He is referring to the written Law—not to the Jew's oral law.]

We can trace how Paul applied this principle. As long as the Temple continued (to 70AD) he as a true Jew observed its rites and ceremonies. We also find him continuing to assemble, as did Jesus, on the weekly seventh-day Sabbath: '...there was a synagogue of the Jews. Paul--following his usual custom--betook himself to it, and for three successive Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures' (Acts 17:1-2). We find, too, that seekers among the *Gentiles* crowded to the synagogue on Sabbath to hear Paul's message (Acts 13:42-44).

We can also trace Paul's attitude to God's *annual* observances. He guides the Corinthian church in their observance of the Passover season—the seven *Days of Unleavened Bread* (I Corinthians 5: 7-8). He is recorded as having observed this festival at Philippi (Acts 20:6). We also find the apostle urgently trying to reach Jerusalem for the *Pentecost* festival (I Corinthians 16:8)

Surely an example for all Christians to follow! **Ω**

Where possible, too, the *annual festivals* provide opportunity for face-to-face contact with other brethren.

The *Churches of God, UK* are here to give you whatever level of support you may want—by mail or online. *Do get in touch!*

James

Light from the Past

insight on Bible culture

Fings ain't what they used to be goes the song. And when we try to get our minds round some episodes in the Scriptures we can become baffled—even to the extent of considering them out-of-date or irrelevant. But peruse the records of life in Bible lands a century or so ago and new light is shed on what can be somewhat perplexing instructions in the ancient Scriptures.

Take, for example, that statement of Jesus: ‘...*If your right hand causes you to sin, chop it off and throw it away! It is better to lose one part of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell [ge'henna]*’ (Matthew 5:30 *CEV*). As followers of Jesus must we conform? It *has* bothered some Christians. Are not the Scriptures inspired?

It is obvious that some Bible statements are not literal, often symbolic—as in the book of Revelation—and need to be interpreted in the light of other texts. But what of that instruction to ‘...*chop off your hand*’ or ‘...*tear out an eye*’? What of that camel passing through the eye of a needle? Or faith moving a mountain? Or the non-pc words of Jesus about ‘dogs’?

In ‘Syria’ (the Middle East of a century ago, before becoming Westernized) such terms would be used—but no-one would think of them as literal! It was a graphic way to emphasize a point.

Common sense dictates that we take such statements with a pinch of salt! That is, we seek the symbolic meaning behind the words.

Cultural Background

Back to our opening statement: *things are different*. Some cultures (as in middle Eastern countries anciently), are exuberant, demonstrative in their manner of expression—we might say ‘over the top’. Modern Westerners are more reserved, and for us accuracy and precision of speech is paramount. Different—but neither is ‘wrong’. So we apply common sense.

A major bank claims it is sensitive to local culture, wherever it operates. And so, too, should we when it comes to understanding what is a text—the Bible—from a vastly different culture from that of the twenty-first century.

Inspired Scripture

But for many there lurks concern as to the ‘verbal inspiration of the Scriptures’. Would God inspire false instruction? Would Jesus?

While acknowledging God’s hand behind the original text, in studying the Scriptures it is vital to observe cultural differences, word meanings (even since 1611!), language *etc*. It remains ‘the Word of God’. Ω

Nation State ...cont'd from p.2

not rejected you [Samuel], but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them’ (I Samuel 8:7).

‘Democracy’, in other words, is a second—and inferior—choice. By rejecting divine rule they were cast on their own devices. The people became idolatrous (II Kings 17: 6-12), and—a recipe for disaster—rejected His precepts of sound government.

Rise and Fall

The United States of America in its origins embraced similar principles: a core homogenous population (‘Anglo-Saxon’), a common faith, welcoming strangers but encouraging assimilation, a Bible-based Constitution and legal system. It was a shining role model for prevailing governmental systems. What happened?

Sadly, Godly principles are shed by the day. Even the semblance of Christianity is being strangled by permissive legislation and the decline of personal moral standards. Mirroring ancient Israel, two and a half centuries of increasing peace and prosperity heralds what can be seen as divine retribution.

Without a radical change of direction, as in ancient Israel—destruction inevitably follows. Ω

Observing ...cont'd from p.2

is both spiritual (self-examination) and physical. We abstain—unless there is a compelling reason—from food and water (*cf* I Kings 22:27).

Atonement is a solemn *Sabbath*. No work—business or domestic—is done. Where possible, brethren meet for worship, fellowship and hearing the Scriptures explained. Fasting, of course, is a ‘non-act’. But the spirit of its observance in the context of Christianity doesn’t mean we can’t turn on our lights or drive (or walk) to services or attend to personal grooming.

As with all God’s festivals, *Atonement* is rich with symbolism. While we observe the Day literally (with fasting *etc*), we must not forget to ‘fast’ by our actions in our daily life. The prophet Isaiah outlines how (*ch* 58).

* *The dates used in the Scriptures are on the Hebrew calendar, anciently in widespread use throughout the Middle East. Tables are available to provide the equivalent modern dates. The 24 hours begins at sunset of the 9th. This year it is September 26th.* Ω