

outreach

The Newsletter of the Churches of God, UK

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World in Transition

It feels like we are on the brink of a new age—but an age of chaos, of barbarism, of hate. The brave new world supposed to follow the end of the war in 1918 has melted in the spilled blood of millions since.

Endless international conferences, focus groups, public institutions, meetings of Heads of State—even a so-called ‘united nations’ organization—have failed to deliver. And our leaders flounder without answers. As wrote the Hebrew prophet: ‘...For the wisdom of their wise ones shall perish, and the understanding of their intelligent ones shall be hidden’ (Isaiah 29:14).

‘Wise’ may have been written tongue-in-cheek—for our politicians, our business leaders and even the religious leaders betray an abysmal ignorance of the true source of wisdom. For when it comes to solving social, economic, family, religious challenges the prophet speaks again ‘...Woe to those who call evil good and good evil; who put darkness for light and light for darkness; who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!’ (ch 5:20).

Wise heads are few, but increasingly nations are ruled by how the prophet sees them: ‘He will let children and babies become your rulers’ (Isaiah 3:4).

Roots of Evil

Certainly, as the apostle Paul writes, ‘...love of money is a root of every evil’ (I Timothy 6:10). And we see that clearly portrayed by avaricious bankers, business

tycoons, Parliamentarians, corrupt despots - and also mankind in general. Our national and personal indebtedness reflects a disregard for a guiding principle for a stable economy: ‘...You shall not covet’.

Money, however, is but one root but there’s another: *religion*. Throughout history religion has spawned countless deaths, untold misery. It began with the murder of Abel and concerned the rejection of the true faith by his brother—and ever since!

More recently the Inquisition, the ‘Thirty Years War’ in the early 17th century, the IRA in Ireland, the current Islamic Sunni and Shi’ite struggles. Mixed with politics and the struggle for power and supremacy, religion is a potent force for evil.

In sum, human greed, humanly-devised religions, technology, power-hungry politics have, for six thousand years, failed our world. Human solutions have crumbled in a surging tide of fallen human nature. *But we are in transition*. For the one and only God sees our desperate plight—and has a plan. There is hope!

A Divine Plan

Thousands of Christians worldwide are now preparing for the Biblical autumn festivals, beginning September 25 with the annual holy day the *Day of Trumpets*. It is a day that highlights the self-destruction of mankind and the return of the Messiah, Jesus, to take over the reins of world government.

A surviving remnant of mankind—of all nations, all races—will be repentant and be *cont’d over*

Who 'Owns' the Church?

The obvious answer, of course, is Jesus Christ: *'...I will build my church'* (Matthew 16:18). Without him the church is nothing. He oversees each assembly (Revelation 2 & 3). He accepts as a member all who come to him from the Father (John 6:37). And he is now preparing for each called one an appointment to his earthly Government (*ch* 14:2). Each and every one invited is precious to him and to the Father, and all are 'shareholders' in his church.

Early in the church's history, however, this began to change. Jesus was ousted from oversight and men appropriated his church. The apostle Paul warned the Ephesian elders (men equipped to serve as overseers): *'...from among your own selves men will rise up who will seek with their perverse talk to draw away the disciples after them'* (Acts 20:30).

The purpose of their appointment was *service*: *'... [not] exercising lordship over the ones allotted to you [Gk kleros, chosen by lot], but becoming examples of the flock'* (1 Peter 5:3). These men, themselves part of God's heritage, are 'shepherds' of God's flock' (Acts 20:28) and, said Jesus, must not act like overlords (Matthew 20:25).

Too often, however, that's what happens when there's a governing body overseeing many local assemblies. The church hierarchy—the 'ministry'—see themselves alone as 'God's *kleros*'—not the entire church. Having taken to themselves (human) authority they 'serve' the church by assuming to themselves all its assets. All decisions are in their hands without recourse to input from the true *kleros*.

In contrast to the New Testament pattern governance becomes centralized, decisions concerning brethren determined remotely, individual talents and skills ignored, salaries and pensions set without the input of their 'paymasters'—the membership, the flock. The church becomes a business, deafened to the working of the Holy Spirit, to the voice of its 'chief executive officer', Jesus.

One Church

All Christians are part of the one and only true church. Each assembly hosts a range of men and women at different stages of their spiritual growth—and even includes interested or curious visitors (1 Corinthians 14:23-25). The Head of the church has brought them together with purpose, and he sets over them qualified overseers to shepherd this disparate group to spiritual maturity.

The 'shepherds' are men who are part of a congregation—not imported from afar—and are selected by the congregation according to the criteria set out by the apostle Paul (eg 1 Timothy 3, Titus 1). They are confirmed in the office by a respected external church leader. This was Paul's practice in the assemblies he founded (Acts 14:21-23).

It is vital that an assembly 'listen' to the voice of the Owner of the church as expressed through His written testimony in the Scriptures. Ω

Unravel the Mystery

*Poetry. History. Wisdom. Comfort.
Warning. Prophecy.*

All are in what some see as a book of mystery—the Christian Bible. But it is the gateway to making sense of our disturbed world.

Lesson 1 of our Bible Basics course is a guide to understanding how to make sense of the Bible's intertwined threads. Request a free copy!

In Transition... cont'd

reconciled to God, at one with Him through Christ and his sacrifice. The universal malign influence of the 'god of this world' will be removed.

Jesus picks up the reins of government over all of mankind—portrayed within the imagery of the next festival, the seven day *Festival of Tabernacles*. All human government will be subject to His benign rule for a thousand years as He implements His divine laws (Isaiah 2), administered by the risen saints:

He shall not judge according to the sight of His eyes, nor decide by the hearing of His ears, But with righteousness He shall judge the poor, and shall decide with uprightness for the meek of the earth. And He shall strike the earth with the rod of His mouth, and with the breath of His lips He shall slay the wicked. And righteousness shall be the girdle of His loins, and faithfulness the girdle of His heart. Also the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the cub lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. And the suckling child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of Jehovah, as the waters cover the sea. Isaiah 11:3-9

The prophet Zechariah tells us that *Tabernacles* will be observed annually by all mankind (*ch* 14:16) - persuaded, if necessary, by the One who controls the weather (vv.17-19)! No more false religion. No more corrupt self-serving government. Just what man desires—universal peace and prosperity.

What better way to understand this plan than to live it by participating in God's festivals! Ω

Sowing Seed

A brother in London has difficulty walking and is frustrated by being unable to travel far for Sabbath fellowship with like-minded brethren. He approached me to enquire if it would be ethical for him to invite others to come together on a Sabbath. Such a proposition would be anathema in some church circles!

But consider. How did the early church grow if not by such a practice? For example, the Ethiopian eunuch was taught the Gospel message by Philip—who was immediately snatched away leaving the eunuch to proceed on his own (Acts 8:26ff) to journey to far-away Ethiopia. It's not improbable that he facilitated the founding of Christianity there.

Saul (Paul) instigated persecution against the Jerusalem church, going from house (church) to house (church) initiating the scattering of the brethren far and wide throughout the land (Acts 8): '*... they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word*'. Undoubtedly they founded congregations—house churches were then the norm—wherever they settled, and when the congregation grew in number and in understanding a leader was selected to oversee it.

To sum up, and apply:

- They were believers in Christ
- They were equipped to 'preach the word', and schooled in its principles
- They were not restrained by the dead hand of a 'central headquarters'
- Where a congregation is formed Paul's guidance on its leadership team should be heeded (I Timothy 3)
- Hosts should maintain contact with and respect other fellowships (*cf* Romans 16)
- They must be vigilant to exclude false teachers (Acts 20: 29-30)
- Humility is key—none of us knows it all!

Many brethren have in recent years been left without fellowship close enough to attend. Where appropriate in their own circumstances they should consider this option. In the *Outreach Ministries* we are here to support you with a wide range of Bible-based literature—and an ear to listen. And through *CGOM* you are linked to other like-minded assemblies. Feel free to contact us. Ω

Read the article: *The Small Church*

<http://www.cgom.org/Publications/Articles/TheSmallChurch.pdf>

At Christianity's Core

Having been removed from the original writing down of the Word in the mid first century, Christians today must approach our understanding of it with caution and humility. Through study and experience we keep growing towards a better understanding of what Jesus taught personally and through the twelve apostles. There's no room for dogmatism. No room for drawing a line—'this far and no further'.

But much *is* clear, and we hold firmly to those teachings. As did the apostle Paul (and all the apostles and prophets) we are '*...determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified*' (I Corinthians 2:2). That is the core belief, and all else stems from that root.

The Scriptures, however, are a tapestry woven from many colours and threads of teaching—all forming a coherent pattern. Each strand of teaching illuminates the core, leading to a more comprehensive understanding. Our *Statement of Beliefs* provides *CGOM*'s considered current understanding of Bible teachings. It was compiled over many years and we are confident it reflects that pattern, but it is not 'engraved in stone'. Ω

You are invited to request a copy of our
Statement of Beliefs

Letter from England

It's sad that so many Christians are for one reason or another unable to fellowship with other brethren (*See Sowing Seed*). Many, of course, 'go to church' with little regard to what is taught there—so anywhere will do. But in general we like to be with others of like mind, whether secular ('my club') or religious.

We are urged in the Scriptures (Hebrews 10:25) '*...not neglecting--as some habitually do--to meet together, but encouraging one another, and doing this all the more since you can see the day of Christ approaching*'. But illness, disability, distance, finance can be obstacles to this. And that's understandable.

Such fellowship, however, is vital to the spiritual growth of God's church and to each of us individually. At baptism we are given God's Spirit, and that includes spiritual gifts which we are each to share in our local assembly. So we both give of ourselves and we benefit from our interaction with others—a two-way street.

On occasion a church organization can 'go rogue', forsaking its foundation beliefs, and this can cause a mass exodus of those brethren who remain faithful to the Scriptures. Many simply become disillusioned and say 'never again'. Others head for another but accessible similar denomination I encourage this—but choose carefully, for Jesus did warn of false teachers easing their way into an assembly.

We urge our readers to heed Paul's admonition, but if this is not an option then do 'fellowship' by mail and phone!

James

Oh To Be a Martyr

Thousands of believers in Jesus Christ—Christians—have been murdered simply for refusing to abandon their faith. Not only centuries ago but in our day, at this time, and not far away. They have witnessed to their faith to the point of death—and that is the true definition of a ‘martyr’. They did not seek death.

It is true that some Christians have in the past deliberately chosen to actively seek martyrdom. But they were misguided, for that is not the purpose of ‘laying down one’s life for their friends’. Nor did Jesus mean that when he said ‘...I send prophets and wise men and scribes to you. And you will kill and crucify some of them’ (Matthew 23:34). Their untimely death was, on that occasion, at the hands of wicked religious leaders among the Jewish hierarchy. And many true believers were indeed so killed, even in the New Testament era. But they did not seek out death!

An example of a true martyr (Gk *marturion*, witness) is Steven, one of the first office-holders in the early church, as recorded in Acts 6 to 8. False witnesses were laid before the Sanhedrin, for a formal trial, accusing him of blasphemy: ‘...when the council members heard Stephen’s speech, they were angry and furious.... [They] shouted and covered their ears. At once they all attacked Stephen and dragged him out of the city. Then they started throwing stones at him.... As Stephen was being stoned to death, he called out, Lord Jesus, please welcome me!’ True martyrdom indeed.

Paradise Lost

Contrast Steven’s martyrdom with the perversion spawned by false religious beliefs. There’s widespread belief among Muslims, for example, that death for the sake of Allah is rewarded by a place in Paradise (Arabic *jannah*). To this end many actively seek death through so-called suicide bombing (actually, murder), which offers the sure promise of immortality.

The concept (Arabic *shahid*, witness) is actively promoted in the Islamic media and by some religious leaders, and is especially used to encourage young Muslims to fight *jihad*, especially against the Israelis. Indeed the funeral of those who so die is termed a ‘wedding’, as they supposedly, in Paradise, marry ‘dark-eyed virgins’ and luxuriate in practices forbidden them in this life. The concept is also intended to encourage Muslims to a desire for Paradise.

To stand up for and promote one’s faith is praiseworthy. It lies at the heart of Christianity, and the Scriptures bear testimony to the tenacity of men and women who faced death to take the Gospel message to the four corners of the earth. In its early years Christianity reflected the peaceful message of the founder, Jesus the Messiah. But it lost its way in later centuries, succumbing to worldly ways, as in the Crusades and the era of the Inquisition.

The apostle Paul unveils the Christian’s battle armour: ‘...though we are still living in the world, it is no worldly warfare that we are waging. The weapons with which we fight are not human weapons, but are mighty for God in overthrowing strong fortresses’ (II Corinthians 10:3,4). The pen mightier than the sword! Christians are engaged in a spiritual battle with no place for violence to achieve its aims.

Christianity, though rooted in the peaceful mission of Jesus, lost its way under the sway of a secular church, regaining it only in later centuries through martyrdom and dearly-bought open access to God’s Word in the Scriptures.

In contrast, Islam spread its influence from its beginning through violent conquest, only at peace with other faiths when it had imposed overall control or were a small minority population. The present inter-Islamic sectarian conflicts shaking the Muslim world are but a reflection of the ‘soil’ from which it emerged in the 7th century. Avidly studied Islamic scriptures (*hadith*) demonstrate the necessity for Muslims to spare no means to spread Islam by force and strike terror into the hearts of the enemies of their god, Allah.

Thankfully, there is a growing revulsion against these tenets, and many Muslims are turning to the Christian faith—notably in Israel, the Gospel proclaimed by Jewish Christians—in face of intense opposition from fellow Muslims.

Reflecting the words of Jesus for the end-time, increasingly Christians face opposition and persecution—and it is predicted to get worse. Many may indeed face true martyrdom as we witness our faith. Jesus, however, promised to be with each of us right to our end. Let’s all remain close and faithful. Ω

What is ‘Spirit’?

Like many words in all languages, ‘spirit’ in the Scriptures has several meanings. The Hebrew word is *ruach*, and in Greek it is *pneuma*.

Examples from both Testaments are: *spirit in man, breath, (Holy) Spirit, angels, (unclean) spirit*

The apostle Paul assures us that *God alone* has immortality (I Timothy 6:16), and that immortality for humanity is available only through the Gospel message (II Timothy 1:10). ‘...*God is Spirit*’ (John 4:24) - *holy Spirit*. What of the remaining uses of the words?

Breath, of course, comes and goes. The *human spirit* will either be transformed by the holy Spirit when resurrected or cease to exist (Revelation 21:8). *Angels* (of God) are created beings and will continue unless they become disobedient, while the *unclean spirits* are destined for oblivion (Revelation 21:8, 27). Ω