

THE Plain Truth

PP 12578/3/2009

A Magazine Of Christian Understanding

Apr-Jun 2008

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the new covenant?**

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THE PLAIN TRUTH

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My God, my God

I thought of my precious children this morning and about how it hurts me to see them hurt or disappointed.

Then I remembered that I don't even have the capacity to love as God loves. There is no way I can love my children (there will always be some selfishness in it) as God loved Jesus, in whom He was "well pleased". This God watched as Jesus suffered many agonies even before He was led to the "Place of the Skull".

The Father watched until the "Cup" was given, then had to turn His back because He is perfect, and no sin can be found associated with God. That "Cup" in which were found the sins of the entire world—past, present and future. Every single sinful deed, word, thought and attitude I've had or will ever have was put on Jesus' aching, flesh-torn body. That same body was forced to hang on that human-devised instrument of torture. Jesus took on sin, my sin, at that moment.

Jesus, as God, knew what He faced, and He was a total participant in all decisions. Yet as a full member of our human family, He was also tormented by the knowledge of being suddenly alone. Since Jerusalem was filled with people during the Jewish Passover, many people had looked on Him during the past several hours. Others still came and went, or stayed, to watch with a grizzly fascination the impending death of three persons suspended above them, on that lonely hill.

Jesus' friend John, even in his

own grief, tried to comfort and shield mother Mary while not far away, soldiers who had gambled away all of Jesus' clothing, were waiting impatiently for the men to die so they could get out of the hot Middle Eastern sun. A number of Jewish religious leaders milled around, gloating at the one they didn't know was their Saviour. Yet, one other lone human being on a cross beside Him, who believed Jesus was who He said He was, asked for forgiveness and received it. That thief, who knew he was

Jesus, in his 30's only felt the abandonment.

How this must have pained the Father! Yet, through this abandonment the man-who-was-God learned the weaknesses of being human. As He mingled with us in our sins He knew that without Him, we cannot do any better. During His life He in turn began the work of teaching us how He can be reached and we can be forgiven.

The Godhead had created people to become their friends—the children of God. Now the Father

watched these potential children, as they poked, prodded, beat and tortured the only one who was perfect and who had never sinned. Jesus was the one who had the power, and the love, to forgive them for what they were doing to Him. Yet, God and Jesus loved these and all people enough to go on with their plan of salvation!

Oh, the irony of it all. What unthinkable

love! But God, the very Father of this Son He loves, also loves you and I. And if Jesus hadn't become our sin, and if God didn't turn away from our sins, we would have to pay for them with eternal death. So, with unlimited grace, God did turn His back on Jesus, and Jesus died, at last, with only our sins to keep Him company, as Mary and John wept in unbelievable pain while the crowd jeered and cheered.

No, as much as I love my children, I can never love as God does. □

being punished for a real crime, asked for and received eternal life in those few minutes before he died.

But Jesus was still alone, bereft of the comfort and eternal companionship He had always known. As God, He had chosen to go on with this mission. At the end of His human life, He now experienced what it was like to be totally alone.

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

The eternal Christ knew, had always known, why. But the man,



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Managing Editor	Low Mong Chai
Co-ordinator	Susan Low
Editorial & Advisory Committee	Dr. P. Sellappan
	Wong Mein Kong
	Ben David
	Stefanie Tai
	Devaraj Ramoo
	Wong Teck Kong
	Tan Ten Lee
Editorial Adviser	John Halford
Design	Richard Low
Design Adviser	John D. Stettaford

Malaysia
 Office Address: 55B Jalan Rengas, Taman Selatan, 41000 Klang
 Postal Address: Locked Bag 2002, 41990 Klang
 Website: www.wcg-klang.net
 Email: ptasia@myjaring.net

Singapore
 Jurong Point Post Office, P.O. Box 054, Singapore 916402

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What our readers say:

I refer to the above magazine that I have requested for and have received accordingly for the past few months. I would like to say that it is a great magazine and that it has imparted and built Spiritual understanding and knowledge in many non-Christian readers. I have also benefited from it greatly. However, owing to the limited time I have now, and the availability of many missionary books and biblical commentaries, I would like to request that the sending of the magazine to me be stopped, so that the magazine may be given to others who have not heard of Jesus Christ and the love of God. Thank you again for the wonderful magazine and may God bless you for your great efforts in spreading the good news to all men!

Gilbert Seow
Singapore

My family and I thank you and your co-partners for supplying us with this wonderful magazine which inspires me in many ways. May the blessed hands of God be with you all in your daily undertakings.

Subramaniam Paul
Seremban

I've read THE PLAIN TRUTH magazine borrowed from my neighbour and I like its contents. Besides that I want to improve my understanding of Christianity.

Ruzita Sudiah
Kota Marudu

The articles and contributions are so inspiring they uplift my spirit when I am feeling down. May God Almighty bless THE PLAIN TRUTH and all who serve and contribute to it!

Geh Cheng Lok
Penang

A small donation for the good work you are doing for Christianity.

K. P. Thomas
Kulai

Ed: Thank you. Your support for our ministry is much appreciated.



I have always enjoyed reading your articles. They are very refreshing and serve as a revision in my bible class. The articles examine this present challenging world from different perspectives and offer age-old solutions from the bible. Thank you for the very good work done. Do continue and we pray the good Lord will guide and sustain you always.

Peter Wang
Kuala Lumpur

THE PLAIN TRUTH articles are interesting and enlightening. They make me think. I share the magazine with my friend.

Selvaraju Chidabaram
Klang

THE PLAIN TRUTH is enlightening and its interpretations of issues and past events are interesting.

Fong Soo Har
Kuala Lumpur

THE PLAIN TRUTH carries life stories and good articles for reading.

Stanley Tan
Petaling Jaya

THE PLAIN TRUTH has lots of interesting Christian stories and they are very exciting.

Julia Fred
Kuala Lumpur

THE PLAIN TRUTH articles are thought-provoking, helpful, relevant and more importantly, they are based on the Bible.

Gan Tian Eng
Klang

The enlightening articles contain gems of wisdom that can help us face the many challenges and corruption in our daily life.

Patrick Foo
Petaling Jaya

THE PLAIN TRUTH articles which are neither parochial nor orthodox, are relevant to a modern society. They relate to modern scientific discoveries and they are not theologically orthodox in thinking. Jesus' teachings are relevant to all ages. Keep up your good work. God bless all of you who are involved in publishing THE PLAIN TRUTH magazine.

E S Lee
Petaling Jaya

THE PLAIN TRUTH articles stimulate our thinking on contemporary issues. Right thinking in turn will result in right living.

Lim Poh Ann
Petaling Jaya

Although THE PLAIN TRUTH is sent free of charge, it is not without cost. Each copy is made possible by the generosity of others. So we are very grateful for those readers who send a donation, and make it possible for us to continue to publish the good news of the Gospel.

Knowing Jesus

We often talk about getting to know Jesus, but doing it can seem somewhat nebulous and difficult—after all, we can't see Him or talk face to face. He's real but He's not visible or touchable and we can't hear His voice, except maybe on rare occasions. So how do we go about getting to know Him?

I've lately been directed, from more than one source, to the gospels as a way of getting to know Jesus. Like you, I've read through

The list is longer than I thought it would be.

Then I went ahead and ordered a book I had wanted to read for some time—*Just Give Me Jesus*, by Anne Graham Lotz. It was inspired by the book of John. I'm only part-way through and have already gained some insight.

And in a devotional I receive daily, the author mentioned a couple of times that reading through the gospels is a great way “to keep falling in love with

the universe.

It's mind-boggling to think we human beings, finite, made of dust and destined to die, can get to know, intimately and personally, an infinite, all-powerful God. But we can. Through the gospels, we can listen in on His conversations, watch Him interact with paupers and nobles, Jews and Gentiles, the sinners and the self-righteous, men, women and children. We see Jesus the man—His emotions, thoughts and feelings. We see His tenderness as He welcomes

by
Tammy Tkach



them many times, and even took a college class called Harmony of the Gospels. But for some time I've been focused on other books, mostly Paul's letters. They've been wonderful guides out of legalism and into grace.

Our pastor suggested we read the book of John, as a way to start the new year. I began reading it and was struck anew by the events of Jesus' life as chronicled by John. I made a list of who Jesus said He is throughout the first 18 chapters.

the life of Christ” (John Fischer, *The Purpose Driven Life Daily Devotional*).

It seems as if someone is trying to tell me something!

When Philip¹ asked Him to show them the Father, Jesus said to His disciples, if you've seen me you've seen the Father. He is the image of God, revealing and reflecting His glory. So if we, 2,000 years or so later, can get to know Jesus, we are also getting to know the Father, the Creator and sustainer of life and

and teaches little children. We see His indignation at the moneychangers and His disgust at the hypocrisy of the Pharisees.

The gospels show us both sides of Jesus—God and man. They show us baby and adult, son and brother, teacher and healer, living sacrifice and resurrected victor.

Don't be afraid to get to know Jesus. Don't wonder and doubt if it's really possible. Just read the gospels. And keep falling in love with the life of Christ. □

¹ John 14:8

Who do you s

The religious folks of the day were quite confused about who Jesus was.

After all, He was attracting large crowds of people, healing them of their ailments, and feeding thousands of hungry people from a few fish and loaves of bread. He obviously was a mighty miracle worker. But His message was so new and radically different it aroused curiosity, suspicion, and accusations of heresy. So He became a hot topic of discussion. Some claimed He was mad. Others said He was a good teacher. The people in His hometown of Nazareth saw Him only as the son of Joseph the carpenter.¹

The superstitious King Herod



by
Paul Hailey

traditions annulled some of God's commandments.⁴ The Scribes also denied some basic truths of scripture such as the existence of angels and the future resurrection of the dead.

Jesus denounced both the Scribes and Pharisees for adding their own list of dos and don'ts to Old Testament law. He pointed out that true piety comes from the heart and not from appearance and outward actions. Jesus made it clear that their spin on religion was wrong. In fact, He referred to them as a "brood of vipers", and said they were like "white-washed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are

An all-important question

The 12 apostles walked, talked, and shared meals with Jesus as He taught them about the things of God. They were close to Him. They saw Him heal the sick, and calm a storm. They marvelled at His miracles. They listened to His teachings and at times didn't understand. They wondered who He really was—prophet, teacher, or Messiah? After He had calmed a raging storm by simply saying "Quiet! Be still!" they were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey Him!"⁷ A little later when Jesus walked on water they worshipped Him and proclaimed:

“Today, as 2,000 years ago, some believe that Jesus was a nobody, or just a “good teacher”, a carpenter of long ago.

But, consider this. Jesus claimed to be God.”

thought He was the resurrected John the Baptist whom he had beheaded.² Others wondered if He was the long-awaited Messiah. But if Jesus was the Messiah He wasn't saying so, at least not early in His ministry.

Jesus didn't meet the expectations of the day

The leading religious groups in Judea all denied Him as anybody important.

The Pharisees, who were strict Old Testament law-keepers, rejected Him because He taught things contrary to their beliefs.³ The Scribes, another religious group, were experts in Old Testament law, but wrongly added some of their own teachings. Jesus pointed out that their man-devised

full of dead men's bones and everything unclean.”⁵ Not exactly compliments! In saying these things Jesus reaches us today with a warning to avoid false religious teachings.

In the eyes of the religious leaders of the day, Jesus was a heretic and a troublemaker. He simply did not meet their expectations of what the Messiah would be like. They even accused Him of blasphemy.⁶

Obviously, Jesus didn't choose any of the local religious leaders to be His apostles. Instead, He chose some fishermen, a tax collector and other ordinary men who were not brainwashed by false religious teachings.

“Truly you are the Son of God.”⁸ But it seems their faith continued to waver. It would be hard, wouldn't it, to realise that a close friend was actually God in human form?

After being with His chosen Apostles for perhaps three years, Jesus asked them, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” They responded, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” Then He asked the all-important question, for them as well as us today, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter got it right. He exclaimed, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!” Peter's response is often called the “great confession”. It was an expression

ay that I am?

that was more than knowledge, but one of faith that could only come through divine revelation.⁹

The Apostles gradually realised Jesus' true identity as they spent time with Him.

We too can come to understand who He was and who He is by spending time with Him in prayer

Himself as the Son of God. Near the end of His life, the High Priest asked Him, "Are you Christ, the Son of the blessed one?" And Jesus said, "I am!"¹¹ The word "Christ" is not a name—it is a title that means "anointed", or the Anointed One. It is equivalent to the Old Testament Hebrew word "Messiah", the name

vanished when He was resurrected from the dead and appeared to them. Jesus even invited Thomas to put his finger into His side where He had suffered His fatal wound. Thomas exclaimed, "My Lord and my God!"¹³ It became abundantly clear who He was—the Saviour of the world.

The same questions today

Today, as 2,000 years ago, some believe that Jesus was a nobody, or just a "good teacher", a carpenter of long ago. But, consider this. Jesus claimed to be God. Now, if He were not God and merely a human being, He would not have been a "good teacher". Liars and frauds don't make good teachers, especially moral teachers. But if His claim was true, He would be much more than a "good teacher". He would be the One who had the words that point the way to eternal life.¹⁴

So who was He, Lord, liar, or lunatic?

Prove it for yourself

Who do you say that Jesus is? Do you know for sure? This may be the most important question in your life. If you aren't sure yet, you are in good company. The Apostles themselves had lingering doubts. But just as Jesus plainly revealed His identity to Thomas, He can just as surely sweep away your doubts.

Scripture tells us to "Test everything. Hold on to the good."¹⁵ We do that by studying scripture, praying and asking Him to reveal Himself to us, and seeking fellowship with other believers.

If you are privileged to know who He is, take some time to thank Him for revealing Himself to you. Jesus said, "...blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed!"¹⁶

May God bless you with the understanding of who Jesus is. □



and through the pages of scripture.

Later Jesus made it plain to the world that He was indeed the Messiah. After Peter's confession, Jesus did not conceal the fact that He was the Christ. He often referred to Himself as the "Son of Man", an Old Testament reference to the Messiah.¹⁰ He also spoke of

given to the long-awaited and long-promised Prophet and King.¹²

But after He was crucified and buried, the disciples again had doubts. They didn't understand that Christ had to die for the sins of mankind before coming in power and glory to reign over the earth. But all that doubt abruptly

¹ Matthew 13:55

² Matthew 14:1, 2

³ Matthew 12:2

⁴ Mark 7:8–13

⁵ Matthew 23:27–33

⁶ Matthew 9:3

⁷ Mark 4:37–41

⁸ Matthew 14:22–33

⁹ Matthew 16:13–17

¹⁰ Daniel 7:13, 14

¹¹ Mark 14:60–62

¹² John 1:41

¹³ John 20:27, 28

¹⁴ John 6:68

¹⁵ 1 Thessalonians 5:21

¹⁶ John 20:29

Making hist

History is described as a chronological record of past events surrounding a nation, thing or person. As I looked at my photos taken when I was a baby, at age 12 for identity card purposes, age 20s with fanciful hair-styles and trendy dressings, age 30s and 40s and recent holiday photos taken with family and friends, I realised these life events have all but passed, and became part of my life history.

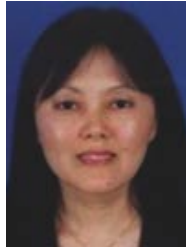
In God we live and move

Acts 17:28 says, “For in God, we live and move and have our being.” In other words, our daily mundane responsibilities, the places we move to and from, and our various stages of life—be it studying, working, romance, marriage, parenting, finances, coping with disappointments and physical limitations, and even learning to grow old gracefully—are all activities that are spiritually and intimately connected with our great Creator God who made heaven and earth, and the entire human race who inhabit the earth.¹

God has a special purpose and an overriding meaning for our lives. We are therefore not here on earth by accident. He gives us all equal access to a fixed 24-hour time frame to live out our daily lives—any which way we choose. Life, however, overtakes us too quickly. We grow up and soon grow old. Our life experiences today will be history by tomorrow. As the saying goes, “Time and tide wait for no man.” How then shall we live our lives?

Mother Theresa made good history

Let’s first consider how some people lived, the infamous and famous. We have studied the history of Hitler and Stalin in school. We understand that between the both of them, millions of lives (sometime around 1930s to 1950s) have perished in their hands. They stifled hopes and snuffed out innocent lives. Their names went down in history for resonating with evil, fear and suffering. In short, they made bad history.



**by
Stefanie Tai**

Unlike the above duo, Mother Theresa worked to alleviate the suffering of a people whose hopes had all been stifled. She chose to live her life dedicated to the service

life where there was none. Mother Theresa made good history. Whose history shall we come close to living?



of God in serving the “poorest of the poor” in the slums of Calcutta, India. To the impoverished and unwanted men, women and children, she offered hope and

Out of God’s love

Our Almighty God Himself made great history when out of His love for the world, He gave His son Jesus Christ to suffer an

ory with God

excruciating death for our sins.² God moves and works through history (from the Old Testament period to the New Testament era) in order to rescue us from death to eternal life with Him.

How we choose to live each day then will determine the kind of history we leave behind—positive or negative. To experience real life as God intended for us, we need to follow the way Jesus Christ lived out His life while on earth. Jesus came to give humanity hope, life and salvation. He said: “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life.”³

We are created for good works⁴—to be part of God’s great commission in bringing people to

the shut-ins who live alone...

You may notice that the needy people mentioned above are usually those we rather not wish to get close to or to know better. To do so would require us to come out of our comfort zone. We are inclined to choose whom to serve and when it pleases us. In short, according to our convenience, and as long as it doesn’t interrupt our routines or even interfere with our habits and life-styles (and not forgetting our pockets).

Seeing Jesus in the needy

It is also noteworthy that the attitude of those who neglected

are often out of their reach. We are judged therefore on the simple personal help that we have given to anyone in need, and not so much on the knowledge we have amassed or the rules we have kept.

Redeeming time and talent

Just as my photos from four decades past testify, “time is not on our side” but marches on in 24-hour time capsules, leaving behind a trail of good and bad histories. Let’s strive each day then, redeeming time and talent revolving around meeting human needs, offering hope and enriching lives—serving where service is needed. Such service and love for others (regardless of race,

“It’s no easy task to treat ordinary people we encounter as if they were Jesus.”

spiritual salvation in Christ,⁵ and to help meet human needs. God is pleased when we model His love by esteeming others better than ourselves and looking out for their interests⁶—especially those in dire needs such as described by Jesus in Matthew 25:35–36:

- Giving a hungry man a meal;
- Quenching the thirst of a thirsty man;
- Welcoming a stranger with hospitality; being there for the lonely and forgotten;
- Clothing those who are in need of better clothing;
- Cheering the sick; caring for the disabled and disadvantaged;
- Visiting those languishing in prisons, old folk’s homes, and

to help was that they failed to see Jesus in the needy. They would gladly have helped if they had seen Jesus personally in need, but had thought it was only some common man who was not worth helping. But Jesus seemed to have a soft spot for the ‘uncool’, unpopular and unglamorous people. In fact, He makes Himself one of them when He said helping them is the same as helping Him.⁷ “You did it to me” was what He said about helping the least among us.

It’s no easy task to treat ordinary people we encounter as if they were Jesus. It takes divine love, wisdom and understanding to see beyond our world, to see Jesus in the world of the disadvantaged where material goods and success

religion, gender or age) honours and glorifies God by reflecting our love for Him⁸.

Let’s go down in history faithfully serving God and our fellow men. And for making good history with and in God, He assures us with these words: “Take your inheritance—the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.”⁹ Now, that’s a sure promise made long ago in history. □

¹ Acts 17:24–25

² John 3:16–17

³ John 14:6

⁴ Ephesians 2:10

⁵ Matthew 28:19–20

⁶ Philippians 2:3–4

⁷ Matthew 25:42–45

⁸ Matthew 5:6

⁹ Matthew 25:34

“Days don

I recently encouraged congregations to set aside old covenant customs, in keeping with the example set by Paul, in order to better reach the gentile culture around us. I implied it would be better for us to have worship services on Sundays rather than Saturdays.

Some people asked: “Wait a minute. Haven’t you been telling us that days don’t matter? Are you now telling us that they do?”

It’s a legitimate question, so let me explain a little further. The days we meet on for worship don’t matter for salvation, but they do matter in practical ways. If you have to work on Sundays, then days matter. If your children have to go to school on Saturdays, then days matter. For most people in our society, days matter in concrete, practical ways, in terms of schedules and convenience.

In terms of seeking God’s favor, days don’t matter. Sunday is not spiritually better than Saturday or Tuesday. But for practical purposes, Tuesday is not a very good day to have our weekly church services. It’s a practical matter, not a spiritual one.

We are in a culture that expects Christian worship services to be on Sundays. Quite a few churches have services on Saturday evenings, but these are rarely the only service time that is offered. The main worship service is usually on Sunday mornings—even the unchurched know that. When I encouraged Sunday worship services, it was based on Paul’s missionary strategy as described in 1 Corinthians 9: 20–22.

Paul’s example

When Paul was with Jews, he acted like a Jew and kept Jewish laws. When he was with gentiles, he did not adhere to Jewish customs and old covenant laws. Did customs matter to Paul? Based on his own testimony, they did. He kept certain customs in one society, but not in another. He was careful to be appropriate to the society he was in.

He adapted his behavior because the customs mattered to the culture



by
Joseph Tkach

he was in—and the reason that Paul could adapt his behavior was because he knew that those customs gained neither favor nor disfavor with God. Since God had given him freedom in regard to those customs, he adapted to culture in those matters because he was trying to reach people with the gospel.

Paul lived according to gentile customs when in gentile society, so he could save some. If we apply this principle to our situation today, it suggests that most of our worship services ought to be on Sundays—not for spiritual reasons, but for practical reasons. Sunday is simply the day expected in our society, and usually the day that most people are free to meet. God gives us freedom to adapt our customs to serve the needs of the mission he has given us. He has commanded a mission, but not a day.

We are not mandating that everyone change. We recognize that some congregations have practical reasons for meeting on Saturdays. That’s OK. A few congregations have free use of a church facility on Saturdays; a few are successfully evangelizing Jews.

But for most congregations, there is a practical reason for meeting on Sundays, and if circumstances permit, we should prefer that day, not because it is spiritually better for us, but because it is practically better for the mission in most segments of Western society. If we want to be successful in our mission, we need to throw off obstacles that put people off. In that, I am taking my cue from Paul.

Sunday is certainly no panacea, no sure-fire formula for attracting new believers. There is no easy formula. The gospel takes work, and it takes time—all the more reason that we need to eliminate as many obstacles as we can. The mission also requires some sacrifice—and for some of us, it means a willingness to rearrange our schedules to better suit the

people we hope to reach.

Days matter to people

For some members, days still matter a lot. For some, it is because of jobs; for others, it is a desire to reach people; and for a few, it is because they still think the Sabbath is commanded for Christians. We must therefore act in wisdom. We need to think about how we can be more effective in our mission, and for this, days matter. I believe that Paul’s strategy of adapting to culture where he could is something that could help us in our mission today.

The gospel is already counter-cultural. It advocates humility and submission, not self-reliance. It advocates love, not selfishness. We do not need to make it more different than it already is. Our behavior does not need to imply something that the gospel does not teach.

For example, we do not want to dress like the Amish, because we do not want to imply that the gospel requires people to avoid color. Amish clothes are not ungodly, but neither are they required. They are permitted, and yet for the sake of the gospel, they are counterproductive. For the sake of the mission, we need to be flexible on the optional so we point people to the essential.

For similar reasons, we do not want to keep obsolete worship commands, because we do not want to imply that these commands are required. For a congregation to meet on Saturday because it is more practical is one thing; for it to meet on Saturday because it believes it is doing something God prefers is quite another. We cannot endorse a wrong understanding of the gospel. It is for this reason that we do not want to see congregations remain in a “Saturday only” configuration for wrong reasons.

The essence of Christianity is not in the days we meet, but in the message of grace. And as

't matter"



apply the principle Paul has given us.

The gospel says that we should put aside our own interests and consider the needs of others. When it comes to our mission of sharing the gospel, we need to consider the needs of the people we hope to reach.

We do not wait until children show up at the door before we begin to think about having lessons for children during our worship services. We do not wait for it to start raining before we think about building a roof. And in the same way, we do not wait until we have new believers before we begin thinking about what day might serve their needs the best.

This is a mission strategy, not a matter of being a “better” Christian. The mission can be done on any day of the week. The mission can be done by a Saturday-meeting congregation. But I believe that the mission will be done more effectively in America through worship services on Sundays—and I believe that this strategy is supported by the apostle Paul. Our mission and our motto is “Living and Sharing the Gospel.” If our church is full of unnecessary customs, that will hinder the gospel.

Paul said, “Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible”.¹ Can we apply Paul’s principle in modern society? Though we are free, can we decide to serve others, so that we might win them?

Paul said, “To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law”.² The law of Christ says we should adapt to serve the needs of others. We need to consider what will help or hinder that mission. When we are in a gentile society, should we not follow Paul’s example? □

I have written before, it is self-contradictory to preach grace while forcing people to keep one particular day, no matter whether it is Saturday or whether it is Sunday.

We are not forcing anybody to do anything. All we are saying is that if we want to be more successful in the mission we have been given (and I hope we do), we need to

¹ 1 Corinthians 9:19

² 1 Corinthians 9:21

No time for

Another year has come and gone—all too quickly it seems. Maybe it is a good time to take stock of what we have accomplished in the past year. If it has been a good year for you *in the things that really matter*, go on improving and doing what you have been doing so that you might have another profitable year. But if it hasn't been a good year, maybe it is time that you re-evaluate and reorder your priorities so that you might have a profitable year.

Short life

Our life on earth is pretty short. At best we can live for 120 years, but many of us will die before that. So it is important that we use our time wisely. St. Paul advises us thus: "See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, *redeeming the time*, because the days are evil."¹ Spending our time wisely means ordering our lives so that we might attain God's purpose for us.

We have only 24 hours a day but we seem to engage in too many activities that compete for our time. Some activities are indispensable, so we must make time for them. We must have time for family and friends; we must work and support our families; and we must also have some time for recreation, rest and sleep so that our bodies can function properly. All these are important and we need to allocate time for them. However, there are many activities that we can cut down or even eliminate altogether, such as window shopping, "not-to-be-missed" bargain sales, movies and TV programmes, and get-rich schemes.

Urgent vs. important

Then there is the tyranny of the "urgent". Many activities are dubbed "urgent" but are they really important? Something that is *urgent* may not necessarily be *important*. It may not enhance or add to our or someone else's life. Things that are important, on the other hand, will add value to our lives. So we must distinguish between urgent and important and choose our activities



by
**Dr. P.
Sellappan**

accordingly. Otherwise, we may be squandering our time—our life—on worthless pursuits that really don't enhance or add meaning to our lives.

time to read and find out what that purpose is so that we might live according to God's intended purpose for us? Discovering God's purpose and living our lives



Higher purpose

God created us for a higher purpose than this temporary, physical existence. And He has revealed that purpose in the pages of the Bible. Do we take

accordingly must be the most important and urgent activity. Do we have time for that? If we don't, we will all soon die and miss out on what God is offering us—eternal

For eternity?

life with Him.

We are only a breath away from death. Sickness, accident, calamity and old age can take away our lives before we know it.

much to offer us? God is offering us a fantastic opportunity to live with Him forever. He is offering us eternal life—free from pain, tears, sorrow and frustration that many

we might experience the abundant life that He wants us to have now and forever in His kingdom? Is that goal worth pursuing?

Excuses

Jesus promised to give abundant lives to all those who would believe and follow Him.³ During His ministry on earth, He invited many to come and taste this abundant life. But sadly many didn't believe Him. They gave all sorts of excuses—some said they had no time because of business commitments, some said they had family commitments, and so on. Jesus was furious because He had taken so much trouble to make this abundant life possible. So He invited the nobodies—the orphans, the old folks, the poor, the weak, the prisoners, the blind, the lame, the widows, the drug addicts and the prostitutes. These people knew they had nothing to show off, so they gladly accepted the invitation. Jesus told the crowd that all these nobodies would enter His kingdom first and all the busybodies and successful people who have no time for God would enter His kingdom last.⁴ He told them that the “first” in this world would be last and the “last” would be first.

God's advice

While the world, swayed by Satan, encourages us to seek wealth, fame and power, Jesus advises us to seek first God's kingdom and His righteousness, and if we do that He promises to bless us abundantly now and forever.⁵ He assures us that in His kingdom there will be pleasures forevermore.⁶ Satan tempts us to focus on the physical and the temporary but Jesus asks us to focus on the spiritual and the eternal. Indeed, Satan tempted Jesus with riches, power and fame, but He rejected the offer in favour of the spiritual and eternal.⁷ As we enter another year, we too must make a deliberate choice. God is offering us eternity; do we have time for that? □



Our earthly life is very fleeting—it is like vapour that is here for a moment but disappears all too soon.² Do we want our lives to be like vapour when God has so

of us have to experience now. Is seeking God an important activity in our lives? Are we taking time to discover God's purpose for us and order our lives accordingly so that

¹ Ephesians 5:15

² Psalms 39:4–6,
James 4:14

³ John 10:10

⁴ Matthew 21:31

⁵ Matthew 6:33

⁶ Psalms 16:11

⁷ Matthew 4

Should you look

Are you a “Capricorn” or a “Scorpio”? Should you avoid strangers today?

Should you be contemplating marriage?

Is this a bad day to start a new job? Should you postpone trying to overcome a bad habit? Are you and your dog or cat compatible?

Millions of people check their horoscopes daily to answer such questions. Contracts are signed, employees hired, business ventures started, lifestyles changed, occupations chosen, friendships altered, diets formulated, bets made, trips planned, babies named—yes, sometimes, even government policies and political decisions arrived at—all based on astrological readings. It remains one of the most popular forms of foretelling the future.

Astrologers believe they can anticipate events by calculating the effect of the sun, moon, stars and planets on human activities. The central belief is that there is an active relationship between man and the natural universe and that this relationship may be interpreted to guide people’s lives.

They allege that the relative positions of the heavenly bodies at, for example, the moment of a child’s birth influence the child’s character and personality for the rest of his or her life.

How did this belief arise? Its roots are deeply buried in antiquity. The ancients had a different view of the world than we do. They did not understand the laws of science we now take for granted. They thought the future was revealed in natural phenomena. This is often called the “magical world view” of the ancients. Those who have studied the origins of astrology say it came from this magical world view.

Lawrence E. Jerome and Bart J. Bok point out in their book *Objections to Astrology*: “Astrology proper began in Babylonia as a system of omen-reading to foretell the fate of kings and realms.” The priests of ancient Babylonia

consulted the stars to determine if it was a good time to go to war or to make alliances.

About the same time, the Egyptians were developing a system of “places” based on planetary aspects. This assumed that the angles of the planets in relation to one another were omens of things to come.

Later, Greek astrologers combined the Babylonian and Egyptian systems and created a mathematical “scientific” cosmology or philosophy of the character of the universe.

The Roman astronomer and mathematician Ptolemy gave astrology an even more scientific veneer when he established the system of “houses” (a division of the “celestial sphere” into 12 sectors). Astrologers still use it today.

By the time Christianity became an official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century A.D., astrology was well entrenched. Augustine, the influential bishop of Hippo, condemned it because it absolved sinners “of all faults. The blame is indeed given to the creator and ruler of the heavens and of the stars,” rather than the sinner. Thereafter, astrology rapidly fell into disfavour for several centuries.

By the 12th century, despite continued warnings by the Church, astrology had once again found its way into European thought.

During the Renaissance (14th and 15th centuries), people began to look at the universe differently. Nicolaus Copernicus, considered the founder of modern astronomy, advanced the then controversial theory that the earth and other planets circle the sun—an idea that threatened to knock the props out from under traditional astrology.

Astrologers countered by claiming that it is the positions of the planets in relation to the earth that matter, and thus Copernicus’ theory had no real effect on

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astrology. But the parting of the ways had begun. The magical world view of the universe was soon discredited under the relentless march of scientific progress.

Incredibly, after being scorned and neglected, astrology again became a fashionable topic early in the 20th century.

Objections of Science

More than a decade ago, 192 leading scientists, including 19 Nobel Prize winners, signed a declaration that no scientific evidence exists to support astrology. They stated, among other things, that “it is simply a mistake to imagine that the forces exerted by stars and planets at the moment of birth can in any way shape our futures. Neither is it true that the position of distant heavenly bodies makes certain days or periods more favourable to particular kinds of action, or that the sign under which one was born determines one’s compatibility or incompatibility with other people.”

Thorough research has found no correlation between zodiac signs and the character traits of thousands of successful people. Roger Culver, astronomer and author of *The Gemini Syndrome*, points out that “in every carefully controlled experiment or statistical analysis (of astrology) of which I am aware, either the results are negative or non-replicable.”

One of the studies Mr. Culver was referring to showed that the birth dates of people in certain professions, such as politics or science, are not grouped in certain times of the year as astrology would indicate. They are randomly scattered throughout the year.

Another study demonstrated that those born under signs allegedly “compatible” for marriage, married and divorced with the same frequency as those born under “incompatible” signs. And one test of 28 “outstanding astrologers” showed them to be no more

to the stars?

reliable than chance in matching astrological birth charts with corresponding personality profiles.

Medical research has shown that one's genetic characteristics are determined by means of conception and not at the time of birth. So how can the arrangements of the heavens at the instant of birth be a critical factor?

Astrologers claim that the characteristics are endowed by certain "vibrations" breathed by a newborn babe, although no one has ever demonstrated what these vibrations might be. Scientists point out that they certainly

the planets Uranus, Neptune and Pluto? They weren't discovered until long after astrology have been established. How could astrologers have factored them into their calculations? Or did these planets simply have no effect on our destiny until we discovered them?

Also, the astrological system of "houses" represents the sky as it looked 2,000 year ago, not as it appears today. Two millennia ago, for example, a person born in late August or early September was labelled a Virgo. The sun at that time was actually in the constellation Virgo. Today, such

In fact, more people believe in astrology now than at any time since the Renaissance. They look to the stars because they feel the need for something to guide them through the complexities of life—something they can rely on for direction and advice. They have lost confidence in the traditional religious and civil institutions to provide adequate moral and spiritual guidance.

But those who seek answers in the stars do so at a price. The American Society of Psychological and Social Studies warns: "Faith in astrology is harmful, for it encourages an unhealthy evasion of

"How many of those who consult their horoscopes daily are really trying to avoid the responsibility of decision making? There is a security of knowing it is "in the stars".

cannot be the pull of heavenly bodies on the newborn baby. For example, the body of the average obstetrician exerts several times the gravitational pull on a baby than does the faraway planet Mars!

Other crucial questions raised by scientists include: Why do twins born at the same time in the same place not have the exact same destiny? Why do only the signs of the zodiac, which cover a very small area of the sky, matter? How are the traits of those born north of the Arctic Circle determined during the times of the year when no signs of the zodiac are visible at those latitudes? And what about

a person is still called a Virgo—despite the fact that the sun is now in the constellation of Leo in late August and early September!

These are serious objections that astrologers have failed to adequately answer. Yet they have had little impact on public opinion. Astrology continues to be so popular that in some areas, nine out of 10 people know their zodiac signs, while less than half know their blood types. Over a thousand newspapers in North America alone carry astrology columns, and astrology books are among the best sellers.

the permanent problems of real life... The astrologers, who offer the public a horoscope, which takes the place of conclusions drawn from serious reflection, are guilty of encouraging the human tendency of choosing facility rather than the difficult way."

What the Bible says

At its deeper levels, astrology is sometimes combined with clairvoyant powers and other occult techniques. Some astrologers seek mystical assistance in interpreting their star charts.

The Bible shows that such magic sometimes does work. Satan, in his effort to mislead and deceive,

can perform counterfeit miracles. The sorcerers of Pharaoh's court in Moses' time were able to duplicate some of Moses' miracles.¹ We should not assume that soothsaying and astrology also do not work—sometimes. There are many phenomena that defy explanation. They can deceive and confuse, unless you are wise to Satan's devices.

it will be given to him.”³ Wisdom comes through prayer to God and the study of His will as revealed in the Bible—not through the examination of astrological charts.

The heavens certainly declare God's glory.⁴ They can inspire us with a greater understanding of His power and majesty. But wisdom, guidance, understanding and forming of an individual's

traits can be overcome. When we have God's Spirit working with us, we become “partakers of the Divine nature”⁶—regardless of our horoscope!

How many of those who consult their horoscopes daily are really trying to avoid the responsibility of decision making? There is a security of knowing it is “in the stars”. But as we've seen, it's a false



The Bible tells us God intended that the heavenly bodies be used by man to measure time and seasons.² Nowhere does the Bible indicate that they be looked to for guidance in making decisions and evaluations in our personal lives. We have God's written laws for that.

The book of James instructs us, “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and

character come from obeying the laws and statutes of God, not from signs in the skies.”⁵

We are not destined to suffer bad luck, good fortune or be blessed or afflicted with a certain kind of personality and character merely because the planets and stars were in a particular configuration when we were born. Through effort, and with the power of God's Holy Spirit helping us, undesirable personality

¹ Exodus 7-8

² Genesis 1:14

³ James 1:5

⁴ Psalm 19:1-6

⁵ Psalm 19:7-11

⁶ 2 Peter 1:4

⁷ 2 Timothy 1:7

⁸ John 16:13

security. Our minds are given to us so we can weigh facts, come to our own conclusions and make our own decisions. God's Spirit works with us to develop a sound mind.⁷

If we look to God, we have a reliable guide who never fails. Jesus promised that “the Spirit of truth will guide you into all truth.”⁸ Thus, a true, godly character is built, and that is what this physical human life is for. □

NIMBY but PIMFY

There is something about American back yards that leave me feeling uncomfortable. They don't have fences.

'Good fences make good neighbours' as the saying goes. But American neighbours seem to get along without them. Both my daughters live in Ohio, in beautiful homes, on big lots in nice neighbourhoods. Out-back is an expanse of well-kept lawns that blend seamlessly with the next door properties. By common consent you can put up a low chain-link fence to keep the dog in, and—if you must—an inconspicuous shed for the mower. But that's about it.

It has its advantages. Children can run free, and there are no awkward 'can we have our ball back?' confrontations. But I always feel a bit exposed. I like my backyard to be clearly demarcated with a good, solid fence or a hedge—or ideally both.

Front gardens in America tell the same story. No walls or fences—just an unbroken stretch of neat lawns with a couple of trees and some individualistic landscaping here and there for variety. I do like that. You see it sometimes in Britain, especially in modern developments, but given half a chance we like to fence off our front gardens. The results can be ludicrous if you look at some of these with American eyes: a patch of lawn the size of a hearth rug, surrounded by narrow flower beds, and a chest high wall or hedge and a barred gate to seal it off from the outside world.

Oh well, the Englishman's home is his castle and The Plain Truth has got more important things to talk about.

Why bring it up then?

You in your small corner...

Because British churches, like our homes, are separated by walls. Many congregations in the same town, or even the same street,



by
John Halford

have nothing to do with each other. Organisations like 'Churches Together' often find the biggest hurdle to joint projects is just getting the local vicars, priests and pastors to sit at the same table, let alone darken each other's doors.

There are exceptions. Like 'Christ the Cornerstone' in Milton Keynes—where Anglicans, Catholics, Baptists, Methodists and the United Reform Church share a building. They all worship in the central sanctuary, although not necessarily at the same time. Even with a spirit of cooperation some things are touchy, and these are respected. The Catholics, for example, display the Blessed Sacrament in a side chapel.

The baptistery is particularly sensible. Facilities for total immersion, pouring and sprinkling are all fed from the same source. After a recent Anglican Communion service, which the vicar shared with a Methodist minister, I chatted with one of the regular attendees.

'We all get along pretty well,' he said, 'but we do have to respect each other's space.' Perhaps that is the key. Denominations are like families, and they have developed their own ways of doing things. One Christian's tradition may be another's heresy. I don't just mean major doctrinal and theological differences. It is often minor sociological variations that keep churches apart; things like speaking in tongues, or clapping during the hymns. 'What they do over there is their business, but NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard).'

Those differences do need to be respected. Eager evangelists urge Christians to be willing to 'come out of our comfort zones'. And so we should, but not all the time. A church is to some extent a refuge (it is called a sanctuary), and if those who come there are made to feel continually uncomfortable, they will go somewhere else. Anglicans, Methodists, Catholics, Baptists et al. are different,

and they do need places to be themselves. They need, so to speak, British-style back yards.

But what about out front? Here is where we could learn something from our American cousins. The open lawns and lack of fussy dividing fences turn what would otherwise be a row of houses into an inviting neighbourhood.

Unwelcoming

Many of our churches don't even look inviting. They are sombre, grim, cheerless enclaves, locked up except for a few inconvenient hours on Sunday. A large percentage of the population of England has never been inside one, and wouldn't know what to do if they did. It doesn't help when 'rival' churches glare at each other and erect physical, spiritual and emotional barriers to keep themselves from being 'corrupted'.

Why do Christians—who essentially believe the same things, and face a common challenge—find it so hard to work together? Why should what others do to worship God pose a threat? Certainly Jesus prayed that the church be 'one'. But that did not necessarily mean 'one size fits all'. To work together with other Christians need not mean abandoning the traditions that make your church your spiritual home.

So by all means enjoy your backyard. But surely at this time when the whole idea of Christianity is under threat, we need to blend our front gardens into a more inviting neighbourhood. Yes, even if those who visit do not end up knocking on our door. Is it not time that more of us knocked down some of those silly walls, and gave the hedge a severe pruning. We owe the world a better view of our glorious Christian neighbourhood. Is what those folks across the street do really so awful that you can't work with them?

Maybe NIMBY. But PIMFY? (Perhaps In My Front yard). □

“If you really had repented...”

If you had really repented, you wouldn't have done it again” is a refrain many tormented souls have heard from well-meaning preachers. We are told that repentance is to “turn around and go the other way,” and it is explained in the context of turning away from sin and turning toward a life of obedience to God's law.

Christians set out with the best of intentions to change their ways. Some ways change, but other ways stick like super-glue. Even the ways that seem to have changed have a nasty way of cropping up again.

And just when we are feeling frustrated and depressed about our failure to measure up to the high

Two sides of the same coin

Repentance and faith mark the beginning of our new life in the kingdom of God. But they don't mark it because we did the “right thing”. They mark it because that is when the scales fall off our eyes and we see in Jesus Christ the glorious light of the gospel.¹

Everything that ever needed to be done for forgiveness and salvation has already been done through the death and resurrection of the Son of God.² There was a time when we were in the dark about that. But when we turn to God in faith, all that changes.

Faith and repentance go hand in hand. When you put your trust



by
**Michael
Fezell**

and your hope in His word, His good news, His declaration in His own blood of your redemption, forgiveness, resurrection and eternal inheritance. Now you begin to live for Him, and you begin to put the needs of others ahead of your own.⁴

Say “Yes!” to God's “Yes!”

God has declared an almighty, thundering, eternal “Yes!” to you through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Repentance is your saying ‘Yes!’ to God's ‘Yes!’ It is turning to God to accept His blessed gift, His righteous declaration of your innocence and salvation in Christ.

“This turning to God means you have turned away from selfish ambition, and instead put your trust in Christ.”

standards of God, we hear another sermon or read another article about how “real repentance” results in a complete turning away from sin. So, we crank up the commitment jalopy and go at it again, with the same, miserable, predictable results. And our frustration and despair deepens, because we realise that our turning away from sin is anything but “complete”.

We can only assume we have not “really repented”. Our repentance was not “deep” enough, or “heartfelt” enough or “true” enough. And if we have not really repented, then we must not really have faith. Which means we must not really have the Holy Spirit. Which means we must not really be saved.

Finally, we either get used to living like that, or, as many have done, we throw in the towel.

in God, two things happen. You realise you are a sinner who needs God's mercy, and you decide to trust God to save you and redeem your life. In other words, when you put your trust in God, you have also repented.

Belief, or faith, is part and parcel with repentance. In Acts 2:38, Peter told the crowd, “Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” By saying, “repent”, he was also implying “believe” or “trust”.

Later in the story, Peter puts it this way: “Repent, then, and turn to God...”³ This turning to God is a turning away from yourself. It does not mean you will now be morally perfect. It means you have turned away from selfish ambition as the driving purpose of your life, and instead put your trust in Christ,

To trust God in this redemptive way is utterly life-changing. It frees us for obedience from the heart, obedience rooted in love rather than obedience rooted in fear of punishment. And whenever we fall short, we can rest in His relentless love and get back in the race, knowing He will never let us go.

God is on our side; He's proven it in Jesus Christ. And because He's on our side, nothing can come between Him and us.⁵

Trust Him. It's His good news for all of us. He is the Word, and He knows what He is talking about. □

¹ 2 Corinthians 4:4

² Romans 5:10; Ephesians 2:1–10

³ Acts 3:19

⁴ Philippians 2:3–5

⁵ Romans 8:31–39

Everything Going Against You by Catherine Pulsifer

When everything is going along smoothly, you feel like nothing can stop you. The true test of success comes when you run up against challenges, or people who put roadblocks in your path. How do you handle them?

Don't let setbacks get you down. Studying successful people will show you that they did not attain their success without first overcoming challenges.

When Beethoven was 26 years old, he started experiencing hearing problems, which later became total deafness. Yet, Beethoven went on to compose some of his greatest works after his hearing loss. He had a strong passion for music, and even though everything seemed to be going against him, he showed tremendous determination to overcome his challenge and fulfil his desire to compose.



The Bank of Time!

Imagine there is a bank that credits your account each morning with \$86,400. It carries over no balance from day to day. Every evening it deletes whatever part of the balance you failed to use that day.

What would you do? Draw out every cent of course!

Each of us has such a bank. Its name is TIME! Every night it writes off as lost whatever you failed to invest to good purpose.

It carries no balance, allows no overdraft. Each day it opens a new account for you. Each night it burns the remains of the day.

If you fail to use the day's deposits, the loss is yours.

There is no going back. There is no "drawing" against tomorrow.

You must live in the present on today's deposits.

Invest it so as to get the most in health, happiness and success!

The clock is running. Make the most of it today.

To realise the value of one year, ask the student who failed an exam.

To realise the value of one week, ask, ask the editor of a weekly newspaper.

To realise the value of one day, ask a daily wage earner with kids to feed.

To realise the value of one hour, ask the lovers who are waiting to meet.

To realise the value of one minute, ask the guy who missed the train.

To realise the value of one second, ask the person who just avoided an accident.

To realise the value of one millisecond, ask the athlete who got a silver medal at the Olympics.

Treasure every moment you have. Remember that time waits for no one.

Yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery, and today is a gift: that's why it's called the present!

If you stand for something, you will always find some people for you and some people against you.

If you stand for nothing, you will find nobody against you, and nobody for you.

William Bernbach

Being a good leader is more than just achieving organizational goals

There is a saying that you can gauge the size of a ship that has passed out of sight by the huge wave it makes behind.

The same can be said of leaders.

Anonymous

When everything seems to be going against you, remember that the airplane takes off against the wind, not with it.

Henry Ford

When we are reading, we often find something that attracts our interest. It's not earth-shattering, or life-changing. But it's worth cutting out and keeping, or sticking on the refrigerator door; or maybe sending to us for this page!

We invite all our readers to contribute news items, quotes, or poems, that make you say 'Hmm'. It could be in today's paper, or in a book hundreds of years old. Try to send the original clipping, or a copy of the page to:

*Hmm... The Plain Truth,
Locked Bag 2002,
41990 Klang,
Selangor,
Malaysia.*

Is tithing required i

Does the Bible tell us to pay at least 10 per cent of our incomes to the church? This paper examines the biblical evidence.

Abraham and Jacob

The first biblical mention of tithing is in Genesis 14. After four Mesopotamian kings had taken Lot captive, Abraham attacked them and recovered all the booty. After his victory, the king of Sodom came out to meet him, and so did Melchizedek, a priest of God. Melchizedek blessed Abraham, and then Abraham “gave him a tenth of everything”.¹

The text does not tell us whether Abraham had ever tithed before, or ever tithed afterwards. But it does show that Abraham was generous. He gave the rest of his booty to the king of Sodom.² Abraham kept all of God’s laws that were relevant in his day,³ but Genesis does not tell us whether tithing was a law in Abraham’s day. Many of God’s decrees and requirements were built around the nation of Israel and the Levitical priesthood and tabernacle. Abraham could not have kept such decrees and laws. He may have tithed regularly, but we cannot prove it.

The next mention of tithing is in Genesis 28:20–22. Jacob had a miraculous dream at Bethel. In the morning, Jacob vowed to tithe if God helped him during his journey. He was trying to make a bargain with God. He wanted special help, and in return for that help, he was willing to worship God, and to tithe as a part of that worship. Tithing may have been part of the common worship practices of that time and culture.

Firstlings

Biblical commands about tithing generally concern grain, wine and oil. A different system of giving was required for some animals. In the last plague on Egypt, God killed the firstborn male of every animal and human, but He spared the Israelites and their animals. Therefore, God

claimed ownership of every Israelite firstborn and firstling male animal.⁴

This applied not only to the generation that left Egypt, but every future generation as well. Clean firstlings were to be given to the priests and sacrificed;⁵ priests and people ate them during the festivals.⁶ Unclean animals and humans were to be redeemed.⁷ This continued to be the law in Nehemiah’s day⁸ and in Jesus’ day.⁹

The people also gave firstfruits of their harvest,¹⁰ but these firstfruits do not seem to be a fixed percentage.

Tithes

Tithing was required on flocks: “every tenth animal that passes under the shepherd’s rod.”¹¹ Was this in addition to the firstlings, or was it instead of firstlings? We do not know exactly how these laws would be administered. It is not necessary for us to take a position on these details.

“A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the Lord; it is holy to the Lord.”¹² The tithes and firstfruits belonged to God, and He gave them to the Levites.¹³ They could keep 90 per cent of what they were given, but had to give 10 per cent as an offering.¹⁴

Tithing was done in the days of Hezekiah,¹⁵ Nehemiah¹⁶ and Jesus¹⁷. In Malachi’s day, tithing was required,¹⁸ and physical blessings were promised for obedience, just as physical blessings were promised for obedience to the old covenant.

Additional tithes?

God gave the tithes to the Levites, but the people could eat their tithes during festivals.¹⁹ Some have drawn the conclusion that Deuteronomy is talking about an additional tithe, a festival tithe. The people needed a tithe for the festivals, since the festivals constituted about 5 per cent of

by
**Michael
Morrison**

the year, plus travel time. During sabbatical years, farmers would not have their regular income, so they may not have been able to go to every festival in every year. Or perhaps they saved the festival tithe from year to year.

At the end of every three years of farming, the Israelites were to set aside a tithe for the Levites, resident aliens, orphans and widows.²⁰ It is not clear whether this was an alternative use of a previous tithe, or an additional tithe. Evidence in favour of the latter is that Deuteronomy 14:28–29 does not mention any firstlings or other offerings. This suggests that it is not in the same category as the other tithes, but was an additional tithe.

Tithing in the new covenant

Now let us consider whether tithing is required in the new covenant. Tithing is mentioned only three or four times in the New Testament. Jesus acknowledged that the Pharisees were very careful about tithing,²¹ and He said that they should not leave it undone.²² Tithing, like other old covenant rules and rituals, was a law at the time Jesus spoke. Jesus criticised the Pharisees not for tithing, but for treating tithing as more important than mercy, love, justice and faithfulness.

The only other New Testament mention of tithing is in Hebrews. The fact that Abraham was blessed by and paid tithes to Melchizedek illustrates the superiority of Melchizedek and Jesus Christ over the Levitical priesthood.²³ The passage then goes on to note that “when there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a change of the law.”²⁴

There was a change of the priesthood from the Levites to Jesus Christ, and this implies a change in the law that assigned the Levites to be priests. How much has been changed? Hebrews says that the old covenant is obsolete. The package of laws that

n the new covenant?



commanded tithes to be given to the Levites is obsolete.

Humans should honor God by voluntarily returning some of the blessings He gives them—this is still a valid principle. The only place that a percentage is required is within the old covenant. There is good precedent for tithing before Sinai, but no proof that it was required.

Responding to the better covenant

Under the old covenant, tithing was required for the support of

Jesus Christ, which *does* cleanse our conscience.²⁶ And yet it seems that in America today, even though we have so much more than the Israelites did, people give on average less than half the percentage the Israelites did. Many people today give less to the church than they spend on luxury items. Some people simply cannot give very much, but many people could if they wanted to. God calls on us to examine ourselves, to examine our priorities, and to be

in the New Testament. A person who is transformed by Christ to be more like Christ is *generous*. Such a person wants to give as much as possible to support the gospel and to support needy members. Christians should give generously—but giving is a *result* of their relationship with God, not a way to earn it. We are given grace through *faith*, not through tithing.

Some people act as if Christ liberates us from the law so that we can keep more for ourselves. That is false—He liberates us from the penalty of the law so that we can be free to serve Him *more*, as loving children and not merely as slaves. He frees us so we can have faith instead of selfishness.

When it comes to money, the real question is: Is your heart in the gospel of Jesus Christ? Are you putting your money where your heart is? You can tell where your heart is by seeing where you are putting your money. “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also,” Jesus said.²⁷

Needs in the new covenant ministry

In the new covenant church, there are financial needs—to support the poor, and to support the gospel by supporting those who preach it. Christians are obligated to give financial support for these needs. Let’s see how Paul explained this obligation in his second letter to the Corinthians.

Paul describes himself as a minister of the new covenant,²⁸ which has much greater glory than the old²⁹. Because of what Christ did for him in the new covenant, Christ’s love compelled Paul to preach the gospel, the message of reconciliation.³⁰

Paul exhorted the Corinthians “not to receive God’s grace in vain.”³¹ How were they in danger of doing this? Paul had gone out of his way to serve them, but they were withholding their affections from him.³² He asked them for a fair exchange, for them to open their hearts to him.³³

Paul told the Corinthians that they had a duty to give something in response to what they had been given. This response comes in terms of morality,³⁴ which the Corinthians had done,³⁵ and in terms of affection, which the Corinthians had also done,³⁶ and in financial generosity, which Paul

the old covenant ministers. The Israelites were required to give 10 per cent—and their blessing was only a physical one! Christians in the new covenant have much better blessings—spiritual ones. How much more willingly ought we to give in thankfulness for the eternal blessings we have in Christ Jesus?

The Israelites were commanded to give 10 per cent under a covenant that could not make them perfect.²⁵ How much more joyfully should we give to God under the new covenant? We have the sacrifice of

generous.

The old covenant gave us condemnation; the new covenant gives us justification and peace with God. How much more should we be willing to give freely and generously so God’s work can be done in the world—to proclaim the gospel, to declare the new covenant ministry that gives us true life, and gives that message of life to others?

A person who has faith in Jesus Christ does not worry about whether tithing is commanded

¹ Genesis 14:20

² Genesis 14:23–24

³ Genesis 26:5

⁴ Exodus 13:2; Numbers 3:13

⁵ Numbers 18:15–17

⁶ Deuteronomy 15:19–20; 12:6, 17; 14:23

⁷ Exodus 13:12–15; 34:19–20

⁸ Nehemiah 10:36

⁹ Luke 2:23

¹⁰ Exodus 23:19; 34:26; Leviticus 2:14

¹¹ Leviticus 27:32

¹² Leviticus 27:30

¹³ Numbers 18:12–13, 21, 24

¹⁴ Numbers 18:26–32

¹⁵ 2 Chronicles 31:5–6

¹⁶ Nehemiah 10:35–39; 12:44

¹⁷ Matthew 23:23; Luke 11:42

¹⁸ Malachi 3:8–10

¹⁹ Deuteronomy 12:5–7, 17–19; 14:23

²⁰ Deuteronomy 14:28–29; 26:12–15

²¹ Luke 18:12

²² Matthew 23:23; Luke 11:42

²³ Hebrews 7:1–10

²⁴ Hebrews 7:12

²⁵ Hebrews 7:19; 9:9

addresses in chapter 8. This is the way in which the Corinthians had closed their hearts to Paul and withheld their affections.

Paul cited the example of the Macedonian churches, who had given generously, even to the point of self-sacrifice.³⁷ The example is powerful; the implications are strong that the Corinthians needed to respond to Paul's sacrifices by making sacrifices themselves. But Paul did not make a command.³⁸ Instead, he asked first for a turning of the heart. He wanted the Corinthians to give themselves to the Lord first, and then to support Paul. He wanted their gift to be done in sincere love, not from compulsion.³⁹ Paul reminded them that Christ had become poor for their sakes; the implication is that the Corinthians should make financial sacrifices in return.

But then Paul reduced the pressure, reminding the Corinthians that they could not give more than they had.⁴⁰ Nor did they have to impoverish themselves to enrich others; Paul was only aiming for equity.⁴¹ Paul again expressed confidence in their willingness to give, and added the peer pressure of the Macedonian example and the boasting he had done in Macedonia about the generosity of the Corinthians.⁴²

Paul again noted that the offering must be done willingly, not from compulsion or given grudgingly.⁴³ He reminded them that God rewards generosity⁴⁴ and that a good example causes people to praise God and puts the gospel in a favourable setting⁴⁵.

This was a collection for the poor in Judea. But Paul said nothing about tithing. Rather, he appealed to the new covenant environment: Christ had made many sacrifices for them, so they ought to be willing to make a few sacrifices to help one another.

In asking for this offering, Paul was also making a financial sacrifice. He had a right to receive financial support himself, but instead of that, he was asking that the offering be given to others. Paul had not asked for *any* financial support from Corinth.⁴⁶ Instead, he had been supported by Macedonians.⁴⁷

Paul had a right to be supported by the Corinthians, but he did not use it.⁴⁸ This passage in Paul's

- ²⁶ Hebrews 9:14
- ²⁷ Matthew 6:21
- ²⁸ 2 Corinthians 3:6
- ²⁹ 2 Corinthians 3:8
- ³⁰ 2 Corinthians 5: 11–21
- ³¹ 2 Corinthians 6:1
- ³² 2 Corinthians 6: 3–12
- ³³ 2 Corinthians 6:13
- ³⁴ 2 Corinthians 6: 14–7:1
- ³⁵ 2 Corinthians 7: 8–13
- ³⁶ 2 Corinthians 7:2–7
- ³⁷ 2 Corinthians 8:1–5
- ³⁸ 2 Corinthians 8:8
- ³⁹ 2 Corinthians 8:5, 8
- ⁴⁰ 2 Corinthians 8:12
- ⁴¹ 2 Corinthians 8: 13–14
- ⁴² 2 Corinthians 8: 24–9:5
- ⁴³ 2 Corinthians 9:5, 7
- ⁴⁴ 2 Corinthians 9:6–11
- ⁴⁵ 2 Corinthians 9: 12–14
- ⁴⁶ 2 Corinthians 11:7–11; 12: 13–16
- ⁴⁷ 2 Corinthians 11:9
- ⁴⁸ 1 Corinthians 9: 3–15
- ⁴⁹ 2 Corinthians 9:7
- ⁵⁰ 2 Corinthians 9:9
- ⁵¹ 2 Corinthians 9:13
- ⁵² Luke 10:7
- ⁵³ 1 Corinthians 9:14
- ⁵⁴ Luke 18:22
- ⁵⁵ Luke 12:33
- ⁵⁶ Luke 21:2
- ⁵⁷ Luke 8:14
- ⁵⁸ Luke 6:24
- ⁵⁹ Luke 12:15
- ⁶⁰ Luke 12: 16–21
- ⁶¹ Luke 12:33
- ⁶² Luke 12:34
- ⁶³ Luke 16:13
- ⁶⁴ Luke 18:24–25

first letter tells us more about our Christian duty to give financial support to the gospel. Workers should be able to receive benefits of their work.⁴⁹ The old covenant even made provision for oxen to be given benefits of their work.⁵⁰

Throughout his appeal, Paul does not cite any laws of tithing. He says that priests received benefits from their work in the temple,⁵¹ but he does not cite any percentage. Their example is cited in the same way as the example of soldiers, vineyard workers, herdsmen, oxen, plowers and threshers. It is simply a general principle. As Jesus said, "The worker deserves his wages."⁵² Paul cited the oxen and wages scriptures again in 1 Timothy 5: 17–18. Elders, especially those who preach and teach, should be honoured financially as well as with respect.

Jesus also commanded, "those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel."⁵³ This implies that those who believe should provide a living for some who preach. There is a financial duty, and there is a promised reward for generosity (though that reward may not necessarily be physical or financial).

A need to be generous

Christians have received riches of God's grace, and are to respond with generosity and giving. Christians are called to a life of service, sharing and stewardship. We have an obligation to do good. When we give ourselves to the Lord, we will give generously.

Jesus often taught about money. "Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me," said Jesus to a rich man.⁵⁴ He said the same thing to his disciples.⁵⁵ The new covenant demands all that we have, and that is fair, since Jesus gave all He had for us. He praised a widow who put two coins into the temple treasury, because she gave "all she had".⁵⁶

Wealth is often an enemy of faith. It can "choke" people and cause them to be spiritually unfruitful.⁵⁷ "Woe to you who are rich," Jesus warned.⁵⁸ He warned us about the dangers of greed⁵⁹ and warned about the danger of storing up wealth for self without being "rich toward God"⁶⁰. When we use wealth to help others, we gain

"treasure in heaven".⁶¹ This helps us have our heart in heavenly things instead of earthly, temporary things.⁶²

"No servant can serve two masters... You cannot serve both God and money."⁶³ But money competes for our allegiance; it tempts us to seek our own desires rather than the needs of the kingdom. After the rich man went away sad, Jesus exclaimed: "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom."⁶⁴

Conclusion

Christians have a need to give, to share their resources and blessings with others. They have a duty to support the preaching of the gospel, to give financial support to their spiritual leaders, and the church needs this support. If disciples of Jesus Christ can give, but do not, they are falling short.

The old covenant required 10 per cent. The new covenant does not specify a percentage, nor do we. However, the new covenant admonishes people to give what they can, and tithing still provides an instructive comparison. For some people, 10 per cent may be too much. But some will be able to give more, and some are doing so. Christians should examine their own circumstances and the better blessings they have been given in the new covenant through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ for us and the gift of the Holy Spirit to us. Contributions should be given to the church for its collective work of preaching the gospel and the expenses involved in the local ministry and congregational needs.

Likewise, the new covenant does not specify any particular percentage for assisting the poor. Instead, it asks for equity—and we certainly have room for improvement in this duty.

The old covenant required simple percentages. Everyone knew how much was required. The new covenant has no set percentages. Instead, it requires more soul-searching, more training for the conscience, more selfless love for others, more faith, more voluntary sacrifice and less compulsion. It asks our values, what we treasure most, and where our hearts are. □

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