

Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

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Children Who Are Not*

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A mother weeps for those who have died in her village, yet millions more children will never have a chance to live due to changing attitudes about reproduction across the globe. Populations are falling dramatically around the world—to the point that many nations will face severe crises in the next generation. What does God think about this?

Reuters

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Editor-in-Chief
JOHN W. RITENBAUGH

Associate Editor
MARTIN G. COLLINS

News Editor
DAVID C. GRABBE

Contributing Writers
MARK BAKER, TED E. BOWLING, JOHN F. BULHAROWSKI, CARL CHILDS, CLYDE FINKLEA,
MIKE FORD, RONNY H. GRAHAM, WILLIAM GRAY, PAT HIGGINS, BILL KEESEE,
ROD KEESEE, WARREN LEE, DAVID F. MAAS, BRYAN NELSON, JOHN PLUNKETT,
JOHN REID, MARK SCHINDLER, JEFF VOLK, CHARLES WHITAKER, BRIAN WULF

Managing Editor
RICHARD T. RITENBAUGH

Graphic and Layout Editor
KRISTEN M. COLLINS

Circulation
DIANE R. McIVER

Contact Church of the Great God

PO Box 471846
Charlotte, NC 28247-1846
U.S.A.

No. 13 Mt. Daho
Amityville
Rodriguez, Rizal 1860
THE PHILIPPINES

Box 30188
Saanich Centre Postal Outlet
Victoria, BC V8X 5E1
CANADA

(803) 802-7075 / (803) 802-7811 fax
<http://www.cgg.org> or <http://www.sabbath.org>
or <http://www.bibletools.org> or <http://www.theberean.org>

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Presumption and Divine Justice

King David specifically requests of God in Psalm 19:13, “Keep back Your servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless, and I shall be innocent of great transgression.”

The *Reader’s Digest Great Encyclopedic Dictionary* defines *presumptuous* as “unduly bold, audacious, and arrogant.” *Strong’s Concordance* also defines the corresponding Hebrew word as “arrogant.” *Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* defines the root word, *presume*, as “to undertake without leave or clear justification.” The word identifies acts done in domineering, haughty insolence with a scornful, contemptuous disdain for respect, convention, and even law. It is the opposite of “humble,” “modest,” and “unassuming.” In a religious context, it can be said that presumption is taking unorthodoxy to its extreme.

Over the past sixty or seventy years, as we have approached the return of Jesus Christ, it seems that orthodoxy in virtually every aspect of life has been discarded. Whether in dress, cosmetics, jewelry, movies, music, dancing, language, marriage, and religion, what was once considered normal has been rejected by the *avant garde* leadership and quickly followed by the masses. It is this author’s opinion that these departures have not advanced the quality of life in the United States.

It has always been this way in mankind’s relationship with his Creator. God established the standard of orthodoxy in the Garden of Eden, saying to Adam and Eve that they could eat of all the trees of the

garden but one. It took apparently minimal effort by the most unorthodox being in all creation to persuade them to take to themselves the right to change the orthodoxy God established by eating of the very tree they were told not to eat. They did this even though they could see God face to face!

This episode is a good indicator of how powerfully perverse human nature is. This is why Jeremiah laments, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?” (Jeremiah 17:9). Nothing in this regard has changed since Adam and Eve; human nature is just as strong in asserting itself to control life as it has always been.

How many people even in the Israelitish nations are aware of what Deuteronomy 12:32 so plainly states? “Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it.” Just in case we missed it, God gives us a similar admonition within a few verses of the end of the Book:

For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in the book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book. (Revelation 22:18-19)

These are strong warnings!

Mankind has an innate desire to worship God, but

he wants to be free to do it according to the dictates of his own mind. The result is a wide variety of religions—in actuality, mass confusion as to which is the true religion—and a world in which true values are lost in an ocean of conflicting opinions about how to live. This, in turn, has helped persuade many people to reach the conclusion that all gods are equally good, or its counterpart, that everybody is worshipping the same god.

We all know God is not pleased with this situation, but He allows it to continue. However, even while allowing it to continue, He is calling people out of it. He has shown His called-out ones that they have been redeemed from the bondage to traditions, described in I Peter 1:18 as “vain,” “aimless,” or “futile,” depending on the translation. However, in the vast majority of cases, someone, presumptuously taking it upon himself to inaugurate a tradition, began practicing them, sincerely thinking he was improving his life. We have all followed these traditions, but the Christian is responsible not to allow the world to squeeze him into its mold of conduct, character, and attitude.

Proverbs 21:16 describes the way many presumptuous sins begin: “A man who wanders from the way of understanding will rest in the congregation of the dead.” Like this man, most people do not deliberately set out to depart from God. Nevertheless, carelessness invariably enters

the picture, and a person drifts from his former sure fix on his goal. Once his focus on the goal is blurred, he is more easily deceived into foolishly assuming certain things. An especially sad part of this is that the result is the same as if he were deliberately presumptuous.

The author of Hebrews uses a metaphor in Hebrews 2:1-3, portraying a boat slipping from its moorings and drifting away. A person “neglect[s] so great salvation” by allowing himself to be caught in the current of the world’s attitudes and conduct. Presumption frequently begins with careless drifting, but the drifting quickly advances from neglect to presumption unless one carefully checks whether he actually has God’s permission to behave as he does.

In Proverbs 8, wisdom is personified as a woman crying out to people along the way—to God’s Kingdom?—to take heed to her instruction. In verse 36, she utters a profound warning: “But he who sins against me wrongs his own soul; all those who hate me love death.” None of us likes to think of himself as foolishly loving death. However, the Bible consistently shows that those who do not consciously, purposefully, and carefully direct their lives toward obedience to God do indeed love death rather than life! Such a person is in effect presuming that all is well with him in relation to God. God does not like being taken for granted—because it is bad for *us*!

An Example from Modern Liberalism

Not all presumption is careless drifting. Unfortunately, strong evidence exists to show that much of modern liberalism in religion was deliberately planned and executed. *A Layman’s Guide to Protestant Theology* by William Hordern, p. 74, refers to this:

The method of liberalism includes the attempt to modernize Christianity. The world, liberals argue, has changed radically since the early creeds of Christendom were formulated; this makes the creeds sound archaic and unreal to modern man. We have to rethink Christianity in thought forms which the modern world can comprehend. Fosdick argued that we must express the essence of Christianity, its “abiding experiences,” but that we must not identify these with the “changing categories” in which they have been expressed in the past. For example, says Fosdick, an abiding experience of Christianity has been its conviction that God will triumph over evil. This has been traditionally pictured in the category of Christ’s second coming on the clouds to destroy evil and set up good. We can no longer retain the outworn category, but we can still believe the truth which this ancient thought form was trying to express. We can continue to work in the faith that, through His devoted followers, God is now building His Kingdom and that there will be a renewing of life, individual and social, to bring it into conformity

with the will of God. The essence of the faith is thus retained, argues Fosdick, which the thought form in which it was once clothed has been abandoned.

A second aspect of the method of liberalism is its refusal to accept religious belief on authority alone. Instead, it insists that all beliefs must pass the bar of reason and experience. Man’s mind is capable of thinking God’s thoughts after Him. Man’s intuitions and reason are the best clues that we have to the nature of God. The mind must be kept open to all truth regardless of from whence it comes. This means that the liberal must have an open mind; no questions are closed. New facts may change the convictions that have become hallowed by custom and time. The liberal will venture forth into the unknown, firmly believing that all truth must be God’s truth. In this spirit, the liberal accepts the higher criticism of the Bible and the theory of evolution. He refuses to have a religion that is afraid of truth or that tries to protect itself from critical examination.

Is it any wonder, when those who are supposed to be the primary protectors of religious purity think the way they do, that the laity behaves as they do? Does it really make any difference? Certainly, because the almighty God on high definitely thinks it makes a difference!

Deuteronomy 12:29-31 emphatically states:

When the LORD your God cuts off from before you the nations which you go to dispossess, and you displace them and dwell in their land, take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed from before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, ‘How did

these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise.’ You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way; for every abomination to the LORD which He hates they have done to their gods; for they burn even their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods.

Christmas, Easter, Ecumenism, and Sunday

Hardly anything more clearly illustrates the self-deceived perverseness of human nature as its presumptuous additions of the observation of Christmas and Easter to the worship of the God of the Bible. That Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea is indisputable, but among other things, He was not born on December 25, nor did anybody exchange gifts on that date. Scripture nowhere says there were three wise men, and it is clear they gave gifts only to Christ as King.

Regarding Easter, Jesus was not resurrected on a Sunday morning, nor was He crucified on a Friday afternoon. It is impossible to squeeze three days and three nights, which Jesus Himself said would be the length of time He would spend in the tomb (Matthew 12:40), between Friday afternoon and Sunday morning. Even so, fantastically detailed and emotionally appealing traditions have presumptuously been built around both these events and have been taught to a deceived public as though they were true.

Beyond what has been already mentioned regarding these days, where in God’s Word does He command that we believe and do these commonly accepted practices? Men have presumptuously taken them upon themselves.

The addition of Christmas and Easter to Christianity happened so long ago that they have come to be accepted as part of the Christian religion, and most people celebrate them without thought. Nevertheless, adding to so-called Christian beliefs has not ended—in fact, it is still happening.

The late Pope John Paul II was an ardent ecumenist. He circled the globe many times in his travels and embraced in conference many non-Catholics in his effort to bring all into one fold. His successor, Pope Benedict XVI, has pledged to continue that effort. In this past month, their representatives achieved a decisive victory in forging a much closer alliance with the Anglican Church. However, Anglican leaders could take this step only by abandoning the firm foundation of a former doctrine and thus joining Catholics in accepting a presumptuous addition that the latter already believe.

A headline in the *Seattle Post Intelligencer*, May 17, 2005, reads, “Catholics, Anglicans reach accord on Mary: Statement closes big gap between churches.” The article explains:

The historical separation between Roman Catholics and Anglicans has narrowed after both found common ground on the position of Mary, mother of Jesus,

according to a document conceived at the highest church levels. . . . Anglicans, already close to Catholics because of liturgy and traditions, have moved even closer through their understanding of Mary as outlined in the joint statement, which took five years and an international committee to complete.

Bringing back the departed brethren has been a strong focus of the Catholic Church since the Counter-Reformation that followed the Protestant Reformation, which had dealt Catholicism a powerful blow in the sixteenth century. However, it was not until the “New Age Movement” began in earnest during the mid-1970s—with its strong, insistent call for a paradigm shift toward greater tolerance and radical thinking in religious beliefs and values—that the stage was set for ecumenical efforts to succeed.

The following quotation from the same article publicly undressed, as it were, the Anglican Church:

The document seeks to transcend past controversies on Catholic dogma, including the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption of Mary. While not spelled out specifically in the Bible, such beliefs *can* be interpreted through Scripture, according to the 80-paragraph document.

The result might be an elevation, or at least a heightened acknowledgment, of the place of Mary—particularly for Anglicans, the denomination born in England during the Reformation and called the Episcopal Church in the United States.

Anglicanism is considered closest to Catholicism because it gives Mary a pre-eminent place among the saints, includes her in Communion prayers and holds six Marian feast days.

Among other matters, Catholics and Protestants disagree over the Catholic dogmas of the Immaculate Conception—the assertion that Mary lived a life free from sin from the moment she was conceived—and the Assumption, the belief that her body and soul were taken into heaven when her earthly life ended.

Those dogmas have “created problems not only for Anglicans but also for other Christians,” the docu-

ment said, largely because they are not explicitly supported by Scripture.

But those dogmas also “can be said to be consonant with the teaching of the Scriptures and the *ancient common traditions*,” said the document, titled “Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ.” (emphasis added)

How can either of these two doctrines be biblically derived? They cannot! The Catholic Church has long acknowledged that the role they give Mary cannot be supported by Scripture alone, so now both the Catholic and Anglican churches have admitted through the publication of this document that these teachings are based upon mere human tradition.

In the distant past, someone decided that honoring Mary

in this way would be “nice,” or perhaps he used the word “appropriate,” because she was chosen by God to bear His Son in her womb, and besides, she seems to be such a good woman. However, the Scriptures call for no such elevation in status, and they certainly never claim that she lived a perfect, sinless life! Now the Roman Catholic Church has gone so far as to claim she is co-savior with Christ!

Such presumption seems beyond the bounds of honest, spiritual reasoning, but the Catholic Church has similarly declared Sunday to be the day of worship, replacing God’s Sabbath. They have published articles openly admitting that, if one uses the Bible alone, then the Sabbath is the only acceptable day of worship. In those same articles, they have also been honest in stating that they have made this change from Sabbath to Sunday on their own authority. On these issues, their presumption is not hidden!

In Presumption, Assumption A bounds

But this is arrogant and bold hubris on a massive scale, enabled only because Satan has managed to deceive the whole world (Revelation 12:9). The overwhelming majority of people calling themselves Christian are so unconcerned—that is, tolerant and careless—they live thinking that it does not matter to God.

The church of God has not escaped falling short in this area of sin either. This year, because Passover falls on a weekly Sabbath, there exists a clear difference among church groups in determining which day Pentecost must be observed. This is due to the day Passover falls, affecting the date for the wavesheaf offering and thus the starting date for the fifty-day count to Pentecost. One side must ignore several clear scriptures in Exodus 23, Leviticus 22, and Deuteronomy 12 and make more than a few assumptions to support their contention. The Scriptures reveal that Jesus, the literal fulfillment of the wavesheaf offering, was “waved” before God on the morning following the weekly Sabbath within the Days of Unleavened Bread, which is exactly what Leviticus 23:10-11 commands.

At times, the line between assuming and presuming is so thin that they are indistinguishable. There is no doubt that an assumption is frequently the foundation for presumption. The *Reader’s Digest Great Encyclopedic Dictionary* gives “to take for granted” and “to arrogate to oneself” as definitions for *assume*. It then proceeds to provide “presumption” and “arrogance” as definitions for *assumption*.

A great deal of assuming is being done in the world of Christianity. Many in the world assume that God’s law is “done away” and that, once one has accepted the blood of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, salvation is absolutely assured. They add to these wrong conceptions another assumption: that, somehow, meeting God’s requirement of living sinlessly, of not breaking His law, is “working for salvation.”

It has never been adequately explained to me how meeting God’s requirement of glorifying Him by growing in the grace and the knowledge of Jesus Christ and overcoming and living life as closely as we can to the way Jesus did are working for salvation. How can one work for the grace that is already freely given? This presumption can easily lead one with this belief to play fast and loose with sin—the very factor that caused them to need forgiveness in the first place!—through carelessly breaking God’s law.

Salvation is indeed assured, but a person must still meet certain conditions established by God. Colossians 1:21-23 provides us with an example:

And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and irreproachable in His sight—if indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel which you heard, which was preached to every creature under heaven, of which I, Paul, became a minister. (emphasis added)

Members of the church of God generally do not have a problem with that major assumption/presumption, but many seem to have a problem with another. Once they become converted, they believe, they are assured of “going to a place of safety.” This especially seems true if they belong to certain organizations that “push” that belief to increase their membership.

God’s Word gives no such specific promise. Did God take Jesus to a place of safety when danger from Satan and the world threatened His life? Did He do the same for the apostles? Did He deliver all the prophets that were killed in Jerusalem? Our responsibility is to submit to the

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*“I have come that they may have life,
and that they may have it more abundantly.”*

John 10:10

Are You Living the Abundant Life?

It is a common misconception among non-Christians that the Christian life is, frankly, boring. Christians of every stripe the world over are thought to be dull, humorless, austere people. For instance, Southern Baptists are ridiculed by the media because they preach against drinking, dancing, playing cards, and—how out of touch of them—premarital sex. When they inaugurated a boycott of Disney World for its annual Gay Day a few years ago, the media’s coverage could not have done more to reinforce the world’s image of intolerant, rigid, square, biblical Christians!

The cause is not advanced in the least by the stuck-in-time lifestyles of the Amish and related denominations. Dressed in their centuries-out-of-style clothing and forbidding the use of most modern devices, such people scream “archaic” and “austere” to the world. Most people, even other Christians, despite their tolerance for their beliefs, consider them crazy to adhere so inflexibly to a way of life half a millennium removed from the present!

Modern mainline Protestants have tried to shed this uncool image. In many churches, a contemporary service has replaced or been added to the traditional service. This modern, pop-culture service features live, upbeat music (read “Christian rock”), heavy use of pictures and computer graphics flashed on huge screens, and short sermons given by high-energy youth pastors, and the mostly young attendees wear casual clothes ranging from blue jeans and T-shirts to khakis and polo shirts.

This change in format has been a conscious choice aimed at ridding Christianity of its dreary reputation among the “unchurched.”

Even so, if the world considers unrestrained hedonism the norm in terms of “fun” and “living large,” biblical Christianity will indeed be considered lackluster and unyielding by comparison. The Bible is clear in its calls for Christians to cease behaving as most in the world do:

[A Christian] no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God. For we have spent enough of our past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles—when we walked in lewdness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries. In regard to these, they think it strange that you do not run with them in the same flood of dissipation, speaking evil of you. (I Peter 4:2-4)

Yet, just because a Christian exercises self-control does not mean his life is boring, underprivileged, and unrewarding. In fact, lived properly, a Christian life is ultimately more exciting, successful, and satisfying than most human beings can imagine! Certainly, the lives of Christians are full of responsibility and self-restraint, but the rewards and blessings that accrue over a lifetime of pleasing God and living His way of life simply overwhelm the seemingly onerous duties and strictures. There is no comparison!

"I have come that they may have life, and that they may live it more abundantly."

Most people are not aware that this is a primary reason Christ came as a man to this earth—to teach us how to live abundant, fulfilled lives. Notice His plain statement in John 10:10: "I have come that they [His sheep, Christians] may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly." According to the very Founder of Christianity, His disciples, if they follow His teachings, will live enviable, full lives! They will have lives worth living!

But, specifically, what does He mean by "life . . . more abundantly"?

Delimiting Abundant and Life

A problem arises when discussing this concept due to the apparent subjectivity of the term "abundant." What is abundant living for one person may be absolutely unsatisfying for another. A hard-charging, A-type businessman—into exotic vacations, sports cars, and rock climbing—would not consider a rocking chair on the porch, a vegetable garden out back, and a weekly round of golf at the local course to be fulfilling, yet they would probably suit a retired senior citizen just fine. One person's bowl of cherries is another's bowl of cherry pits.

The Greek word Jesus uses in John 10:10 to describe the kind of life He came to teach His disciples is *perissón*, meaning "superabundant," "superfluous," "overflowing," "over and above a certain quantity," "a quantity so abundant as to be considerably more than what one would expect or anticipate." In short, He promises us a life far better than we could ever envision, reminiscent of I Corinthians 2:9, "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him" (see Isaiah 64:4). Paul informs us that God "is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think" (Ephesians 3:20).

However, before we begin to have

visions of palatial homes, classic automobiles, around-the-world trips, and wads of pocket money, we need to step back and consider what God says comprises "life." Once we determine His view of living, we will have a better grasp of what kind of blessings we can expect as Christ's disciples. All we need to do is glance around at our and our brethren's situations to know that wealth, prestige, position, and power in this world are not high-priority items on God's list of blessings (I Corinthians 1:26-29). In terms of economic, academic, and social strata, most of us come from the lower and middle classes, and we tend to remain in a situation similar to the one in which we were called (compare I Corinthians 7:20-24).

Perhaps the most telling biblical definition of *life*—particularly *eternal life*—is uttered by Jesus Himself in John 17:3: "And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent." Note that this definition makes no mention of length of days, health, prosperity, family, occupation—in fact, the only thing it does mention is knowing God!

What can we take from this?

- God is not overly concerned with the physical circumstances of our lives. It is enough that He assures us that we need not worry about what we will eat or wear (Matthew 6:25-32; Philippians 4:19).
- Eternal life, the kind of life in which a Christian is truly interested, is not determined by duration but by a relationship with God. This is why, once we are converted and impregnated with the gift of the Holy Spirit, we are said to have eternal life already (I John 5:11-13), though not, of course, in its fullness.
- Eternal life—the life God offers us through Jesus Christ and

His teaching—is thus about *quality*, not quantity. Put another way, the abundant life is life as God lives it (Ezekiel 33:10-11; I Peter 2:21; I John 2:6), for once we truly come to know God, we will desire to emulate Him.

- Physical blessings, then, may or may not be byproducts of God's way of life; neither our wealth nor our poverty is a sure indication of our standing with God. Certainly, God desires that we "prosper in all things and be in health" (III John 2), but the bottom line is "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth" (verse 4), not that we live like royalty.

- Finally, a Christian's life revolves around, as Peter puts it, "grow[ing] in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (II Peter 3:18). This suggests that the abundant life is a process of learning, practicing, and maturing, as well as failing, recovering, adjusting, enduring, and overcoming because, in our present state, "we see in a mirror, dimly" (I Corinthians 13:12).

As humans, we are naturally oriented toward material things, but as Christians, our perspective must change. Paul admonishes, "Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died [in baptism], and your life is hidden with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:2-3). To us, life—and our perception of abundant life—is a whole new ballgame!

Promises, Promises

But what about God's promises of physical blessings?

Most successful televangelists preach what is called "the Prosperity Gospel." Using select Scriptures, they teach that if one gives his life to Jesus, and if he follows certain bibli-

cal principles, God is obligated to fulfill His promises of wealth, health, and well-being. In the end, God becomes little more than a genie-in-a-bottle, granting wishes out of sheer compulsion. To these preachers, this is the abundant life God promises, and hundreds of thousands of people agree with them.

It is true that the Bible is full of promises. It is also true that Jesus tells us several times in John 14-16, “If you ask anything in My name, I will do it” (John 14:14; see also 14:13; 15:7, 16; 16:23-24, 26). Psalm 37:4 pledges, “Delight yourself also in the LORD, and He shall give you the desires of your heart.” These sound like absolute promises, and if God is to be true to His Word, He must fulfill them, right?

This is what the televangelists have concluded, but in the end, it is a facile conclusion. Very few of God’s promises in the Bible are absolute in nature; they are, instead, *conditional* promises, governed not only by our responses to God, fulfilling certain requirements, but also by the perfect judgment of God. As James 1:17 says, He gives only good and perfect gifts; He will never give one of His children a “blessing” that would ultimately derail His purpose for him or that would be too much for him to handle.

It works similarly among mere mortals. A human parent would not send his son to vocational school if he really wanted him to be a doctor, even though tuition to the vocational school would be a “good thing.” Likewise, the same parent would not entrust his child with thousands of dollars in cash at Toys ‘R Us, despite the fact that such sums of money would be considered a wonderful gift. If human parents have enough wisdom to give goal- and maturity-dependent gifts to their children, how much more does God (Romans 11:33)?

The faithful Abraham and Sarah are good examples of this aspect of God’s promises. In Genesis 12:2,

God tells Abraham, age 75 at the time (verse 4), that He would make of him “a great nation,” implying that he would have children. God makes this promise again in verse 7: “The LORD appeared to Abram and said, ‘To your descendants I will give this land.’” Yet, He does not give Abraham the promised child when he is 76 or 78 or 80!

After his rescue of Lot from the confederation of kings, Abraham pleads with God in Genesis 15:2-3—he is now 80 years old—for an heir. God repeats the promise, and Abraham believes Him (verses 4-6), yet Sarah does not become pregnant any time soon. Later, after Ishmael is born of Hagar when Abraham is 86 years old (Genesis 16:16), the patriarch wonders if this is the promised seed, but when the boy is thirteen—Abraham is now 99!—God reiterates, “No, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son” (Genesis 17:19).

Finally,

... the LORD visited Sarah as He had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as He had spoken. For Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him. ... Now Abraham was one hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. (Genesis 21:1-2, 5)

Evidently, a great deal had to happen in the lives of Abraham and Sarah—predominantly in terms of spiritual maturity—before God felt the right time had come to give them their promised baby boy. *Twenty-five years* passed before God fulfilled His promise. Notice that Scripture itself informs us that God performed the miracle to allow Sarah to conceive “at the set time.” There was one perfect time for this promise to be fulfilled, and God fulfilled it when all the conditions were right.

And we can thank Him profusely for doing the same for us (II Corinthians 4:15).

Shining the Light on Our Lives

Despite our humble, modest circumstances, are we living abundant lives? Despite our lack of toys, a mansion on the lake, or a Rolls-Royce on our driveway, are our lives better than we ever expected? Or do we feel that life has passed us by, serving us the dregs instead of the wine? If so, could it be that we need a change of perspective?

J. Paul Getty, at the time perhaps the richest man in the world, said, “I hate and regret the failure of my marriages. I would gladly give all my millions for just one lasting marital success.” He possessed the money to live whatever lifestyle gave him the most satisfaction, but at the end of his life, he came to realize that a good, enduring marriage meant more to him than riches. He died feeling like a failure at what life is really all about.

King Solomon lived a similar life of wealth, power, and privilege. The book of Ecclesiastes chronicles his lifelong experimentation with various lifestyles, projects, possessions, hobbies, and creature comforts. What does he ultimately conclude about how humanity should live?

Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth, before the difficult days come. . . . Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether it is good or whether it is evil. (Ecclesiastes 12:1, 13-14)

His conclusion is totally compatible with Jesus’ statement in John 10:10. Jesus did not come promising us wealth, prestige, and authority on earth (although He does promise us these things in the world to come), but He came with good news from His Father about how to attain eternal life (John 6:40). Like Solomon’s, His message is very clear, “. . . if you

(continued on page 14)

The Zeitgeist of Suicide

Part One: Weeping for the Children Who Are Not

“Civilizations die from suicide, not by murder.” —Arnold Toynbee, Historian

“Within a few centuries, the world’s population could shrink below the level of America’s today.”¹ Any resident in urban America, living as he does with ever-more cars and ever-less road space, would not readily agree with such an apparently off-the-wall statement. The whole idea seems counterintuitive in a world of jammed freeways, bustling malls, long queues in post offices, and crowded classrooms. Yet, trend lines lead exactly to that conclusion—to a 95% reduction in worldwide population during the next half-millennium or so. In real numbers, that represents a decline from the planet’s current 6 billion inhabitants to about 300 million by about the year 2500.

Trend lines of what? Almost any normalized population metric—examples include fertility rate, aging rate, abortion rate, HIV/AIDS-prevalence rate—point in the direction of shrinking population, not just in some nations or regions, but worldwide.² The most telling—and troubling—measure is the *total fertility rate* (TFR), a synthetic metric representing the number of children a woman will bear in the course of her lifetime.

It takes only elementary math to see why this measure is important. If mom and pop die without having produced two children to replace them, the population declines. With two children, the population holds steady, neither growing nor shrinking. Of course, not everyone marries, and some individuals die because of disease, natural disaster, or war before they have reproduced. So, the hold-steady total fertility rate is considered to be about 2.1. In aggregate, every woman must bear 2.1 children in her lifetime. In practice, this means that every tenth couple must have three children if the population is to remain steady.

A Global Phenomenon—Almost

Worldwide, the TFR has tumbled significantly over the last thirty years or so. Estimates vary, but United Nations data suggests an unrelenting decline from 5.02 in 1950 to 2.05 by 2045.³ Today the global TFR is thought to be about 2.6—scarcely above replacement levels.⁴ “By 2045 . . . the world’s fertility rate as a whole will have fallen below replacement levels.”⁵ One demographer writes, “Sub-replacement fertility . . .

is increasingly emerging as the norm in Asia and Eurasia.”⁶ Another claims: “Not a single industrialized nation today has a fertility rate of 2.1, and most are well below the replacement level.”⁷

Yet, *as a whole*, the planet’s population is not declining—yet. Some areas (such as sub-Saharan Africa)⁸ and some groups (such as Muslims) consistently report fertility rates well above the replacement rate. However, even fertility trend-lines in these holdout populations are pointing down. It is only a matter of time before the planet’s overall TFR falls below the replacement rate of 2.1. At that time, just a few decades from now, the population of the earth as a whole will begin to fall.

Sub-Saharan Africa remains a standout at this time. A few words about this African exceptionalism are in order. Although African nations in general report high fertility rates, African growth remains constrained by significant health problems.

Table 1 (on page 11) compares the relatively high TFRs of selected African nations with their 1) AIDS/HIV Adult Prevalence Rates, 2) their AIDS/HIV Death Rates, and 3) the number of children living with AIDS/HIV. While not canceling out African high-fertility rates, the consequences of the AIDS pandemic is certainly diminishing their effect. The consequences of AIDS will snowball in the next generation, as indicated by the fact that African nations report a total of 2,270,360 children now living with AIDS. It is also noteworthy that, of the top thirty nations ranked in AIDS/HIV prevalence sequence, all but one, Haiti, is located in the African continent.

Table 2 (on page 12) displays comparative data for two nations, the United States and South Africa. While their population sizes are admittedly quite different, and their migration rates are worlds apart, their respective TFRs rank only a few points apart. The comparison of metrics concerning the AIDS/HIV pandemic is dramatically instructive. The high infection rate in South Africa raises her AIDS-specific death rate significantly, and affects the general death rate as well. In the United States, about one in every 21,124 people died of AIDS in 2003. During that same year, one in every 119 South Africans died of AIDS.⁹

Where Rates Are Falling

What about the United States? America's TFR at the time of the Founding is thought to have been about eight—they made families big in Ben Franklin's day. From that level, the national TFR dropped to a low of 1.70 in 1972, but has risen to about 2.08 today due to the higher fertility rates of some immigrant groups. Presently, American population is still growing, but at a significantly reduced rate. Natural increase (that is, births minus deaths) accounted for only 56.4 percent of her growth from April 2000 through July 2004. During that period, immigration accounted for the other 43.6 percent of her growth.¹⁰ Immigration, then, is a major driver of American population growth. (Remember, migration does not directly change *worldwide* population. When a person immigrates to these shores, he emigrates from somewhere else. In coming here, he leaves there. There is no net *worldwide* popu-

lation increase or decrease due solely to immigration.)

Most Asian and European nations are registering sub-replacement TFRs, usually rates lower than America's. (See Table 3 on page 13, which indicates TFRs for major nations by region.) One way to grasp the magnitude of the decline—to understand its consequences—is to consider the “loss” of people a nation experiences due to sub-replacement TFRs. “Loss” here means the number of people lost to the nation because, upon death, they were not replaced by a younger person.

Canada will lose so many people that one Canadian think tank is urging the government to “import” young workers to offset declining population. Remarkably, Mexico's TFR, at 2.45, has plummeted so fast that “the country is now aging five times faster than is the United States.”¹¹ Currently sitting at 1.4, the aggregate TFR of Western Europe means that the region is losing about 750,000 people annually. The condition

of the Russian Federation, which has reported absolute negative population growth for more than a decade now,¹² is even more dramatic. That one nation is now losing about as many people as all Western Europe loses each year—750,000 people. By 2050, Russia's shrinkage factor could be three million annually, while Bulgaria's population loss will be 38%, Romania's 27% and Estonia's 25%.¹³

The loss figures for China and Japan will be staggering.¹⁴ Following current trend-lines, China's population will soon peak at 1.5 billion people, then begin a steep decline, manifesting itself in the loss of 20-30% of her population each generation.¹⁵ China will be losing about 4.9 million people a year by 2045. By that time, Japan will be losing about 5.7 million people per year due to sub-replacement fertility levels.¹⁶ Before 2045, the Land of the Rising Sun will lose a full 25% of her 127 million people.¹⁷

TABLE 1

Nation	Total Fertility Rate	AIDS/HIV Prevalence Rate	AIDS/HIV Death Rate	Children Living with AIDS/HIV
Botswana	2.85	37.3	33,000	28,000
Central African Rep.	4.50	13.5	23,000	25,000
Egypt	2.88	0.1	700	Unreported
Kenya	4.96	6.5	150,000	220,000
Lesotho	3.35	28.9	29,000	27,000
Malawi	5.98	14.2	84,000	65,000
Mozambique	4.70	12.2	110,000	80,000
Namibia	3.18	21.3	16,000	30,000
Nigeria	5.53	5.4	310,000	270,000
Rwanda	5.49	5.1	22,000	65,000
Sierra Leone	5.72	7.0	11,000	16,000
South Africa	2.24	21.5	370,000	250,000
Sudan	4.85	2.3	23,000	30,000
Tanzania	5.06	8.8	160,000	Unreported
Uganda	6.74	4.1	78,000	110,000
Zambia	5.47	16.5	89,000	150,000
Zimbabwe	3.54	24.6	170,000	240,000
For comparative purposes, benchmark the above figures against the following data				
Netherlands	1.60	0.2	less than 100	160
United States	2.08	0.6	14,000	10,000
Mexico	2.45	0.3	5,000	3,600
South Korea	2.26	0.1	less than 200	Nil

Table 1: African TFR Tabulated against AIDS/HIV Measures

- The AIDS/HIV Adult Prevalence Rate gives the percentage of adults (aged 15 through 49) who are living with AIDS/HIV.
- The AIDS/HIV Death Rate gives the absolute number of adults and children who have died from AIDS during the twelve months of 2003.
- Children Living with AIDS/HIV gives the absolute number of children aged 1 through 14 living with AIDS/HIV in 2003.

Sources: CIA World Factbook (<http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html>) and Human Development reports (<http://hdr.undp.org/default.cfm>).

Runaway Loss

If the math behind the TFR is easy to understand—replacing two deceased old people requires two living young ones, the math behind the long-term cost of a declining TFR is difficult to grasp. That is why the forecast of a 95% loss in population over 500 years seems like a prediction bordering on the absurd.

It is easiest to understand how the numbers decline so fast using metaphors. We can say the situation of a declining TFR feeds itself—gets worse generation by generation. This is because the pool of women to have babies grows *smaller* each generation. Thus, in a sub-replacement environment, if one generation has, say, 100 women capable of childbearing, the next generation might have only 95. That is, when they died, not all of the 100 women were replaced by young females. If the sub-replacement fertility persists, the following generation might have only 86 women, the next 75, the next 62, and so on. The pool of women to have babies shrinks at geometric rates. Hence, fertility falls at geometric rates—faster and faster.

This makes turning the situation around—reversing the trend—more difficult with each passing generation. The compounding effect of declining fertility rates is like a snowball rolling downhill, getting bigger and bigger all the time, more and more difficult to stop. Propelled by the laws of gravity and inertia, it takes a powerful force indeed to brake the snowball's fall. So it is that civilization may become locked into a pattern of falling fertility. The zeitgeist of avalanche will be hard to stop.

Bottom line: Population decline is described by the laws of compound interest—only in reverse.

Such a vast depletion of the planet's most precious thing, its people, seems the work of a zeitgeist made the more hideous because it does not slay the living but extinguishes their desire to engender new life. It does not depopulate horrifically and violently, *en masse*, by genocide or with weapons of mass destruction. Rather, by consuming the young before they come to exist, it leaves only the old to grow older, finally to die. None takes their place.

As subtle as it is malignant, this spirit of creeping suicide impels human society to its end with ever-quicken- ing pace by denying those yet living a lingering bereavement for the unborn—that decent, relieving pain that would drive many to change their thinking and to engender young. This is the culture-of-death demon wearing its most ugly mask.

This is the despicable demon who does not slay those whom we have wanted and whom we have seen and whom we have loved, but those whom we have not wanted, whom we have not seen, and whom we have not loved—and whom we therefore cannot miss.

Does God miss them? If humans are too callous to feel the loss, does He?

It Is Not Going to Happen

Five hundred years or so from now, the world's population will not be less than America's today. God's Word paints a completely different picture. Yes, it graphically shows that catastrophic events of the Tribulation and the Day of the Lord, so vividly described in Revelation 6 through 19, will result in worldwide ecological and environmental degradation not witnessed since the Flood. In all that, both human and animal population levels will fall markedly.

God, however, will take swift action to reverse the effects of these literally earthshaking events. The prophet Ezekiel describes what God will do to refurbish the environment. A river, flowing from the Temple's sanctuary, will apparently gush eastward into the sea. Once there, the oceans' waters will be healed.

And it shall be that every living thing that moves, wherever the rivers go, will live. There will be a very great multitude of fish, because these waters go there; for they will be healed, and everything will live wherever the river goes. (Ezekiel 47:9)

Ezekiel continues, mentioning the “exceedingly many” fish that will come to live in the seas (verse 10). In addition, “all kinds of trees,” growing along both banks of the river, will produce fruit for food and leaves for medicine, all year around (verse 12).

The environment will be healed. People will be healed. As the Family of God teaches mankind God's way of life and His plan, couples will come to share God's view of children as potential God-beings. That

TABLE 2

Demographic Characteristic	United States	South Africa
Population (2005)	295,734,134 (5)	44,344,246 (28)
Migration Rate per 1,000 Population	3.31	-0.22
Total Fertility Rate (2003)	2.08 (130)	2.24 (123)
Life Expectancy at Birth (2003)	77.71 (46)	43.27 (213)
AIDS/HIV Prevalence Rate (2003)	0.60 (69)	21.50 (5)
AIDS/HIV Deaths (2003)	14,000 (34)	370,000 (1)
Percent of AIDS/HIV(2003) Deaths to Population	0.0047%	0.834%
Death Rate (2003)	8.25 (111)	21.32 (8)

Table 2: United States and South Africa Comparative Demographic Data

Numbers in parentheses indicate rank position among 226 nations. Source: CIA World Factbook (<http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html>)

TABLE 3

Region & Nation	Total Fertility Rate
North America	
Canada	1.61
Cuba	1.66
Mexico	2.45
United States	2.08
South America	
Argentina	2.19
Brazil	1.93
Uruguay	1.91
Europe	
Belgium	1.64
France	1.85
Germany	1.39
Great Britain	1.66
Ireland	1.80
Italy	1.28
Russia	1.14
Spain	1.15
Asia	
China	1.30
Japan	1.32
India	2.78
North Korea	1.17
South Korea	1.26
Singapore	1.05
Africa	
Egypt	2.88
Libya	3.34
Sudan	4.85
Union of South Africa	2.24
Oceania	
Australia	1.76
Indonesia	2.44
New Zealand	1.79
Philippines	3.16

Table 3: Sample National Total Fertility Rates

Sources: CIA World Factbook

(<http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html>);

Eberstadt, Nicholas, "Power and Population in Asia,"

Policy Review, February/March 2004, p. 4;

Neuhaus, Richard John, "Where Have All the Children Gone?"

First Things, May 2005, p. 58.

Endnotes

¹ Kurtz, Stanley, "Demographics and the Culture War," *Policy Review*, February/March 2005, p. 33.

² See also Longman, Phillip, *The Empty Cradle: How Falling Birthrates Threaten World Prosperity and What to Do About It*, Basic Books, 2004.

³ United Nations Population Division, *World Population Prospects: the 2002 Revision*. Population Database, accessed May 20, 2005, <http://esa.un.org/unpp>.

⁴ See the CIA Global Factbook (<http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook>).

⁵ Longman, Philip, "The Global Baby Bust," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2004.

⁶ Eberstadt, Nicholas, "Power and Population in Asia," *Policy Review*, February/March 2004, p. 3.

view is implicit in the God's very *first* command to mankind:

So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. Then God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. . . ." (Genesis 1:27-28)

Man is now subtracting, not multiplying. By the time mankind comes to understand God's perspective on offspring, Satan will be unable to deceive humans into believing that God is either too callous or too weak to provide air, food, water—all the essentials of life—for people young or old.¹⁸ For then the Culture-of-Death Demon, who hates man, seeing in him the image of the true God, will be locked safely away in the bottomless pit (see Revelation 20:1-3).

In Isaiah 49:19-20, the prophet Isaiah forecasts the consequence of mankind's newfound understanding of God's will. God speaks encouragingly to Israel, dispelling at the same time any notion of a "birth dearth" in those days of restoration:¹⁹

For your waste and desolate places, and the land of your destruction, will even now be too small for the inhabitants; and those who swallowed you up will be far away. The children you will have, after you have lost the others, will say again in your ears, "The place is too small for me; give me a place where I may dwell."

These will be the land's myriad inhabitants who will eat the "great multitude of fish" and the fruit growing year-round, mentioned by Ezekiel.

Abraham and Sarah's experience concerning the birth of Isaac indicate that *human reproduction is an act of faith*. As couples in the Millennium begin to trust God—believe that He is willing and able to provide for them and their children, they will begin to reproduce again. They will work with God, multiplying, rather than against Him, subtracting.

Next month, the second part of this four-part series will examine some of the causes of today's population implosion. It will also review some of the dire consequences of man's refusal to multiply.

—Charles Whitaker

⁷ Kurtz, *ibid.*, p. 34.

⁸ In 1960, the TFR of North Africa was about 7.1. Today, it is 3.2 and still in free fall.

⁹ *World Population Prospects*, *ibid.* The Executive Summary comments:

Twenty-five years into the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the impact of the disease is evident in terms of increased morbidity and mortality and slower population growth. In Southern Africa, the region with the highest HIV/AIDS prevalence of the disease, life expectancy has fallen from 62 years in 1990-1995 to 48 years in 2000-2005, and is projected to decrease further to 43 years over the next decade before a slow recovery starts. As a consequence, population growth in

the region is expected to stall between 2005 and 2020. In Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland, the population is projected to decrease as deaths outnumber births.

¹⁰Total growth from April 1, 2000, through July 1, 2004, was 12,230,802. Natural increase accounted for 6,901,964 people. Immigration accounted for 5,328,929 people (U.S. Census figures).

¹¹Longman, *ibid.*

¹²Kurtz, *ibid.* Putin has called the demographic situation a “disaster” and a “crisis.” However, he has done nothing to curtail abortions in Russia. Russia leads the world in number of abortions, over 2.76 million annually. This is more than double the abortions in America, which ranks number two.

¹³Neuhaus, Richard John, “Where Have All the Children Gone,” *First Things*, May 2005, p. 58.

¹⁴Chinese population loss is clearly attributable to the one-child-per-family rule. By simple math, this rule makes China a sub-replacement nation. In the 1960s, China’s TFR was 6.06. Today, it is 1.30—and falling.

¹⁵Neuhaus, *ibid.*, p.59.

¹⁶*World Population Prospects, ibid.*

¹⁷Neuhaus, *ibid.*

¹⁸For example, God’s adversary (and ours!) has convinced many that the earth is catastrophically warming due to excess greenhouse gases. The United Nations based its prediction of environmental degradation on the premise that the world’s population would not peak until it reached 11.5 billion, 5 billion more than are currently living. Grudgingly, the UN has had to back off its predictions of disaster due to global warming because current demographic trends point away from population growth, toward population decline, away from explosion and toward implosion.

¹⁹Eric Cohen, the editor of *The New Atlantis*, writes intriguingly of the Jewish view of reproduction in “A Jewish-Catholic Bioethics?” (*First Things*, June/July 2005, p. 7). When God told Abraham that He would give land to his descendants (as in Genesis 15:18), He connected the *identity* of Israel with the absolute necessity that

there be future generations. If there were no descendants, there would be no one to receive the land.

So, to Jewish thinking, Genesis 17:7 records an implicit *command* to multiply: “I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you.” It is implicit because the covenant *requires* descendants forever. Without descendants, there would be only half of the covenant (God); the other half, “your descendants after you in their generation,” would be missing. *This means couples must multiply*, generation after generation. Without procreation, Israel as an identifiable covenant people would not exist. From our standpoint, Cohen undoubtedly summarizes the matter too darkly when he concludes: “To give birth is to be eternally remembered; to be childless is to be eternally forgotten.”

An extended quote from the *Yevamot* (a part of the *Mishnah* which discusses the reciprocal responsibilities and rights of married couples) recaps the Jewish perspective:

“Should the number of Israelites happen to be two thousand and two myriads less one, and any particular person has not engaged in the propagation of the race, does he not thereby cause the Divine Presence to depart from Israel?” Abba Hanan said in the name of Rabbi Eliezar: “He deserves the penalty of death; for it is said, ‘And they had no children, but if they had children they would not have died.’” Others say, “He causes the Divine Presence to depart from Israel; for it is said: ‘To be a God unto thee and to thy seed after thee’; where there exists ‘seed after thee,’ the Divine Presence dwells among them; but where no ‘seed after thee’ exists, among whom should it dwell?”

For more information on the Jewish perspective of all things sexual (homosexuality, masturbation, single-sex marriage, etc.), see http://www.myjewishlearning.com/ideas_belief/sex_sexuality/Overview_Judaism_And_Sexuality/Purpose_And_Meaning/Sex_Contraception_Isaacs.htm

JOHN 10:10

“I have come that they may have life, and that they may live it more abundantly.”

(continued from page 9)

want to enter into life, keep the commandments” (Matthew 19:17).

The big “secret” is that the abundant life is contained in the keeping of God’s commandments, in tandem with the grace supplied through Jesus Christ. John writes, “And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:16-17, ESV). Jesus came to give man the means by which he could properly keep God’s commandments; His grace puts commandment-keeping in its proper place. Once a person is living this way—what Paul calls “walk[ing] in the Spirit” (Galatians 5:16-25)—his life is naturally going to be abundant because he is no longer under the penalties and curses that breaking the law exacts (see verse 18). His life will be pleasing to God, and He will bless

him, now and in the life to come (Psalm 19:11; Proverbs 11:18; Matthew 6:33; Revelation 11:18; 22:12)!

Are our lives abundant? Are we reaping the rewards of following God’s way of life? Have we begun to enjoy the benefits of keeping God’s commandments?

Every Sabbath, we enjoy the benefits of keeping it holy (Exodus 20:8-11), including physical rest, time with our families, fellowship with our brethren, and communion with and instruction from God. It may not be “exciting,” but it is living as He wants us to live.

The same is true of keeping the other commandments. If we have happy families and marriages, we are reaping the benefits of keeping the fifth and seventh commandments (verses 12, 14). If people find us trustworthy and honest, we are being rewarded for keeping the eighth

and ninth commandments (verses 15-16). If we are content in our circumstances, our peace of mind derives from practicing the tenth commandment (verse 17).

Moreover, if we see spiritual growth taking place, and if we are producing good fruit in our lives, we are experiencing the results of a strengthening relationship with God, encapsulated in the first four commandments (verses 2-11; Matthew 22:37-38). Such a relationship with our Creator is *the key* to abundant living, for there is no greater, more satisfying accomplishment than that among men!

When we reach this point, we will have learned the godly perspective, and we will know that the life of God we live is definitely abundant living—no matter what our circumstance (Philippians 4:11)!

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

Peer-Pressure: A Challenge for All

A few years ago, I was on a training course with eleven other technicians at our employer's training school. We were there to learn about some of the latest telecommunications equipment, and part of the training involved a one-day field trip to see some of this equipment in operation. The morning of the field trip had been quite warm, and when the instructor announced that we would go to a nearby pub for lunch, I joined the other students in thinking what a good idea that was!

The instructor seemed quite familiar with the directions to the pub, but as our car turned into its parking lot, I received my first clue that something was not quite right. This was no nice neighborhood pub, as I had anticipated. This place looked as though it was long overdue for an encounter with the wrecker's ball!

Clue number two came when our instructor looked at his watch and said, "Oh, good! We're early! We should be in time to get ring-side seats!" As we walked from the car to the side door of the pub, I was puzzling over possible interpretations of his unusual statement when I was jolted into full realization of his meaning by clue number three: a series of posters in the porch displaying photos of scantily clad young women. While I was frantically wondering how I was going to get out of this fix, we were already inside the dimly lit tavern and walking around clue number four: a gold and black elevating stage encircled with small lights. Happily for me, it was not yet occupied. There I was—a member of God's church—in a strip-bar surrounded by a dozen colleagues all rubbing their hands together as if it were a freezing-cold day!

Another incident, familiar to us all, occurred during the early hours of Nisan 14, AD 31, in the city of Jerusalem. God's Word supplies the narrative of this story:

Having arrested Him, they led Him and brought Him into the high priest's house. But Peter followed at a distance. Now when they had kindled a fire in the midst of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them. And a certain servant girl, seeing

him as he sat by the fire, looked intently at him and said, "This man was also with Him." But he denied Him, saying, "Woman, I do not know Him." And after a little while, another saw him and said, "You also are of them." But Peter said, "Man, I am not!" Then after about an hour had passed, another confidently affirmed, saying, "Surely this fellow also was with Him, for he is a Galilean." But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are saying!" Immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how He had said to him, "Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times." So Peter went out and wept bitterly. (Luke 22:54-62)

What does Peter's denial of Jesus Christ have to do with my experience at the pub? The link between the two stories is the problem of *peer-pressure*. Peter, in his ordeal in Jerusalem, and I in mine were both experiencing pressure from "peers" with whom we had been thrown together by circumstance. This article will examine the few words that God has to say on the subject.

What Is Peer-Pressure?

The term *peer-pressure* does not normally appear in dictionaries or encyclopedias, so we will define the words separately from *Webster's Dictionary*:

Peer: one that is of equal standing with another; equal; especially one belonging to the same societal group and especially based on age, grade, or status. Companion.

Pressure: the burden of physical or mental distress; the constraint of circumstance; the weight of social or economic imposition; the stress or urgency of matters demanding attention.

In everyday usage, peer-pressure is generally understood to be the constraint that a person feels to conform to the standards of the group he or she is with at any given time. When this occurs, a person feels pressured to be the same as the others in the group, to talk as they do, to dress as they do, to enjoy the same kind of entertainment as they do. Such pressure is often perceived rather than real. In actuality, very few people pressure others to be the same as themselves, but it is quite natural for us to *want* to conform or to belong. Not many people enjoy standing out and thus being rejected as different or weird.

Peer-pressure is not always necessarily a bad thing; it can be positive or negative. Which of these it turns out to be depends heavily on the morals, character, and personality of the members of the peer group, and hence, the nature of the activities one feels he is being pressured to participate in. It is not the perception of negative peer-pressure that is wrong, but rather, the giving in to it—especially if it leads one to compromise with God’s standards, or worse still, to deny Him. As in Peter’s case, compromise may be due to fear, but in most cases in today’s Western, laissez-faire, anything-goes, whatever-turns-you-on societies, such fear is usually unfounded.

So again, what is a simple definition of peer-pressure? It is the perceived or real pressure to conform to the group with which one associates.

Who Are Our Peers?

Peers fit into two main categories. Firstly, we all have our regular peer groups with whom we spend much of our time: for example, in church, school, work, sports activities, etc. Secondly, we can make a peer group out of an assembly of people with whom we are put together on a temporary basis, often by circumstance. This was Peter’s case with the soldiers and servants in the High Priest’s house, and this was my case every time I attended a training course.

Whichever of these categories we find ourselves in at any time, it is important for us to find and choose *good* friends amongst our peers. This is not forgetting what Jesus says about who is “good” in Matthew 19:17: “No one is good but One, that is, God.” No, “good” friends are those who do not have obvious swearing, drinking, smoking, drug, or immorality problems. Despite the odds against it, such people can still be found in most schools and workplaces.

The ideal, of course, would be to have other friends from God’s church attending the same school or workplace as ourselves. If one is blessed with such a situation, he or she should make every effort to spend time with and give support to the other person, even if there is an age difference (which, for young people, may not be considered *cool*). If there are no other people from church at one’s school or workplace, one might feel comfortable with a friend who attends another church, as long as he or she is not the aggressive, proselytizing type. Although one hesitates to make such a recommendation, we all need

companionship, and the chances are that such a person has higher moral standards than the norm.

Peer-Pressure at All Ages

We often think of peer-pressure as being the exclusive domain of our teenage sons and daughters. Perhaps our teens think so too. In reality, this is *not* the case. Both of this article’s introductory stories are instances of *adult* peer-pressure. Most adults who are working or studying in group environments would likely agree that they frequently experience peer-pressure. Like teens, church adults also must decline sports, parties, and social occasions on Sabbaths and holy days. Like teens, church adults must decline and work around festivities such as Christmas and Halloween. Like teens, church adults must ask for time off to attend God’s feasts. Yes, adults face all of these challenges along with the associated explanations to peers who do not and cannot really understand.

In some respects, peer-pressure can be worse for adults than it is for young people. Certainly, the dangers and penalties for compromise are more severe for a baptized adult Christian because God considers such a person to be more accountable. Learning to resist negative peer-pressure in our early years can prepare us to resist more severe peer-pressure effectively in our adult years.

What Does God Say?

If we desire to be God’s children, we must choose His way of life. The same goes for young people. If we desire to be part of and reap the benefits of being part of a Christian family, we too must choose God’s standards. Many teens are rapidly approaching their “age of decision” when they will have to decide whether to stay in the church and do it God’s way, or leave it and try their hands at the world’s way. Although I was not brought up in a church-of-God family, I was seventeen years old when I arrived at my age of decision, which, due to my age and the lack of a local congregation, led to me being on the outside chomping at the bit to get in. It is hoped that few—preferably none—of our teens are on the inside chomping at the bit to get out!

We could not find the term peer-pressure in our dictionaries or encyclopedias, nor can we find the term in our Bibles or concordances. The associated Bible words that deal with this subject are *conform* and *separate*. What, then, should we conform to? What should we not conform to? What should we separate ourselves from?

- And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. (Romans 12:2)
- And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the

called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. (Romans 8:28-29)

These verses speak for themselves. We all must resist the pressure of conforming to the standards of the world. God the Father has predestined us to be conformed to the image and standards of His firstborn Son, Jesus Christ! However, if we do this, some of our friends will probably reject us and separate themselves from us. What then?

Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude you, and revile you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of Man's sake. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy! For indeed your reward is great in heaven. For in like manner their fathers did to the prophets. (Luke 6:22-23)

Such rejection and separation can be tough for a young person. It is not easy to face rebuff and exclusion from those we consider friends. But what if we are trying to do what is right, and our old friends do not cut us off but hang on to us while they continue to do wrong? This can be an even worse problem because it then becomes our responsibility to act:

Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said, "I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people." Therefore "Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you." "I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the LORD Almighty." (II Corinthians 6:14-18)

To clarify—at the risk of being repetitive—God is not telling us to cut off our friendships with "good" kids (or adults). However, if they are into alcohol, drugs, immorality, swearing, and they continue to hang on to our friendship, it is a safe bet that, rather than our restoring them with our good example, they will drag us down with their bad one. Hard though it may be, it is up to us to sever the relationship. If we do, God promises to reward us. We should not think that we will be lonely and friendless if we have to take such action. God promises that He will replace our old associates with real, true, good friends:

So Jesus answered and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My sake and the gospel's, who shall not

receive an hundredfold now in this time—houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions—and in the age to come, eternal life." (Mark 10:29-30)

In addition, if we separate from those we should separate from, and if we conform to those who we should conform to, God promises to put us in Jesus Christ's peer group when He starts doing some separating of His own:

When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right hand, "Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. . . . Then He will also say to those on the left hand, "Depart from Me, you cursed, into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels. . . . And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." (Matthew 25:31-34, 41, 46)

This is not meant to frighten anyone with "fear religion," but as mentioned before, many young people are approaching the age of decision, and they will soon be asking themselves the vital question, "Should I stay in the church or should I leave?" The ministry and members really care about the young people in the church and want what is best for them. We all want to be in God's Kingdom together. The Kingdom of God is real, and we believe that it is coming soon. Thus, the window of opportunity to choose God's way narrows with every day that passes (Romans 13:11).

The choice is huge, but God has put it into very simple terms—terms that are especially relevant to today's world:

. . . I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live; that you may love the LORD your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days; and that you may dwell in the land [of promise]. (Deuteronomy 30:19-20)

God sees matters in these stark terms: There is the path He offers us, which is good for us in every way, and there are all other avenues, all of which lead to curses and death. Most of our peers have not been offered this choice—yet—so they have no inkling of the better way found in God's Word. But we have had it revealed to us, and God urges us to rise above the demands of our worldly peers to seize what He offers with both hands.

—John Plunkett

(continued from page 6)

will of God come what may, glorifying Him in our response. How do we know precisely, in advance, exactly how God is going to use us? Is this something we can assume?

A clear and hopeful sign is that God shows a pattern in protecting Noah and his family and bringing Lot out of Sodom. Therefore, we can have hope that safety exists. He also promises not to test us above what we are able (I Corinthians 10:13). Nevertheless, a direct promise to every Christian to “escape” is simply not there. It cannot

Adding or Subtracting is Serious

What is so interesting in light of the many examples of presumption available to us on the modern scene is that the words most commonly used in both Old and New Testaments to indicate sin are more specifically defined as “to miss the mark,” “to slip,” “to fall,” or “to wander from the path.”

Those definitions at first seem rather innocuous. However, Deuteronomy 12:30-32 warns that to add to God’s Word is a snare. Then, Jesus adds to this serious warning that to reject the commandments of God to keep one’s own traditions is vanity—it is futile, useless (Mark 7:7-9). Finally, the book of Revelation adds the clincher, saying that anyone who adds to or takes from God’s Word will not be in His Kingdom (Revelation 22:18-19). This sounds like serious business!

To add to or to subtract from God’s Word is not a light matter. In this form of sin total ignorance plays only a small part; it is sin in which knowledge of righteousness is fully available. Those involved, especially in initiating the presumptions, should have known better than to do what they did. We, the people of God, may find ourselves in this kind of situation.

The examples of presumptuous sin in this article have been drawn from real life, and for the most part, they are the actions of entire organizations. But how about you personally? Are you just “going along” because many others are following the same course, and the conduct of your life has become traditional? Are you guilty of turning aside here and there because you convince yourself it does not matter just this once, that God will understand, even though you know what you are about to do is wrong?

The sacrificial laws cover situations where sins of this sort may be committed. Leviticus 4:2 states, “Speak to the children of Israel saying: ‘If a person sins unintentionally against any of the commandments of the LORD in anything which ought not to be done, and does any of them. . . .’”

“Unintentionally [*ignorantly*, KJV]” includes more than one might think at first. It means “wander,” “err,” “make a mistake,” and “go astray,” and contains a strong sense of ignorance and even inadvertence. It suggests a lack of deep understanding of the seriousness of the sin involved. In other words, regarding this sin, the person did not know any better. It includes sins done with a degree of con-

be assumed. Instead, we find generalities, such as is stated in Zephaniah 2:3, “Seek the LORD, all you meek of the earth, who have upheld His justice. Seek righteousness, seek humility: It may be that you will be hidden in the day of the LORD’s anger” (emphasis added).

The pitfall for us is much the same as for those in the world who are deceived by the once-saved, always-saved doctrine. We, too, can easily take this for granted and relax, rather than zealously seeking to grow and overcome. We must be careful not to allow this to occur.

sciousness, an awareness of what one is doing—something done willingly out of weakness—but *not* sins done deliberately.

For instance, the Bible clearly differentiates between manslaughter and murder, and the underlying principle revolves around presumption:

And if you sin unintentionally, and do not observe all these commandments which the LORD has spoken to Moses. . . . [T]he person who does anything presumptuously, whether he is native-born or a stranger, that one brings reproach on the LORD, and he shall be cut off from among his people. Because he has despised the word of the LORD, and has broken His commandment, that person shall be completely cut off; his guilt shall be upon him. (Numbers 15:22, 30-31)

Manslaughter is to kill someone accidentally, while murder is to take a life deliberately and willfully. To sin presumptuously is to sin willfully. Those who overstep their bounds and *dare* to act in a disobedient manner commit presumptuous sins such as murder. The New Testament word translated “presume” can mean “to think,” “to suppose,” “to deal proudly, defiantly, and recklessly,” and “to look down upon.” It shows an evil attitude and a twisted thinking process followed by an action one knows full well is absolutely wrong to do.

Does God provide any examples of how He might react to presumptuous sins? He has been quiet for a long time concerning the belligerent way mankind is living in our time. However, a number of times in the past He has reacted with sudden, explosive, and deadly results to those who committed them.

In the next installment, we will look at several vivid examples of those times in both testaments. It would be good for those of us who may have taken God’s quietude for granted to remember Jesus’ statement about God’s judgment: “. . . to whom much is given, from him much will be required” (Luke 12:48).

In Christian love,



Is Europe Dying?

For several years now, various media sources and analysts have been discussing how the European Union (EU) seems to be languishing—or treading water, at best—while the U.S. continues to surge ahead. This is not to suggest that either of these trends will continue indefinitely; America certainly has much to answer to God for. However, a number of recent events beg the question of how viable the EU really is.

Columnist Mark Steyn, in “The Strange Death of the Liberal West” (*The Telegraph*, March 22, 2005), puts it this way:

Almost every issue facing the EU—from immigration rates to crippling state pension liabilities—has at its heart the same glaringly plain root cause: a huge lack of babies. . . . [H]uman inventiveness depends on humans—and that’s the one thing we really are running out of. When it comes to forecasting the future, the birth rate is the nearest thing to hard numbers. If only a million babies are born in 2005, it’s hard to have two million adults enter the workforce in 2025 (or 2033, or 2041, or whenever . . .). If that’s not a political issue, what is? To cite only the most obviously affected corner of the realm, what’s the long-term future of the Scottish National Party if there are no Scottish nationals? . . . The hyper-rationalism of post-Christian Europe turns out to be wholly irrational: what’s the point of creating a secular utopia if it’s only for one generation?

Steyn also noted three months later, “A political entity hostile to the three principal building blocks of functioning societies—religion, family and wealth creation—was never a likely bet for the long term” (“My Virility Doesn’t Matter—the EU’s Does,” *The Telegraph*, June 28, 2005). It should be noted that, of the three tenets that Steyn identifies, the U.S. is tenaciously holding onto only the last.

According to a report by the New Frontiers Foundation, there is as much truth as wit in Steyn’s statements. Fertility rates in America, India, Indonesia, and the Philippines suggest that these populations will grow significantly over the next fifty years. Yet, Europe’s population, on its current trajectory, will decline by almost 10%. The working-age population of the Eurozone will have fallen from 203 million to around 160 million. Assuming that the same proportion of the population will be working (62%), this implies a fall in the workforce from 127 million to roughly 100 million. The Eurozone will essentially lose 27 million workers while simultaneously gaining 35-40 million retirees, looking for a government pension that its governments may

not be able to pay. This is a large part of the reason the governments of the EU favor very loose immigration policies—to help pay into the public coffers. But in addition to defying logic—Europe already has more people than it can employ—unchecked immigration has brought on its own crisis as the various cultures fail to integrate.

Even as the demographics of the EU paint a gloomy picture, the very bedrock of the Union—the EU Constitution—is crumbling, and may in fact be finished. On May 29, 2005, France held a referendum on whether to accept the EU Constitution. Fifty-seven percent of the citizens voted against the Constitution. A few days later, the Dutch rejected the Constitution by a margin of 62 to 38. Exactly what happens now is uncertain. The EU Constitution may be allowed to die altogether. Alternatively, the French and Dutch may get to vote again—until they “get it right.” Or, their respective legislatures may simply deem the referendum as non-binding and pass the Constitution anyway. Nevertheless, even if the Constitution is somehow rammed through, it is not lost on Europe—or the world—that when the people were given a voice, they soundly rejected the bloc’s founding document.

On the economic front, things are not faring much better. The EU recently agreed to weaken the fiscal rules that underpin the euro, allowing France and Germany in particular to take on more debt without penalty. While this may help some countries in the short term, the larger issue is that this move demonstrates to the financial world that the EU is not willing to abide by its own rules when it would benefit the more influential nations in the Union. The result is that the euro is seen as slightly less reliable. In addition, in the first week of April, the European Commission slashed the economic growth forecasts for 2005 from a slow 2% down to a weak 1.6%. This is on top of the low-to-no growth of the past few years.

These factors, taken along with a German unemployment rate unrivalled since the lead-up to World War II, as well as the popular unrest resulting from the myriad immigration issues—particularly the utter failure to integrate Muslim immigrants into a “Christian”/secular culture—make it easy to see why some commentators and analysts are already talking about “post-EU Europe.”

None of this is to say that the Beast of Revelation 13 and 17 will *not* arise out of the continent of Europe. However, as with the Axial Period of the sixth century BC, new powers often arise only when the current ones fall. It seems highly probable that, if the Beast is to come out of Europe, he will not come from the institutions of the European Union—but from its dust and ashes. ■

NEWS AND TRENDS Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour when the Son of Man is coming. (Matthew 25:13)

BIBLE STUDY: *THE PARABLE OF THE TALENTS*

Part One

Following the Parable of the Ten Virgins (Matthew 25:1-13), Jesus continues without a break in His teaching to His disciples. This continuity of thought makes the Parable of the Talents (verses 14-30) a fitting complement to the preceding parable. Jesus is careful to balance His instruction by teaching another important requirement for His servants to fulfill prior to His return. He does not want His disciples to assume that the previous parable constituted His entire warning.

In the Parable of the Ten Virgins, Jesus reveals the necessity of developing inward character, but in the Parable of the Talents, He combines that need with the encouragement to manifest good works. The virgins teach us the need to watch

and be ready; the talents teach us our responsibility to work until His return.

Jesus knew the human tendency to think that, because He was there in person, His disciples did not have to work, leading to laziness and freeloading as a person becomes dependent on the support of another. Thus, He urges His disciples, not only to be ready by watching for His return, but also to work diligently toward it. The first parable portrays the virgins waiting for their Lord, which requires mental and spiritual preparation and watching, while the Parable of the Talents shows the servants of the Lord working for Him, which entails profitable activity.



1. What do the various images in the Parable of the Talents represent? Matthew 25:14-30.

COMMENT: The wealthy man (referred to as “lord” by his servants) is “the Son of Man,” Jesus Christ (Matthew 25:13). His journey into the far country parallels Christ’s departure into heaven after His ascension. The servants stand for the twelve disciples and thus all the followers of Christ down through the ages, and the talents they receive represent the spiritual gifts Jesus passes on to His servants. The absence of the lord from his home pictures the absence of Christ’s visible presence on the earth, and his return is Jesus’ promised return. The trading that the servants are expected to do during their master’s absence suggests the faithful use of spiritual gifts and opportunities for service that Jesus’ disciples are expected to practice. On the master’s return, he commends the servants, showing what will happen at Christ’s return, when each Christian’s service will be rewarded. The judgment on the one servant who failed in his trust is a warning against not using or misusing his gifts. [Note: The phrase, “The kingdom of heaven is” (verse 14), is in italics, meaning that it is not in the original, but was added by translators for clarity.]

2. What exactly is a talent? What is its spiritual significance? Matthew 25:15.

COMMENT: The talent was not a coin but a weight, and so its value obviously depended on whether the coinage involved was copper, silver, or gold. The most common metal was silver. The original Greek word for “talent” is *talantos*, which refers to quantity. As Jesus uses it, a talent is not something we possess, but which He possesses and loans to His servants. In the parable, all talents belonged to the lord, who entrusted them to his servants for use in trade.

Spiritually, the talents represent the gift of the complete revelation of God as given in the Bible, including the knowledge of His plan of salvation and the gospel of the coming Kingdom of God. It also includes His spiritual gifts to the church, such as speaking and understanding languages, preaching, teaching, discernment, knowledge, and wisdom, among many others (Romans 11:29; 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11).

What we “trade” with while He is absent belongs to Him. Our natural abilities are comparatively insignificant and of little value, but God has given us spiritual wealth to use by investing it in supporting the work of God. These talents, then, are not a matter of things we own or of strengths we have, but are part of the grace of God, provided for the church’s benefit.

3. What is the difference between a talent and an ability?
COMMENT: God’s gifts accomplish much more through some people than they do through others, as is seen in how much the lord bestows on each servant. Every true servant of Christ receives the Holy Spirit, but different servants receive differing amounts of spiritual understanding from God. We do not receive more from Him than we can understand and use. Because God’s servants differ in aptitude, He accordingly bestows His gifts to each servant as He pleases (1 Corinthians 12:11).

The lord knew the trading ability of his chosen servants, and he distributed his talents accordingly. Talent and ability are two different things. Talents are the spiritual gifts of the Master, while ability is power from our natural fitness and skill. A person may have great natural ability, yet no spiritual gifts. Natural ability, however, one of God’s physical gifts, is often necessary for the reception of spiritual gifts. This was no reflection on the third servant because he only received one talent; he could not handle more. Each servant of Christ receives for his service all that he needs and can use (Romans 12:4-9; 1 Corinthians 12:4-30).

This parable teaches us several things. God gives people differing gifts. Work well done is rewarded with still more work to do. The person who uses his gifts will be given more, while the person who does not will lose even what he has. If a person uses a gift, he is increasingly able to do more with it, and a person who does not try is punished. The only way to keep a spiritual gift is to use it in the service of God and one another.

In Part Two, we will analyze the unequal allocation of talents, how they were used and misused, and how the servants were rewarded.