

Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

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The **ECONOMICS** of an Offering

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Is the Christian Required To Do Works?

Part One

I frequently receive questions from people who think they have caught us in an error. Occasionally, they do, though it is usually nothing more than a technical inaccuracy. However, most of the time they have based their attempt to correct our articles on the common doctrines of this world's Christianity. They are not entirely at fault because, in their sincerity, they are probably judging our articles by what they have been taught in their churches.

One must follow a number of principles to have the right perspective on biblical teaching. The Bible was not written like any other book. Its multiple authors wrote in three different languages over a period of around 1,500 years. God did not reveal the entirety of His purpose at any one time, but gradually over that entire period.

In reality, the Bible has only one Author—God. The apostle Paul states in II Timothy 3:16-17, “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” In a different context, the apostle Peter confirms this truth in II Peter 1:20-21, “. . . knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.”

A major effect of God's manner of inspiration is that information on any given doctrine may appear in any number of the Bible's sixty-six books. Yet, de-

spite the apparently jumbled order of the books as they appear in our modern versions, a common thread of an awesome, incredible purpose still runs through all of them, connecting Genesis with Revelation. The Bible, both Old and New Testaments, is one Book.

The Bible's books appear jumbled because the Hebrew Old Testament, while having the same content as the King James Version and most of the modern English translations, has many of the books in a very different order. In addition, those who study into these things believe the New Testament is also much easier to understand if its books are arranged differently. In His wisdom, God has not generally provided us with this most important educational tool arranged in the order these experts suggest. Most of us, then, have to work with what we have.

In my experience, one of the most common causes of people's accusations against us, besides their having been wrongly taught in the first place, is that they have not considered all of God's revelation on the subject in question.

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Old Testament Largely Rejected

During his farewell address to the Ephesian church elders, the apostle Paul asserted, “For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). Conversely, in many cases much is omitted from people’s analysis of what the Bible teaches. Jesus parries one of Satan’s attacks during their confrontation with, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). In his temptations of Jesus, Satan twisted certain scriptures and omitted principles from others that would have exposed the lies he used to challenge Jesus.

A tragic, modern-day example is that much of this world’s Christianity neglects or even rejects two-thirds of God’s inspired Word, the Old Testament. Many people have relegated it to a mere needless appendage. To others, it contains some heroic stories, but important doctrinal positions that connect to New Testament instruction? Never!

Some churches have consigned it for use in children’s Sunday school lessons, but it is rarely truly studied by adults in those same churches. All too frequently, churches and religious organizations hand out as a gift a small volume containing only the New Testament and the Psalms. Most are unconcerned that they have received less than half of the full Book.

Many are deceived in thinking that Christianity’s doctrines lie solely in the New Testament, yet when Jesus replied to Satan during His temptation, instructing us to live by every word of God, He was speaking of the *Old Testament*, the only portion of the Bible He knew! It was God’s Word then, and it still is today. In short, Christianity is not exclusively a New Testament religion but one based on the entire Bible, the whole counsel of God.

The New Testament contains two telling comments, both by Paul, that clearly show that Christ’s disciples used the Old Testament in conjunction with the New. Paul writes in Romans 15:4, “For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the [Old Testament] Scriptures might have hope.” He adds in I Corinthians 10:11, “Now all these things [written in the Old Testament] happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.”

The foundations for God’s revealed way of life are established in the Old Testament, and one cannot live by the superstructure, the New Testament, alone. King David even writes in Psalm 11:3, “If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?” Without the foundation, one will get only a partial picture of a given doctrine.

Isaiah 28:10-13 expresses a principle about the way the Bible is written:

“For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little.” For with stammering lips and another

tongue He will speak to this people, to whom He said, “This is the rest with which you may cause the weary to rest.” And, “This is the refreshing”; yet they would not hear. But the word of the LORD was to them, “Precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little,” that they might go and fall backward, and be broken and snared and caught.

In II Timothy 2:15, Paul charges us, “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” All the counsel of God on any specific doctrine is probably scattered throughout as many as 66 books! Paul’s exhortation to Timothy to dissect rightly the Scriptures—again the Old Testament—requires diligent research, honesty, and careful analysis.

Herbert Armstrong often compared the Bible to a picture puzzle. Each doctrine must be searched out precept upon precept, line upon line, here a little, there a little—much like finding specific pieces of a puzzle scattered on a table. Each piece fits only in the place specifically designed to accept it. As each piece is correctly fitted into its corresponding slot, the picture gradually emerges as it was designed to appear.

Lawkeeping and Works?

Of the critical letters we receive, the bulk of them concern several specific doctrines, but the one that receives the most in numbers and vehemence is—by far—our teaching that the laws of God, which we could expand to include “works,” are required to be kept by the Christian if God is to complete His purpose for them. The tone of the missives against this true concept ranges from mild skepticism to angry rebuke that charges us with being arrogant false prophets.

Usually, the letters’ contexts contain references to a number of verses that, to the letter writers, prove that the law is done away or that Christians are no longer under it; that grace through faith alone is sufficient; that Christ completed His work at the cross and nothing can be added to it; that He kept the law only because He was a Jew; or that God formerly saved people through their lawkeeping but now He does it by grace. The letters can be quite impassioned, but their arguments contain only a small portion of the picture of how God’s law fits into His purpose in saving people. Because they see only a narrow portion of the whole, it renders their arguments incorrect. They do not seem to grasp that lawkeeping and works fit into a far larger framework than that of the brief paragraph containing their “proof text.”

It is important to note that many of these critics lack a proper concept of law in its relationship to the Bible, and this leads them into too narrow an application. “Law” can be used by the Bible to indicate a specific precept or as a

body of law—for example, the first five books of the Old Testament are known as “the Law.” It can also refer to everything God has said, for He says nothing that is not absolutely righteous. His every utterance, therefore, places us under obligation to obey.

Let us begin looking at this “no law/no works” argument from the perspective of what the Bible says about its own words. Jesus states during a discussion with those who challenged a concept He was expounding, “If He called them gods, to whom the word of God came (and the Scripture cannot be broken), do you say of Him whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, ‘You are blaspheming,’ because I said, ‘I am the Son of God’?” (John 10:35-36).

How clear! It was so clear that those who were challenging Him could not answer Him. “The Scripture cannot be broken” means God’s Word is indestructible, no matter how fallible men may regard it. In this case, Jesus means that the Old Testament is inspired, infallible, and authoritative. The New Testament is every bit as authoritative and reliable as the Old, as the same God inspired it for the same overall purpose!

Jesus declares in Matthew 5:17-19:

Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Not only does Jesus, our Savior, emphatically proclaim that He was not doing away with portions of God’s Word (again, the Old Testament), but He also specifically charges us to keep the commandments and teach them. Yet, men ignore this and say that keeping the commandments is no longer necessary. Are we going to believe Jesus or those who contradict what He says?

Jesus calls God’s Word “truth” in John 17:17. David writes in Psalm 100:5, “For the LORD is good; His mercy is everlasting, and His truth endures to all generations.” Psalm 117:2 adds, “For His merciful kindness is great toward us, and the truth of the LORD endures for ever. Praise the LORD!”

Just in case one thinks that nothing similar to this exists in the New Testament—as that is where people believe God’s law was changed and done away—notice the apostle Peter’s quotation of Isaiah 40:6-8 and comment on it, “‘All flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of the grass. The grass withers, and its flower falls away, but the word of the LORD endures forever.’ Now this is the word which by the gospel was preached to you” (I Peter 1:24-25). Does he not imply that the gospel was preached to them—New Testament Christians—from the Old Testament? Indeed he does!

How can something that comes from the mind of the righteous God who never lies—declaring in Proverbs 30:5, “Every word of God is pure,” and adding in Psalm 12:6, “The words of the LORD are pure words, like silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times”—be effectively contradicted by fallible, short-lived, and foolish men, whose entire lifetime is but the blink of an eye compared to His?

In whom does wisdom lie? Surely Jesus knew what He was saying when the rich young ruler asked what he should do to have eternal life: “Keep the commandments!” The man then asked, “Which?” Jesus answered by naming five of the Ten Commandments (Matthew 19:17-19). The Bible does not contradict itself. Someone is seriously misinforming people on this subject.

God charges us to consider this seriously in Deuteronomy 30:15-20, where He commands us to make a choice—and not only to make this choice, but to choose life. Where can we find real life when comparing God’s Word to that of men? Since He says to choose life, the wrong choice is automatically choosing death. This is not rocket science. The answer is obvious: If one wants to live, he will choose to believe and keep what Jesus says.

Yes, But What About Sacrifices?

A factor many fail to consider when they conclude that the law is done away is that God can temporarily set aside the physical responsibility of doing certain acts commanded under the Old Covenant, while at the same time still require His spiritual children to understand and apply them spiritually. Obvious examples are the offerings of Leviticus 1-7 that God commanded to be burned on the Temple altar. Each of those offerings in some way pictures Christ in His sacrificial work in our behalf. Most of us immediately think of them in relation to sin, with Christ being the payment for sins. Yet, interestingly, three of them do not involve a payment for sin at all. Only the sin and trespass offerings involve a payment for sin.

Three of the requirements God laid down for making those offerings cannot be met today. There must be a Temple or Tabernacle, an altar, and Aaronic priests available to perform the offerings. Since AD 70, these three conditions could not be met. The priesthood continued for a while following Jerusalem’s fall, but the Temple and altar were rendered unusable by Roman armies. The Temple sacrifices stopped.

However, to a Christian, sacrificing continues—but in a far different and more meaningful way in terms of salvation. The book of Hebrews makes it plain that, despite sacrifices being offered at the Temple for almost forty years after Jesus’ resurrection, they had lost some of their meaning and use. We can still learn from them, but God does not require that they be physically performed.

Paul writes in Hebrews 10:4, “For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins.” Do we grasp a serious ramification of this statement? It was *never* possible for animal blood to remove sins! If it was

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not possible in Paul's day, it was not possible in Old Testament times either. *No one*, including the Old Testament heroes, was ever forgiven through an animal sacrifice, nor was anyone saved by works of the law. Forgiveness and salvation by grace were not new to the New Testament.

The offerings were continuously repeated and detailed portrayals of what sin does—it kills—and what Christ's sacrifice would accomplish—reconciliation with God. Hebrews 10:3 says they served as reminders of sin. They were and remain as teaching vehicles since their spiritual purposes are shown elsewhere in God's Word. Hebrews 10:5-10 adds:

Therefore, when He came into the world, He said: "Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, but a body You have prepared for Me. In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin You had no pleasure. Then I said, 'Behold, I have come—to do Your will, O God.'" Previously saying, "Sacrifice and offering, burnt offerings, and offerings for sin You did not desire, nor had pleasure in them" (which are offered according to the law), then He said, "Behold, I have come to do Your will, O God." He takes away the first that He may establish the second. By that will we have been sanctified through the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

How can a person truly live by every word of God if he casts these things aside as useless to daily life? How do they apply to us today? They apply in the spirit, which is their true intent. Jesus Christ is the object of each of the offerings, that is, they portray His activities as a man. However, as mentioned above, three of them, the burnt, grain (or meal), and peace offerings, do not deal with sin. Only the trespass and sin offerings depict Christ's death for our sins.

Very briefly, the whole burnt offering pictures Jesus Christ's total devotion to God. His life was completely consumed as an offering to God every minute He lived. It pictures His fulfilling the first of the two great commandments of the law (Matthew 22:37): Jesus loved God with all His heart, soul, and mind.

Along with the burnt offering, the meal offering represents Christ's dedicated service, but this time to man, fulfilling the second of the two great commandments (verse 39): He loved His neighbor as Himself. Sharing His consuming love for God showed His consummate love for man.

The peace offering represents the fruit of all of Jesus' sacrificial labors on behalf of God and mankind, including those symbolized by the sin and trespass offerings. The peace offering shows God, the High Priest, and man fellowshiping together, sharing a common meal in peace and thanksgiving.

Before leaving Jesus' example, we need to consider whether we are ever tempted to think that Jesus dream-

walked through life like an actor on a stage. Do we ever feel that He must have had it easy because He was also God, and so could easily overcome any temptation that crossed His path? While it is true that, even as a man, He never stopped being God, He was also a man and thus encumbered with human feelings, and that nature within Him opened the door to sore temptations. Hebrews 2:16-18 reflects this:

For indeed He does not give aid to angels, but He does give aid to the seed of Abraham. Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted.

Hebrews 4:15-16 adds

For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

He Is Our Example in Sacrifice

It is important on several fronts to allow this reality's impact to affect us. Why? Because Jesus is our example, and we are to follow in His footsteps. Even though He was the Son of God, His Father did not lay out an easy course for Him. For instance, He rarely escaped almost continuous confrontations by angry people. By itself, this was a great burden. The pressure from this trial culminated in His crucifixion and all it entailed.

Jesus had to work at succeeding in His responsibilities. Each day was a sacrificial offering for Him on behalf of God and men. Thus, He is our example in this too. He gave of Himself, laying down His life for His friends, not only as an offering for sin, but also in daily service as a servant.

It will become clear that He did not engage in this labor so we could escape the responsibilities of our assignments. If we are to walk the same path behind our Example, does it not follow that we will face the same basic difficulties He did? God promises that our responsibilities will be in measure to our gifts (I Corinthians 10:13; Romans 12:6-8), but He did not do it all for us.

Do we not have work to do to follow Him? Once a person is converted, can anybody keep the commandments for him? Can a person be a proxy for another before God? Can anyone live any part of life for another? People can do things on another's behalf, but they cannot live life for anybody else.

The apostle Paul is given "credit" by no law/no works advocates for teaching that God's law is done away. However, II Peter 3:15-16 says about Paul's writings:

... and account that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation—as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which those who are untaught and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures.

Notice that Peter said *all* of Paul’s epistles had things in them that people twisted! This happens because people frequently will not take the time to study deeply, and at the same time, they lack the humility to admit the truth.

Romans 12:1-2 lays the gauntlet before us concerning how the sacrifices apply to the Christian. Paul writes:

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. 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.

In I Corinthians 11:1, Paul gives a command to the Corinthians that ought to be burned into our consciousness: “Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ.” This verse is unfortunately misplaced as the first verse of chapter 11, as it rightly belongs to the subject matter of chapter 10. Just three verses earlier (verse 31), Paul admonishes them, “. . . whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” This was how Jesus Christ lived life, doing it perfectly. The apostle strove to do the same. To imitate them, we must live life as a living sacrifice. We can imitate Christ, not in the sense of enduring the agony of His crucifixion, but by obediently walking in His footsteps (I Peter 2:21) and by showing love and thankfulness to Him by keeping His precepts.

Christians who love God fully with heart, soul, and mind, and who love their neighbors as themselves, will do everything to please Him. So how can a person sacrifice himself before the God he says he loves without doing the works entailed in those sacrifices? Paul exhorts us in Ephesians 5:1-2: “Therefore be followers of God as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma.” Love is extremely rewarding yet also costly since one who loves will sacrifice. Indeed, sacrifice is love’s very essence.

We can illuminate Paul’s thought in Ephesians 5:1-2 by placing it in a larger context. Note Ephesians 2:8-10:

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

Salvation indeed is a free gift; it cannot be earned by works. Yet, after saving us from our sins, God requires us

to work! We are to perform work that He has laid out beforehand for us to accomplish. In fact, verse 10, standing by itself, asserts that to do these good works is the very reason we have received justification!

This verse, in the phrase, “we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus,” also says that God, in turn, is working on us. Before being saved, we were not in Christ Jesus. God’s creative processes brought us into Christ, and once there, He continues to shape and form us into His Son’s image (II Corinthians 3:18).

Works, Sacrifice, and Love

We are being formed, shaped, and molded by our Creator and Savior to become Christ-like. What kinds of work are required of us for this to happen?

As he progresses toward his statement in Ephesians 5:1-2, Paul says in Ephesians 4:17-18:

This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk [live your life] as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart. . . .

Is it twisting these verses to say that Paul is commanding these converted and already-saved people to work to sacrifice their lives as Christ did? Doing what he commands takes the work of consciously praying, studying, investigating, and meditating on God’s Word to remove a person’s ignorance and blindness. It also takes the additional hard work of resisting Satan, human nature, and the world to implement what is learned into daily life.

Such labor will be very pleasing to God, but in no way does it earn us salvation! Moreover, this is clearly obeying God’s command. Even though it is not one of the Ten Commandments, it nonetheless expresses God’s will for His children after they have been saved from past sins.

Let us be specific about other commandments God requires us to keep. Paul writes in verse 22, “. . . that you put off [work in sacrifice to rid yourself of character flaws], concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts.” He adds in verse 24, “. . . and that you put on [work to build virtue into your character] the new man which was created according to God, in righteousness and true holiness.”

The picture Paul uses is taken from removing old clothing and putting on new. Has anybody figured out how to do this without labor? As simple as this illustration is, he applies it to the far more difficult and serious change of conduct and attitude that occurs as we choose to yield to God, who empowers us to do these things by His Spirit.

Paul’s epistle becomes even more specific. In verse 25, he charges us, “. . . putting away lying, each one speak truth with his neighbor, for we are members of one another.” Is he not saying that we must keep the ninth

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“Be ready always to give an answer . . .” I Peter 3:15

What Is the Passover Anyway?

**“And it shall be, when your children say to you,
‘What do you mean by this service?’”
—Exodus 12:26**

How time does fly! It seems as if the sun has just set on the Last Great Day, and now God’s people are preparing for His Passover once again! In reality, we have gone through two full seasons—half a year—and it is time to start anew the cycle of biblical festivals that God has us rehearse each year. The Passover always begins our keeping of the seven annual holy days.

This article is directed specifically towards the young people of the church, as well as those who are new to the beliefs of the church of God. Because our doctrines and practices are in some cases quite different from what other professing Christians believe and do, it makes good sense to approach these matters from their most basic elements.

We will ask the journalistic questions—What? Why? Where? Who? When? How?—to fill in the picture of this most important festival of God.

What Is the Passover?

Right from the start, God knew that young people would ask this very same question: “And it shall be, when your children say to you, ‘What do you mean by this service?’” (Exodus 12:26). So He prepared an answer for them: “It is the Passover sacrifice of the LORD, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt when He struck the Egyptians and delivered our households” (verse 27).

Passover is a memorial day—a very important anniversary day. However, it commemorates three events, not just one. As God said, it commemorates the tenth and last plague upon ancient Egypt in which, after giving them ample warning, God *passed over* the nation of Egypt and killed all the firstborn in the land. Through this decimating plague, God freed the children of Israel from their captivity and servitude in Egypt.

Secondly, and most importantly, it commemorates the death of Jesus Christ, who was and is the firstborn Son of God the Father. Through Jesus’ awful death—which, by God’s design, took place on Passover day in AD 31—God freed us, begotten Christians, from our captivity and slavery to the world, to Satan, and to sin.

Finally, it commemorates the baptism of each Christian, when we formally accepted the death of Jesus Christ, when we asked Him to apply His priceless sacrifice to our sins, when we asked that He would cover and blot out our sins with His blood (Psalm 41:1, 9; Acts 3:19; Romans 4:7).

Why Should a Christian Keep the Passover?

We should keep the Passover because, as we have already seen, God commands us to. This, of itself, is good enough reason, but there is much more!

God has us keep the Passover because it forces us to consider the deaths of the firstborn

Egyptians and how that miraculous and terrible event led to the freeing of Israelites from Pharaoh and from Egypt. It should lead us to think deeply about what these events symbolize.

Yet, is not Passover just an Old Testament, Jewish ritual? No! God's commands are never merely empty rituals. His commands always contain rich and meaningful purposes, including spiritual, New Testament applications that we can learn from today.

Keeping the Passover also forces us to think about the death of God's firstborn Son and how that momentous event will lead to the eventual freeing of all mankind from Satan and from sin:

For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me." In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes. (I Corinthians 11:23-26)

Notice that this reminder to keep the Passover was recorded by the apostle Paul some years after the close of the Old Testament era. It is most decidedly a Christian observance.

He adds that our preparation for Passover should cause us to take a close look at ourselves in solemn self-examination, to see how far we have grown and how much we still need to overcome: "But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup" (verse 28). In the days preceding the Passover each year, we think about the past year and how imperfect we still are, and we ask God to continue to cover our sins and imperfections with the blood of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Each of God's people makes a practice of looking back at the years that have flown by since his baptism, considering how far we have left our lives of sin behind. Self-examination shows us areas in which we still need to overcome and should motivate us to rededicate ourselves to the covenant we have made with God.

Where Should the Passover Be Kept?

The apostles once asked Jesus this same question! Originally, the Old Testament Passover service (essentially a dinner of roasted lamb) was held in the homes of all Israelite families. Later, the Jews took it upon themselves to perform the Passover sacrifice at the Temple in Jerusalem. In this change, we believe that they were in error. Jesus and His disciples, because they were in the Jerusalem area and away from their own homes in Galilee, kept His final Passover in a room hired especially for the occasion, possibly from the family of Mark:

And He sent Peter and John, saying, "Go and prepare the Passover for us, that we may eat." So they said to Him, "Where do You want us to prepare?" And He said to them, "Behold, when you have entered the city, a man will meet you carrying a pitcher of water; follow him into the house which he enters. Then you shall say to the master of the house, 'The Teacher says to you, "Where is the guest room where I may eat the Passover with My disciples?'" Then he will show you a large, furnished upper room; there make ready.'" So they went and found it just as He had said to them, and they prepared the Passover. (Luke 22:8-13; see Matthew 26:17-19; Mark 14:12-16)

From this example of Jesus and His disciples, we take our lead. Most church of God groups keep the Passover in rented rooms. For those who are alone, in very small groups, or in poor health and unable to travel, it is quite acceptable for them to keep it in their homes.

Who Should Keep the Passover?

Participation in the ceremonies of the New Testament Passover service is restricted to baptized, adult church members.

Why? Are we ashamed or embarrassed about what we do at that service? Not at all! In the Old Testament Passover, all members of Israelite families participated in the evening, including

the children (see Exodus 12:43-47). Non-Israelites (Hebrew *gərîm*: “strangers,” “newcomers,” “foreigners,” “sojourners”) were also permitted to keep it as long as their males had been circumcised (verse 48). Circumcision was the sign of the Old Covenant that Israel made with God. Under the Christian New Covenant, it has been replaced with the rite of baptism (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3-4). As practiced by the church of God, water baptism is only for those mature enough to understand basic doctrine, to repent of their sins, and to grasp the serious, spiritual commitment they are making to God.

In addition, the example of Jesus on the last night of His human life, which we find in Luke 22:14—“When the hour had come, He sat down, and the twelve apostles with Him”—provides additional evidence that only baptized, adult church members are permitted to attend the Passover service. Children and unbaptized people would be unable to comprehend the ceremony’s deeply solemn and spiritual nature.

Because participation in the Christian Passover service is restricted to baptized members, young people may feel disassociated from the evening and from the day as a whole. This is a pity because it should be very important and meaningful for them too. We will come back to this later.

When Should the Passover Be Kept?

This question has caused much contention in the church over the years, but we will avoid those controversies here by examining the question straight from God’s Word. The answer is surprisingly simple. Passover is to be kept on the fourteenth day of the first of God’s months, called Abib or Nisan. Scripture after scripture proves this point beyond every shadow of doubt. We will quickly run through six of them:

- On the fourteenth day of the first month at twilight is the LORD’S PASSOVER. (Leviticus 23:5)
- And they kept the Passover on the fourteenth day of the first month, at twilight, in the Wilderness of Sinai; according to all that the LORD commanded Moses, so the children of Israel did. (Numbers 9:5)
- On the fourteenth day of the first month is the Passover of the LORD. (Numbers 28:16)
- Now the children of Israel camped in Gilgal, and kept the Passover on the fourteenth day of the month at twilight on the plains of Jericho. (Joshua 5:10)
- Now Josiah kept a Passover to the LORD in Jerusalem, and they slaughtered the Passover lambs on the fourteenth day of the first month. (II Chronicles 35:1)
- And the descendants of the captivity kept the Passover on the fourteenth day of the first month. (Ezra 6:19)

The evening beginning Abib/Nisan 14 was when the Passover lamb was killed, cooked, and eaten. The night of Abib/Nisan 14 was when God’s Angel of Death passed over Egypt. During the evening of Abib/Nisan 14, Jesus kept the Passover, often called the Last Supper, with His disciples. Later that same night and day of Abib/Nisan 14, Jesus was arrested, tried, tortured, and murdered. So it is on the evening beginning Abib/Nisan 14 that we hold the Passover service.

It is well known that God’s days begin and end at sunset. As Passover day is not specified as one of the holy days, if a person must attend school or work on it, he or she should make a point of keeping in mind what happened during this very day in AD 31.

How Should the Passover Be Kept?

There has been some controversy over this question too. Some groups, including the Jews, the Samaritans and, yes, even some church of God individuals and smaller groups, maintain the Passover lamb dinner. Though this practice was commanded in Exodus 12, considering the fact that Jesus’ sacrifice fulfilled the Old Testament lamb sacrifices, it is not necessary to be kept in the New Testament era.

The Jews call the Passover lamb dinner a *Seder*, which comes from a Hebrew word meaning “order,” as in a strict order of events and activities. To this author’s knowledge, the Samaritans are the only group that still maintains the formal Passover sacrifice of lambs and goat kids. Some

(continued on page 18)

As springtime is upon us once again, members of God's church are preparing for the beginning of another cycle of His holy days. We find ourselves today in a very different world—economically—to that of Old Testament Israel. We do not have the same economic system that they did, and yet just as the Israelites were, we are commanded to give offerings. For us today, though, our material offerings are primarily monetary.

In reading the relevant Old Testament scriptures, have we ever thought what it would be like to have to apportion an offering out of the firstlings of our flock, of our grain, of our gold, silver, or brass? This is not our reality today, yet the principles behind offerings have not changed.

Regardless of what we offer or what era we live in, the economics of an offering are essentially the same. This article will discuss an offering's economic principles and how offerings are designed both for our benefit and God's.

If we want to delve into economics, we must first establish a definition that, in effect, puts us all on the same page.

What Is Economics?

A basic definition of *economics* is “the study of the optimization of resources” (for a general discussion of some of the economic principles used in this article, see “Economics 101—A Curriculum” by Catherine Austin Fitts at <http://fromtheburbs.blogspot.com/2005/03/economics-101-curriculum-by-catherine.html>). From a biblical perspective, economics is studying how to optimize the resources God has given us. Two points stand out in this definition:

- 1) To optimize something is to make the most of it.
- 2) God has not only placed resources at our disposal, but He has also given us the responsibility to create, manage, and allocate those resources. Money is one of those resources.

property, of ownership. The lamb under discussion is one's personal possession, not his neighbor's or a friend's. According to God's command, it cannot be borrowed; it must be an animal that the offerer owns.

The application for us today is that, just as the offering cost the offerer something—a lamb—our offering to God must cost us too. We cannot borrow money from someone to give an offering: it must come from our own resources. King David provides a sterling example of this in II Samuel 24:18-25, where he tells Araunah, who offers to give him animals for a burnt offering: “No, but I will surely buy it from you for a price; nor will I offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God with that which costs me nothing” (verse 24).

The second principle contained in Exodus 12:5 is *purity* or *quality*, as described in the phrase “without blemish.” What does this phrase mean? In those days, the animal being offered—in this case, a lamb, but it could have been any of the clean animals God allowed to be sacrificed—had to be free of all defects. In fact, God says that *every offering* has to be without blemish.

What does it take to determine if a lamb has defects? As Phillip Keller points out in his book, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*:

Sheep do not “just take care of themselves” as some might suppose. They require, more than any other class of livestock, endless attention and meticulous care.

With this in mind, consider what it took for a sheep owner to find a lamb within his flock that met this strict qualification. The owner could not just take a quick glance over the flock and say, “Okay, I choose *this* one!” No, it was a process that took time. The sheep owner personally had to inspect each lamb physically and meticulously to ensure that the animal he would offer was without blemish.

How does this apply to us today? Our offerings should not be mere afterthoughts any more than the ancient Israelite's were. The Passover lamb was chosen on the

The ECONOMIC\$ of an Offering

In terms of an offering, we need to ask, “What does God want us to learn from and about making an offering?”

Contained within the selection process of the Passover lamb are two important economic principles: “Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male of the first year. You may take it from the sheep or from the goats” (Exodus 12:5). The first economic principle illustrated by this verse is *ownership*, as identified by the word “your.” God obviously believes in—He actually grants—the right of private

tenth day of Abib, but the offerer spent a great deal of time leading up to this selection date inspecting his flock to make sure he chose his best lamb to give to God.

We, too, are to give God our best. We should not wake up on the morning of the holy day and say, “Umm, . . . let's see. How much should I put in the envelope today?” Instead, we should put some time and serious thought, prayer, and meditation into the amount we will offer.

We should now see that our offering will cost us

something and that its quality is something that we must consider deeply. No matter what we do, we cannot get around these fundamental principles.

What's In It for Me?

When we put our offering in the envelope, our human natures sometimes perceive this process as painful. “What’s in this for me?” we might wonder. Remember, the definition of economics told us that *to optimize something is to make the most of it*.

Would God, in His wisdom, make offerings a one-way street? He does not seem to create *anything* that has only one purpose—in fact, God created many things to have multiple uses and purposes. Even a superficial study of the physical creation provides overwhelming evidence of this principle.

To answer the question, however, let us explore the economics of an offering by dividing the process into two categories: mapping and creating value.

Mapping

Mapping, as indicated by the present-active tense of the word, is a process that involves planning something out in great detail. Economics helps us build and maintain a monetary “map” of our world. Just as we would use a geographical map to get ourselves from point A to point B, we can get a clear picture of which direction we need to go financially by mapping our world economically.

As Catherine Austin Fitts points out in her article, “Economics 101—A Curriculum,” the story of the Island and Gulf of California dates back to 1701 to a map of the New World drawn by a Spaniard. The map shows the North American continent to have its western coast dominated by a long island of great mass—the Isle of California. For many years, European explorers sailed the Pacific Ocean to the California coast, seemingly secure in the knowledge that they could not reach the Rocky Mountains without another water crossing. They would take their boats apart on the Pacific coast and carry them overland so that they could sail across the non-existent Gulf of California. The men of expedition after expedition died in the desert trying to carry their boats to a place that did not exist.

They failed because their maps were inaccurate. If their maps would have been accurate, they would probably have reached their destinations. Thus, an accurate map is not only an excellent

investment, but also an essential tool. By extension, then, an offering is a tool designed by God, partially to teach us financial management practices.

One of the keys to success in life is learning how to put together and use budgets, whether they track time or money. A budget is a detailed plan for what one will do with his resources. A time budget estimates the time an individual has available and how he intends to invest it. There are twenty-four hours in a day—no more, no less. A monetary budget estimates how much money a person has available and how he intends to invest it.

We can confidently know, because the Bible says so, that the purposes of the two types of budget are intertwined. Jesus Himself captures this principle very succinctly: “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:21).

We need to connect the value of budgeting with giving an offering. The apostle Paul states in II Corinthians 9:7: “So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver.” *Webster’s Dictionary* gives the primary definition for *purpose* as “something set up as an object or end to be attained.” We are not only commanded by God to give offerings (see Deuteronomy 16:16), but we are to give cheerfully.

How do we attain this? How do we become cheerful givers? We can achieve this through budgeting. We should all make a budget, and now is the perfect opportunity, as the spring holy days are approaching, to go through our monthly expenses and to project them out over the rest of the year. If we would just take the time to sit down with pencil and paper (computer-owners can use a spreadsheet program), we would find that it is a fairly quick process. A person can then see where his money goes, and from that vantage point, he can make an informed decision, based on his financial situation, of how much to give as an offering. He should try to make a commitment on what he will give for each holy day and see if he can stick to it.

Notice that one should *try* to do this, since a budget, whether it is for time or money is almost like a living, breathing document. It is subject to change. Unforeseen circumstances can arise that may prevent us from being able to stick to our budget. Unforeseen circumstances are part of life. However, we must not undercut our efforts by manufacturing “unforeseen circumstances” out of whole cloth. To do so is a sure way to land ourselves in financial trouble—and leave us with little left to offer to God.

When we map out our



time and our economic worlds, we will gain a more thorough understanding of our resources and where we are spending them. This understanding will provide us with a foundation for making the best use of those resources. If we do this, we will never again give grudgingly or of necessity. We will have become cheerful givers.

Creating Value

How is value created from our offerings? From a purely financial perspective, does God need or want our money? Absolutely not! But from the viewpoint of the economics of an offering, He absolutely does! Why? Perhaps a better question to ask is, “What is in it for God?”

If a person were to walk into his bank, or to sit down with a financial advisor to make an investment, would he not expect the value of his money to increase over time? The answer is obviously, “Yes!” The goal for any investment is to increase the value of the original sum of money invested. God is no different! In fact, we are God’s investment. He is the One creating value by investing in us.

How does God create the value in us? In the Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25:14-30, a talent, an ancient monetary value, is used to represent a gift or skill that God has endowed on His children for them to employ and improve. Remember, a talent is a type of money, so it makes sense to think about this parable from an investment perspective.

For the kingdom of heaven is like a man traveling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them. And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability; and immediately he went on a journey. (Verses 14-15)

Note that God handed His servants their resources and expected them to manage them. “Then he who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and made another five talents” (verse 16). This servant doubled his initial investment. “And likewise he who had received two gained two more also” (verse 17). The second servant also doubled his initial investment. God responds to them, “Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord” (verses 21, 23).

But he who had received one went and dug in the ground, and hid his lord’s money. After a long time the lord of those servants came and settled accounts with them. . . . Then he who had received the one talent came and said, “Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed. And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, there you have what is yours.” But his lord answered and said to him, “You wicked and lazy

servant, you knew that I reap where I have not sown, and gather where I have not scattered seed. So you ought to have deposited my money with the bankers, and at my coming I would have received back my own with interest.” (verses 18-19, 24-27)

Here the third servant did not create any value. The investment was not profitable, neither for the servant, nor for God. The first two individuals are described as faithful, as they believed what God said and acted on it.

Christ hones in on the value that God creates by giving us a powerful example in the account of the widow and her two mites in Luke 21:1-4 (see also Mark 12:41-44):

And He looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the treasury, and He saw also a certain poor widow putting in two mites. So He said, “Truly I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all; for all these out of their abundance have put in offerings for God, but she out of her poverty put in all the livelihood that she had.”

Christ describes this lady with just two words, “poor widow”—He does not even give us her name. These two words reveal a great deal about her, however. They disclose both her social and economic standing in the community: She was the very bottom of the ladder.

This event is recorded for all time as a teaching tool. It is the story of a woman who had an accurate “map” of her world. A mite, as best as can be determined, was worth only about one-third of a cent in today’s value. Though she did not require an exhaustive budget, she nevertheless had a clear picture of her financial situation. Despite having almost nothing, she gave everything.

Please do not misunderstand. This is *not* to say that we must give every single penny we possess. The dollar value of our offering is not the most important aspect. What *is* most important is that we optimize—or give back to God—as we are able. This is how God creates value. We grow to be more and more like God, and it benefits Him because His investment has gained tremendous value! In the end, He has reproduced Himself!

An offering will always cost us something. Yet, when utilized to its fullest potential, an offering is a financial management tool that God has designed to assist us in optimizing our finances. We need to take the time to budget and map out our economic situations. Having an accurate map will assist us in giving our very best to God. After that, we will never have an excuse for giving an offering as an afterthought. In addition, by so doing, we will help to create great value—the value that we will be another step closer to being in the image of God.

The economics of an offering is something that, once we master the basics, can be hugely useful to us today, tomorrow, and for the rest of our lives—our eternal lives!

—Warren Lee

WHY ISRAEL?

PART TWO

Most readers of the Bible, even those who are only mildly familiar with its content and themes, know that Israel plays a major part in God's dealings with humankind.

That relationship began about four thousand years ago, when God called Abraham from Ur of the Chaldees to beget a people who in short order multiplied into a nation. Over the millennia, Israel's impact on the world has gone largely unacknowledged by both the great and small—and this lack of recognition continues even today. Of course, the best product of Israel was born more than two thousand years ago in Bethlehem of Judea and became our Messiah, Jesus Christ the Savior.

Because God had chosen Israel to represent Him to the peoples of the earth, He gave Israel every advantage. He started them with magnificent parentage through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Physically, when they came out of Egypt, they were a strong-bodied slave people, hardworking and accustomed to the rigors of service. When they entered the land of Canaan, God gave them abundance. The Promised Land is frequently described in Scripture as one "of milk and honey"—it was fertile and fruitful, temperate and well-watered.

God told them time and again that He would provide them with everything that they would need. He gave them the best laws and provided wise and God-fearing leaders. He promised to fight their wars, to protect them from illness, to bless their crops and herds, and to multiply them as the sand of the seashore. God offered them everything any people could ever want.

All they had to do was to obey Him and to keep the covenant to which they had both agreed (Exodus 24:1-8). Yet, they failed miserably in doing this.

Notice all their advantages: righteous ancestry, strength, health, abundance, a fertile land, plus all the wonderful blessings that God so generously promised—and still, they failed. They had everything going for them, but the biblical record is unambiguous: The Israelites failed to keep their bargain with God more often and for far longer than they succeeded.

God allowed this to occur for a specific reason. One day, God will thunder before all humanity, "Even though your representatives, Israel, had every advantage—the most and the best of everything I could offer—man still could not, would not, obey Me." At some point, Israel's 4,000-year history will be a lesson presented to all peoples to teach them how impossible it is for humanity, even with God's physical blessings, to have a relationship with God and be saved (see Romans 15:4; I Corinthians 10:11).

Humanity, as God displays in the history of Israel, cannot solve its own problems. Even under a perfect setup, any nation—indeed any individual—would still fail without what God can and is eager to supply spiritually. The Bible explains that God "put away" Israel and called a new nation to represent Him to the world. This new nation, however, was not based on birth into a particular bloodline, but on personal and individual belief and devotion to God through His Son, Jesus Christ. To them, He proposes a New Covenant, based on even better promises (Hebrews 8:6).

PURE STOCK?

The Old Testament speaks a great deal about bloodlines. Genealogies pop up here and there within its pages, culminating in the pedigrees of Jesus in Matthew 1 (legal through Joseph) and Luke 3 (physical through Mary). Genesis contains several, from Noah's to Nimrod's to Esau's, as well as the patriarchs'. Moses' line appears in Exodus 6, while Numbers and I Chronicles have extensive listings of Israelite tribal lines. Whole books, such as I and II Samuel, I and II Kings, and I and II Chronicles, record ultimately the most important lineage, that of David's house. The Old Covenant seems to put heavy emphasis on unmingled Israelite genes. Again, God has His reasons.

After the exiles returned to Judah from Babylon, Ezra the scribe was forced to deal with the then-widespread

problem of Jews intermarrying with the Gentile people of the land. Notice Ezra 9:2, which describes the situation:

For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, so that the holy seed is mixed with the peoples of those lands. Indeed, the hand of the leaders and rulers has been foremost in this trespass.

Ezra solves this problem of intermarriage by decreeing:

You have transgressed and have taken pagan wives, adding to the guilt of Israel. Now therefore, make confession to the LORD God of your fathers, and do His will; separate yourselves from the peoples of the land, and from the pagan wives. (Ezra 10:10-11)

This breaking up of whole families, many of whom had perhaps been living happily together for many years, was a drastic but necessary step. Ezra, who seemed to have God-given insight into the divine plan, understood what had to be done and the reasons for it.

The spiritual reasons are, of course, the most important. God says many times in the Pentateuch that intermarriage with pagans is spiritually dangerous (see, for instance, Deuteronomy 7:1-4). It was far more likely that, rather than the heathen spouses being won over to the worship of Israel's God, they would influence their sons and daughters to worship idols. If this were to happen frequently, Israel would soon be entirely idolatrous.

Although there *is* a bit of physical purity involved in this, God's demands are *not* for reasons of racial superiority¹ but because He had a purpose for Israel—and the most important purpose is Jesus Christ. To fulfill the prophecies of the promised Seed, He had to be directly descended from Abraham through Judah, Jesse, and David, and because of a curse on Jeconiah (Jeremiah 22:24-30), He could not descend from that wicked king's bloodline.² Only these particular circumstances could fulfill the prophecies and establish His righteous claim as the Messiah. Thus, Ezra's action was taken in large part to preserve David's line in preparation for Jesus' birth.³

In addition, God wanted Israel to be a holy and separate nation (see Leviticus 19:1-2; Deuteronomy 14:2; 26:19; 28:9). The Israelites were to retain as many of their distinguishing traits and practices as He had given them at the beginning, and they could do this only as long as they remained separate from other nations. In this way, they could be the model nation, a people others would want to emulate, not because of any so-called racial purity or superiority, but because the true God was their God.

GOD LOVES ISRAEL

Deuteronomy 7:6-11 explains in God's own words why He chose Israel:

For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the

LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth. The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; but because the LORD loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Therefore know that the LORD your God, He is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His commandments; and He repays those who hate Him to their face, to destroy them. He will not be slack with him who hates Him; He will repay him to his face. Therefore you shall keep the commandment, the statutes, and the judgments which I command you today, to observe them.

Since God is holy, the people He chooses for Himself must also be holy, a principle that continues under the New Covenant. As God lives by high standards, so must His people keep those same high standards as an example to the rest of the world. Just as a human government sends out ambassadors to other nations to represent it in its affairs within those nations, God chose Israel to represent Him. What were His reasons?

- He chose Israel to be His own people, a special treasure for His own purposes.
- He chose them to demonstrate His love for them. He simply loved them. When God loves someone, He puts a great deal of responsibility on him.
- He chose them to keep His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, with whom He also had a special relationship.
- He chose them to make a covenant with them, under which they were to keep His commandments and obey Him in everything. In return, He would bless them immensely.

God's choice of Israel was an act of love for them, even though He knew from the start that they would ultimately fail. God knew from the foundation of the world that all mankind would need a Savior (1 Peter 1:19-20; Revelation 13:8), including Israelites. Yet, if any people were to succeed as God's model nation, it would be the children of Abraham. This is not because they were better, but because they of all people had a relationship with God, which had begun with Abraham. They had examples in their own ancestry that they could study to see that it could be done if they remained close to God.

To help them to succeed, God gave them His laws, another act of love. Moses writes:

Surely I have taught you statutes and judgments, just as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should act according to them in the land which you go to possess. Therefore be careful to observe them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes, and say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.” For what great nation is there that has God so near to it, as the LORD our God is to us, for whatever reason we may call upon Him? And what great nation is there that has such statutes and righteous judgments as are in all this law which I set before you this day? (Deuteronomy 4:5-8)

Even in their laws they were to be a model nation for the rest of the world, not just for the Gentiles to notice, but to emulate. The Israelites should have made a great impression on the Canaanites, Philistines, Edomites, and all the nearby nations. This respect and admiration should have then spread beyond them to other nations.

Yet, because they failed to live by those good and righteous laws and to take advantage of God’s nearness to them—in reality, they failed in just about everything He asked of them—their influence as a model nation rarely stretched beyond their borders. Too often, Israel was instead outright pagan!

A MISSING INGREDIENT

The Israelites could have been the world’s perpetual premier nation if they had done as God asked. But they failed, proving that no nation, no people—even with the righteous examples of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and with the great laws of God—could solve humanity’s problems and live peaceful, abundant lives without a special ingredient only God can supply.

Men say, “With enough time and enough knowledge, we can solve any and every evil.” But the record of humanity, foremost in Israel, has proved that it cannot be done. Even with God as their King, Israel could not succeed in this. Something was missing.

What was missing? *God’s Holy Spirit!* It was evident, even during the days of the prophets, that the Old Covenant was insufficient, that its terms could not redeem a person from his sins or deliver eternal life. A new and better covenant was needed. Notice Jeremiah 31:31-33:

Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah—not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

God will make a New Covenant with Israel, one that will include an element whereby He can write His law on people’s minds and hearts. By this means, His way of living will be their way too, and they will be faithful to Him.

Paul comments on this in Hebrews 8:7-8, adding that the failure of the Old Covenant lay in the Israelites themselves. They had hearts of stone on which God could not write His way of life. While that covenant was in force, He purposely withheld the vital, heart-softening ingredient, His Spirit, from them as a whole to depict to mankind that peace, prosperity, and redemption are impossible without a spiritual relationship with Him. He must be personally and individually involved in their daily lives.

One day, in the Millennium, He will give Israel that ability—that right heart—and allow them to succeed in the areas in which they failed. This is prophesied in Ezekiel 37:21-23, 26-28:

Thus says the Lord GOD: “Surely I will take the children of Israel from among the nations, wherever they have gone, and will gather them from every side and bring them into their own land; and I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king over them all; they shall no longer be two nations, nor shall they ever be divided into two kingdoms again. They shall not defile themselves anymore with their idols, nor with their detestable things, nor with any of their transgressions; but I will deliver them from all their dwelling places in which they have sinned, and will cleanse them. Then they shall be My people, and I will be their God. . . . Moreover I will make a covenant of peace with them, and it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; I will establish them and multiply them, and I will set My sanctuary in their midst forevermore. My tabernacle also shall be with them; indeed I will be their God, and they shall be My people. The nations also will know that I, the LORD, sanctify Israel, when My sanctuary is in their midst forevermore.”

Israel will then be given the New Covenant. They will be allowed wholesale access to God through His Holy Spirit, and they will keep His laws along with the statutes and the judgments. They will not just pay them lip-service. This time they will keep their covenant with God.

Moreover, the nations will notice when Israel finally does what it was chosen to do. The Gentiles will begin making the right connections. They will see that God has sanctified the Israelites by setting them apart, giving them His Spirit and His law, and blessing them abundantly for their obedience. They will say, “Maybe we should be doing this too!” and begin to fulfill Isaiah 2:1-4. Thus, during the Millennium, Israel will perform its original purpose as a model and mediatory nation for the rest of the world.

It will take time, maybe generations, but slowly, surely, the whole world will see in Israel, then part of God’s church (see Galatians 6:16), how it should live under God.

prophecy watch *Why Israel?*

There will be conversions by the thousands—perhaps even by nations, as they realize what wonderful peace and prosperity can ensue when a nation obeys God and lives the way that He teaches!

AT IT AGAIN

Ezekiel 44 takes place either during the Millennium or the Great White Throne Judgment. However, from certain details, it seems that God is referring to the actual ancient Israelites who failed Him under the Old Covenant.

Now say to the rebellious, to the house of Israel, “Thus says the Lord GOD: ‘O house of Israel, let us have no more of all your abominations. When you brought in foreigners, uncircumcised in heart and uncircumcised in flesh, to be in My sanctuary to defile it—My house—and when you offered My food, the fat and the blood, then they broke My covenant because of all your abominations. And you have not kept charge of My holy things, but you have set others to keep charge of My sanctuary for you. . . . And the Levites who went far from Me, when Israel went astray, who strayed away from Me after their idols, they shall bear their iniquity. Yet they shall be ministers in My sanctuary, as gatekeepers of the house and ministers of the house; they shall slay the burnt offering and the sacrifice for the people, and they shall stand before them to minister to them. Because they ministered to them before their idols and caused the house of Israel to fall into iniquity, therefore I have raised My hand in an oath against

them,’ says the Lord GOD, ‘that they shall bear their iniquity.’” (Ezekiel 44:6-8, 10-12)

It appears that, when the Israelites rise in the second resurrection, God will make them perform what they failed to do originally! He will give them a chance to repent of their unfaithfulness, to make up, as it were, for the sins of the past. They will know every time they lift a bullock onto the altar, every time they keep the gate, every time they make the showbread, every time they fulfill any of their responsibilities to God, that they failed in their first attempt to keep the terms of their covenant with God.

That is bearing iniquity! They will be reminded in every action that they have sinned and are a sinful people. It will be a hard lesson for Israel, but they will learn it well.

God says in Isaiah 43:21, “This people I have formed for Myself; they *shall* declare My praise.” Finally! In the end, when God gives them the complete package of spiritual blessings, the Israelites will glorify God as He intended from the beginning, fulfilling their ultimate purpose.

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

ENDNOTES

¹ See “Perfect in His Generations,” *Forerunner*, February 2005, for a discussion of Genesis 6:9 and the Bible’s approach to racial purity.

² See “Jesus Disqualified?” *Forerunner*, August 1997, for a full explanation of this curse.

³ Even so, Jesus’ genealogy in Matthew 1 shows that He was Himself descended from at least three Gentiles: Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth. It is probably impossible to determine, but one or more of Judah’s kings, as well as some of the uncrowned princes of Judah between the fall of Jerusalem and His birth, could have taken Gentile wives. Whatever the case, even Jesus was not of racially pure stock.

personal *Is the Christian Required To Do Works?*

(continued from page 7)

commandment? Verse 26 admonishes us, “‘Be angry, and do not sin’: do not let the sun go down on your wrath.” Is this not saying that we must control ourselves and not break the sixth commandment through the spirit of murder (see Matthew 5:21-22)?

Verse 28 commands us to earn our income honestly without breaking the eighth commandment so that we might have the resources to help others who are honestly be in need. In Ephesians 5:3, following his command to imitate Christ, he urges us not to fornicate and not to be unclean, both sins with sexual connotations. In other words, he is telling us to keep the seventh commandment.

He then adds that we must cut off any covetousness—the tenth commandment, which is a form of idolatry (Colossians 3:5)—that clings to our character. In Ephesians 5:4, he lists sins of blasphemy that can involve breaking the third commandment. He concludes his catalog of sins to overcome by making it exceptionally clear that anybody

who practices them will not be in God’s Kingdom (verse 5)! After this, who can sincerely claim that no works are required? Yet, doing none of these labors required to produce growth will earn one salvation.

The appeal underlying all of what Paul writes here is that we walk in love. If we follow what he commands on the authority of Jesus Christ, we will be walking in love, just as Christ loved us. Our walking in love cannot be just any old act that men dignify with the title “love.” Christ’s own purposeful, self-sacrificial example must be the pattern for our thoughts, words, and conduct.

Notice that in Ephesians 5:2 Paul says Christ gave Himself for us. At the end, He surrendered Himself to His enemies. Thus, His surrender, His sacrifice, was genuine; John 10:11, 15, shows it was not forced on Him. God wants Christ’s example to be part of what motivates us to follow in His footsteps regardless of what life may drag across our path.

Self-sacrifice was the driving motivation of His life.

personal *Is the Christian Required To Do Works?*

For us, this is exceedingly difficult to emulate because self-gratification has been our guiding beacon for so long. Most of the works required by God occur when we make the effort to learn to do good and put off the evil that encumbers us from our former lives in the world. Can anyone honestly say that we expend no mental or physical energy—work—when we sacrifice for the sake of glorifying God in our lives?

God's freeing the Israelites from Egypt was His gift. They barely had to lift a finger in that huge undertaking, but they *did* have to walk out. His dividing of the Red Sea was a gift, but they had to walk through it. The Promised Land was a gift, but God required the work of walking there, following the guidance of "the cloud of the LORD" (Exodus 40:38). Suppose they had decided, at any time along the way, not to make that effort anymore. They never would have made it, would they?

Walking is one of the most frequently used figures in the

Bible, appearing almost three hundred times! It is the Bible's prime metaphor for tying together a person's manner of life and his progress toward a destination. Walking can be casual or intense, but it always requires the expense of energy. Christianity is most certainly not a passive wait for Christ to do everything for us, but a dynamic process in which work plays a large part.

We are seeing that a Christian is required to perform the instructions God has laid out for him to accomplish. These include following God's guidance contained in specific laws and in general instructions, but in every case, once we are justified through Christ's blood, we are required to do our part. We will see more on this next time.

In Christian love,



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(continued from page 10)

groups traditionally include roast lamb as part of the dinner on the Night to be Much Observed, which we keep on Abib/Nisan 15, the evening after the Passover.

Again, are we ashamed or embarrassed about what we do at the Passover service? Not at all! Most church of God groups, including ourselves, take their example from just a small slice of Jesus' final night as a human on this earth. There is absolutely nothing for us to be embarrassed or ashamed of in what we do:

- We hold a solemn service in a quiet, private, rented room, as Jesus and His disciples did.
- We obey Jesus' command and example to maintain the footwashing ceremony (John 13:1-17).
- We obey Jesus' command and example to maintain His symbols of the partaking of the unleavened bread, symbolizing His broken, sinless body, and the red wine, representing His shed blood.
- With little comment, the minister reads through the scriptures that describe the events of this evening in AD 31. We do not get into the subsequent details of the arrest, trials, mocking, torture, crucifixion, and death of Jesus. These are left for one's personal Bible study.
- We end the service, again as Jesus and His disciples did, with the singing of an appropriate hymn (Matthew 26:30; Mark 14:26).

Because young people are not involved in the Passover service and because it is not a formal holy day, does this mean that they should sit at home, playing video games or watching sitcoms or reality shows on television? Although the Passover evening and its daytime portion are not formally recognized as a holy day, it is important that young people learn to treat this special time with appropriate respect.

Please remember what this time commemorates. This was the night when Jesus went through His awful, mental anguish, knowing that He would have to take the sins of the world upon Himself and thus be separated from His Father. This is the night when He was arrested, illegally tried, and terribly beaten. The daytime portion of Passover day was when He suffered further physical tortures, was crucified, and died.

Why God chose not to make this day a formal holy day is not entirely clear. Some day we will know. However, whether at home, at school, or at work on the day of the Passover, everyone, including children, should treat the day with a proper level of reverence and thoughtfulness, remembering our Savior's experience for us on that day in AD 31.

—John Plunkett

A Snapshot of European Sentiment

As Europeans try to come to terms with decades of Islamic immigration, failed integration, and the resulting convulsions of a bicultural society, change and adaptation can be seen everywhere. A brief survey of European media from the end of February gives a snapshot of various segments of the native European culture.

In Paris, the fashion world is preparing for a season that is “as somber as it is certain. It is going to be a long dark winter.” Writing in the *International Herald Tribune*, Suzy Menkes (“The New Sobriety: Covering Up the Body”, February 28, 2006) details the bizarre shift in fashion toward a “great coverup”:

The mood is now for a chaste sobriety, with sturdy fabrics, thick leggings and even ankle-length hemlines. The world’s leading designers have no doubts as to where fashion is headed as they talk about “restraint” and “sobriety.” “I think ‘modesty’ is a beautiful word today—and a beautiful attitude,” says Lanvin’s Alber Elbaz, who has built his career on designing dresses with a respectful attitude to women.

On the surface, this appears to be great news for those concerned about morality and the last decade of “free-fall hipster pants, bared midriffs, [and] bras on show under sheer dresses.” However, this shift in fashion appears to be a distressing reflection of the changing culture. As one designer put it, “If you read the daily papers, you are not in the mood for pink and green.”

What is the source of this shift? Not a sudden interest in decency, but the acceptance and even promotion of the culture pushing at Europe:

But among themselves, thoughtful designers are putting the change of mood into a different context, as they talk about the “Muslim-ization” of fashion. They are referring both to drawing, deliberately or unconsciously, on a culture of female sobriety. In a world clearly in turmoil, cocooning clothes are a response.

It is surely not mere coincidence that the designers are producing clothing that is dark in color and goes to great lengths to cover, rather than to reveal—a motif similar to the Muslim burka.

On the same day, the *New York Times*—owner of the *International Herald Tribune*—ran a story about a new Parisian trend. Craig Smith, in the article “In France, a Meal of Intolerance,” chronicles a grassroots, public demonstration aimed at offending those cultures that are becoming less welcome each day. The demonstration consists of publicly eating “pig soup”—a forbidden activity because of the “risks to public order and incitement to racial hatred.” The movement actually dates

back several years, beginning when a small French-nationalist movement known as the “Identity Bloc” started serving hot soup—now known as “identity soup”—to the nation’s homeless.

At first . . . the group used pork simply because it was an inexpensive traditional ingredient for hearty French soup. But as the political significance of serving pork dawned on them and others, it quickly became the focus of their work. Made with smoked bacon, and with pigs’ ears, feet and tails, together with vegetables and sausages, the soup is meant to make a political statement: “Help our own before others.”

The “others” . . . are non-European immigrants who . . . are sopping up scarce resources that ought to be used for descendants of the Continent’s original inhabitants. In other words, the soup is meant to exclude those who do not eat pork—for the most part, Muslims and Jews.

While they are not exactly erecting barricades in the streets yet, those who are fed up with Islamists and Jews are more than willing to engage in bits of civil disobedience and “public disturbance” to make their views known.

The day before these stories were published, the *EU Observer* in Brussels reported that “EU foreign ministers . . . changed the wording of a statement on the Danish cartoon row at the insistence of Dutch foreign minister Bernard Bot, who wanted to avoid the suggestion of an EU apology towards the Muslim world” (Mark Beunderman, “Foreign Ministers Wrangle Over Cartoon Row Text”). For several weeks, the EU Council had worked on drafting a “statement” to express a unified view of the cartoon uproar.

The text in question? “The [EU] council acknowledges and regrets that these cartoons *caused offence* [sic] to Muslims across the world” was changed to “The [EU] council acknowledges and regrets that these cartoons *were considered offensive and distressing* by Muslims across the world” (emphasis ours). While some observers were encouraged that “freedom of speech has remained upright” and that no formal apology was made, critics of the Brussels bureaucracy point to this as a sublime example of why Europe is in its present condition: politicians disputing about words while cities burn around them—literally, in some cases.

Together, these vignettes expose a continent that is badly divided and deeply concerned about the trivial. While there seems to be a whiff of resistance in the air to the ongoing cultural incursion, there is still no clear leadership to pull Europe out of the mire in which she finds herself.

—David C. Grabbe

The Parables of Matthew 13

Part Six: The Parable of the Hidden Treasure

Our study of the Parables of Matthew 13 now encounters the remaining four parables, which Jesus spoke only to His disciples in the house after He had sent the multitude away (verse 36). He had dismissed the outside world—men and women of sight—because he wanted to give those of faith additional instruction. As He had said in verse 12, “For whoever has, to him more will be given.”

These final parables show the inner characteristics of His church, revealing its day-to-day work as a result of Christ’s life and teachings. In considering these parables to be a prophetic summary of the church’s historical development, we find that the last four parables picture the preparation of individual church members, known as “the called” or “the elect,” for the coming Kingdom of God. Remember, the phrase “kingdom of heaven” signifies Christ’s work through His church to make known “the word of the kingdom” (verse 19).

The Parable of the Hidden Treasure and the Parable of the Pearl comprise the third pair of parables in Matthew 13. The Treasure (verse 44) depicts the preciousness of God’s elect in preparation for the Kingdom and that they are of such value that they must be hidden. The Pearl (verse 45) also portrays the preciousness of the church in preparation for the Kingdom and particularly the true value of the sacrifice involved to acquire it. This pair reveals the value God places on the church and the lengths to which He went to purchase and secure it. In contrast to all other competing distractions and interests, it is truly a wonderful blessing to be part of God’s treasure.



1. What does the treasure hidden in a field represent? Matthew 13:44.

COMMENT: The field is the world (verse 38). The treasure is a symbol of the members of the church. In the Old Testament, God calls Israel His “special treasure” (Exodus 19:5; Psalm 135:4) and “My jewels” (Malachi 3:16-17, margin: “special treasure”). In the New Testament, the apostle Peter states that the elect are God’s “own special people” (I Peter 2:9-10). This title was transferred from ancient Israel to spiritual Israel, the church (Galatians 6:16). Since Israel is biblically a type of the New Testament church, the “treasure” in this parable represents the church.

The man hides his treasure in the world. “Hid” is used in a negative sense in the Parable of the Leaven, but the context of the Parable of the Treasure is positive. Prior to their calling, the individual members of the church are lost, but then they are found (called by God) and hidden again in the world (Ephesians 2:1-7). We were once hidden in the world by default because we were just like the world, but we were not hidden from God. He knew who we were before we were called (Psalm 71:5-6; Isaiah 49:1; Jeremiah 1:5; Luke 1:76; Romans 8:28-29; Galatians 1:15-16; II Timothy 2:19-21).

2. Why does the man hide his newfound treasure? Same verse.

COMMENT: The man is Christ. Jesus reveals here how He views the world in relation to the church. Instead of glorifying us immediately, He hides us after we are called (John 17:11, 14-18) by physically sending us back into the world. The world camouflages us because we still physically look like the world, but being spirit-begotten members of God’s church, we are radically different spiritually. We are set apart or sanctified by God’s truth (John 17:17), and the

world does not readily notice that we have His truth in our hearts and minds. No longer are we hidden in the world because we conform to it, but for the opposite reason. We are hidden in the world with Christ (Colossians 3:3), and the world recognizes neither Him nor us (see John 1:10).

3. Why is the man so joyous that he sells all to buy the field? Same verse.

COMMENT: Jesus gave His all, the ultimate sacrifice—His own blood—His life—for us (John 3:16-17; Acts 20:28). His attitude of joy in doing so shows the genuineness of His self-sacrifice for His treasure (Hebrews 12:2). Even though He had to endure crucifixion, He was elated to redeem or purchase His church—those who would become His bride (Revelation 19:7). Christ reflects His Father in every way, and God is a God of joy. When we receive His Spirit, we also begin to receive His joyous nature as a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). When we use God’s Spirit, joy is produced. As God’s elect, we have Christ dwelling in us, and by doing the will of the Father as He did, we can have His joy.

Christ now sits at the right hand of God, continually appearing in the Father’s presence, making intercession for us as our Mediator (Romans 8:34; Hebrews 4:14-16; 9:24). Jesus receives great joy from knowing that He is presently in the process of saving the firstfruits of God’s Kingdom and will later do the same for the rest of humanity. He maintains His joyous excitement by looking forward to the glorious future of the Family of God and by always doing the will of the Father.

Jesus Christ our Savior found us, a special treasure in the world, and gave His all to call us out of the world and redeem us. He now owns us, and through sanctification, He protects us and hides us from the world.