

THE LIVING CHURCH NEWS

LCG.org

March-April 2023

Let's Go Goose Hunting!

Dear Brethren,

I used to hunt geese in my younger years. Blue and snow geese come in giant flocks of hundreds and thousands in southern Louisiana. When they fly low enough, it looks easy to hit one by shooting in amongst them—just aim in their general direction and you will be enjoying a goose dinner that evening. But that is a deception, as there is actually a lot of space around each goose. It is all too easy to miss entirely, and a less-than-direct hit may send you on a literal wild goose chase to retrieve a wounded bird. An experienced hunter realizes that aiming at a specific bird brings greater success.

Similarly, taking a less-than-focused approach toward overcoming sin brings less success than directing your attention to one sin at a time. Not that we forget all other sins when confronted by one, but sins, bad habits, and weaknesses need our *focus* if we are to overcome. You likely can see a few of your weaknesses flying like geese overhead. Will you carelessly shoot upward amongst them, or will you give special attention to one at a time? Will you shoot randomly, or will you take aim at one weakness before focusing on another? While you can work on more than one at a time—and no doubt you should, as you should not forget about *any* sin that confronts you—focusing your greatest effort on the biggest “goose” is a good start.

The time before the Passover and Days of Unleavened Bread is important for self-examination. This is a time to focus on personal change, reminding us that we must put sin out of our lives. We must be overcomers. So, this is not a trivial question to ask: How have you done since last year? What big “sin-goose” did you set your sights on and bring down? And what will you set your sights on this year?

Doers of the Word

We read, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End.... He who *overcomes* shall inherit all things.... But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death” (Revelation 21:6–8). Yes, according to the Alpha and Omega—Jesus Christ (Revelation 1:11)—we must *overcome* sin.

This is the lesson John gave to the seven Church congregations in Revelation 2–3, where every message admonishes us to be overcomers. And it is really more than an admonition—it is a requirement. Not that any of us will overcome every shortcoming in this life, but we *must* be overcoming our carnal nature as a daily way of life. There ought to be evidence for God to see. Consider the Parable of the Minas. The man who hid his mina and failed to multiply it had that mina taken away from him (Luke 19:22–24). It would appear, from the loss of his mina and the appellation of “wicked servant,” that he will not be in the Kingdom of God.

While different in some respects, the Parable of the Talents has the same lesson for the fearful, lazy, and wicked. Note all three characteristics in this parable: “‘And I was afraid...’ But his lord answered and said to him, ‘You wicked and lazy servant...’ ‘Cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth’” (Matthew 25:25–26, 30). Those too fearful to step out in faith to obey, the wicked who refuse to repent of sin, and those too lazy to put in the effort will *not* be in the Kingdom of God.

Each of these parables indicates that God understands our different backgrounds and abilities, but He does not coun-

Volume 25, No. 2



Inside This Issue...

Challenge Yourself to Think Like God... p. 3

**The Blessing of Honest
Self-Examination... p. 6**

**Has the Law of God Been
Nailed to the Cross?... p. 10**

**How Is Messianic Judaism Different
from the Faith Once Delivered?... p. 14**

An Unleavened Lineup... p. 18

Local Church News... p. 26

Seventy-Two Hours... p. 28

tenance gross laziness and lack of progress. We cannot sit back following baptism and expect that it is all done for us. This is seen in the letter from James, where he admonishes us to be doers of the word, and not hearers only. If we are the latter, we deceive ourselves. “For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was” (James 1:23–24).

Confidently Overcome

We may object, *Why would people want to deceive themselves?* As human beings, we are all no doubt guilty of this in one way or another. We do not see ourselves as others see us, and certainly not as God sees us. We are often blind to our shortcomings that others can easily see. Sadly, more often than not, it is *not* a matter of our being blind, but simply our rationalizing around a problem, postponing our attention to it, or refusing to face it. Changing bad habits is not easy, and taking the easy course is part of human nature.

Is this not the same message the Apostle Paul gave to the Romans? “Not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified.... You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal? You who say, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law?” (Romans 2:13, 21–23).

Are you guilty of adultery by consuming pornography? This is sadly a problem for both men and women, both young and old, and the Internet makes it easy. Perhaps it is necessary to cut the cord, so to speak (Matthew 5:27–30). Are you stealing from God by not paying your tithes faithfully? God

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calls that robbery and says that one who does so is under a curse (Malachi 3:8–9). Do you smoke or vape? Do you get drunk or self-deceptively justify marijuana use? Brethren, these are big “geese” on which we need to focus our sights—and, with God’s help, overcome. It is not good enough to sit back and expect God to do it all for us. These problems do not go away on their own.

We understand that we are saved by the loving grace of God. If we are doing our part, we need not go about wondering, “Will I make it?” We can be confident in our walk with God, so this is not an attempt to put a guilt trip on all of you faithful overcoming members. We will never in this life overcome every shortcoming, but we have our part. And, as we see in Scripture, there *are* sins that will keep us out of the Kingdom (1 Corinthians 6:9–10; Revelation 21:8). So, for those who are addicted to pornography, those who rob God, and those who do not take seriously our need to overcome, this is the time to *get* serious.

For all of us, what is it that we have changed since last year at this time? What will we change this year? Is this not what putting out physical leaven is meant to teach us? What benefit is it if we do not learn the important *spiritual* lesson? Change produces good fruit, and good fruit tastes good. As James reminds us, “He who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does” (James 1:25).

So, which goose will you set your eyes on this year? Pick one. Pick the biggest one. Draw a bead on it. Then consider how wonderful you will feel when you can look back with joy at having overcome a sin that has nagged you for years.



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The *Living Church News* is published bimonthly by the Living Church of God, 2301 Crown Centre Drive, Charlotte, NC 28227. Subscriptions are sent without charge to members of the Living Church of God.

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**Postmaster: Send address changes to
 The Living Church News • P.O. Box 3810 Charlotte, NC 28227**

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Challenge Yourself to Think Like God

When I was growing up, my father would occasionally tell me that I needed to clean up my room. I would clean it up, and then I would ask him to come and check it out—because I knew that, until he OK'd it, I couldn't go out and play baseball or do whatever else I wanted to do. Sometimes he would check it out and say I needed to work a little harder. Other times he would let me go and have my fun. The same would happen when cleaning the garage, mowing the lawn, or doing any other chore that needed to be done. I was very used to doing a job and then asking my father, "Is it OK?"

Then, one day, he shocked me with a lesson I have never forgotten. I asked my father to check my work to see if it was OK, and he answered my question with a question: "Is it clean?" I wasn't ready for that, because I had grown used to doing the least that I thought needed to be done so I could go on to the things I really wanted to do. "It is clean?" now put the question on my shoulders instead of his. I immediately felt a bit of guilt, because I knew I could have done better.

Instead of giving or denying me permission to go do what *I* wanted, he challenged me to think more deeply and to learn to see things the way they needed to be. How may this apply to us, especially as we approach Passover and the Days of Unleavened Bread—a time for serious self-examination?

Sometimes the question "Is it OK?" is a sincere request communicating a desire to really know how one might be falling short. But too often we ask "Is it OK?" as a substitute for the underlying question: "Can I get away with this?" It is human nature to try to come, so to speak, as "close to the edge" of sinning as we can, without actually falling off the cliff. We understand from Scripture that fornication and adultery are sins, for example, but do we ever try to see how close we can come without crossing the line?

Do we seek the thrill of getting as close to the edge of the cliff as we can? Or do some of us even secretly hope that we will "trip" and fall off the cliff, planning to repent later?

Beyond "Dos and Don'ts"

Jesus had to deal with the Pharisees, who kept a long list of "dos and don'ts." Their idea was that as long as

they stayed within that detailed list of their own making, they were free to get away with anything else they wanted. Yet what did Jesus say?

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithes of mint and anise and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel! (Matthew 23:23–24).

Often, for those who take a "checklist" approach, there are bigger questions that are ignored or missed. Jesus Christ told the Pharisees that they had neglected the weightier matters of the law—justice, mercy, and faith. These are less easily defined. It is not that they are undefinable, but they require us to use righteous judgment. We must mature over time as we grow in understanding and Christ lives in us through the Holy Spirit, so that we may make godly judgments (Galatians 2:20; Hebrews 5:14). Tithing on something is rather clear cut. If someone says you must tithe on mint and anise and cumin, these are clear guidelines—how and when and how much—and we can feel very good about doing that. But without clear "dos" or "don'ts" on a point of justice, mercy, or faith, it's not so easy to know if we have pleased God. Yet He is plain that they are "weightier matters" that mean a great deal to Him.

And it was not only the Pharisees of Jesus' day who sought to keep lists of extrabiblical "dos and don'ts." With the advance of technology, today's Orthodox Jews often seek rulings as to whether or how to adapt or adopt modern innovations into their religious lives. In 2007, the *Jerusalem Post* reported an attempt by the Israeli Defense Force to accommodate the "requirements" of religious soldiers:

A recent decision by the IDF top brass to institute a "kosher telephone" that minimizes Shabbat desecration is yet another sign of the growing influence of religious soldiers on the army. In recent weeks the IDF purchased hundreds of telephones developed by the Tzomet Institute, a research group that finds technol-

ogy-based loopholes in Jewish law, according to the army weekly *Bamachane*.... Dialing and other electronic operations on the “Shabbat phone” are performed in an indirect way so that the person using the phone is not directly closing electrical circuits. Instead, an electronic eye scans the phone buttons every two seconds. If a button has been pressed, the eye activates the phone’s dialing system. This indirect way of activation is called a *grama* (“‘Kosher phone’ helps IDF minimize Shabbat desecration,” February 14, 2007).

In other words, punching in the same numbers is not *technically* dialing the phone. Imagine one Israeli soldier calling another on his special “Sabbath-compliant” phone and saying, “We’ve got to lob artillery fire on those people coming across the border.” Now, *that* would produce a good-sized fire! Yet, it was the tiny telephone circuit that was seen as desecrating the Sabbath! You will never come to an end of “dos” and “don’ts” if that’s your approach.

We at times find the same approach, perhaps less obvious, among ourselves. Consider how often the question “Is it OK?” really means “Is it a sin?” And, again, a lot depends on the spirit in which that question is asked.

The Days of Unleavened Bread teach us a lesson about sin, and we certainly do not want to commit sin. But too often people use questions like these in an effort to find technical “cover” for doing something that, deep down, they know is probably not the most righteous course of action they could take. The Apostle Paul gives us very good advice when he points out that some things may technically be *OK*—may not be *sin*—but still not be *profitable*: “All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify” (1 Corinthians 10:23; see also 6:12).

Paul’s statement challenges Christians to aim higher—to ask harder questions. Asking “Can I technically justify my actions in the law?” is one thing. The Pharisees were very good at this. But asking questions like “Does this edify others?” and “Is it helpful to the congregation and my family?” and “Does it truly reflect God’s own mind, thinking, and desires?” is something very different. The Pharisees were not very good in this department.

Some details are clear-cut in Scripture, of course. For instance, consider the question “Is it OK to get a tattoo?” The answer is unambiguous: “You shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor tattoo any marks on you: I am the LORD” (Leviticus 19:28). But let’s look at another example that many think is similarly clear-cut, but in fact is not: “Is it OK for a man to wear an earring?” Some will argue that men are adopting a female custom if they wear earrings, so they shouldn’t do so. But what about a society in which both men and women rou-

tinely wear earrings? Proponents may go to Exodus 32, Exodus 35, Judges 8, and other chapters to point out that Israelite men at times wore earrings, seemingly without condemnation.

So, which is it? The answer to “Is it OK?” may be either “Yes” or “No,” depending on circumstances. The question, whether it is asked aloud or only internally, should not be “Can a man get away with wearing an earring?” Rather, we should keep in mind a vital admonition from Scripture: “And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and *do those things that are pleasing in His sight*” (1 John 3:22).

Notice: “keep His commandments”—of course—but *also* “do those things that are pleasing in His sight.”

If we begin by seeking to *please God*, rather than to follow a fad promoted by a culture deliberately pushing the boundaries of acceptable behavior, we will naturally ask, “Is God pleased when we try to imitate the world around us” (1 John 2:15-17)? Can we not recognize who is behind the course of this world (Ephesians 2:2)? Even if we can’t find a definitive passage of Scripture that forbids earrings on men and other body piercings the way it forbids tattoos, we can put verses together and understand something of the mind of God. Consider this vital passage from Deuteronomy:

You shall utterly destroy all the places where the nations which you shall dispossess served their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. And you shall destroy their altars, break their sacred pillars, and burn their wooden images with fire; you shall cut down the carved images of their gods and destroy their names from that place. You shall not worship the LORD your God with such things (Deuteronomy 12:2-4).

This passage is about destroying the symbols and altars of pagan gods. What is one of the most influential gods of our present society? Pride and the promotion of the self. Think of a simple baseball cap, with its visor on the front to keep the sun out of the wearer’s eyes. Is it OK to wear the cap sideways? What could be wrong with that? Nothing—or everything. It’s “just a style,” true. But is it about looking “cool” and projecting an attitude about the self—an attitude Satan would recognize as his own?

This kind of thinking—real, honest self-examination concerning our own motives and desires—is hard. Much harder than checking a list of “dos” and “don’ts” to see if something is “OK” or “a sin.”

Embrace Principles

Some of you remember how members of the Worldwide Church of God reacted when their leadership told them, “It’s

OK now to eat pork and shellfish.” More than a few went out to dinner that very evening, and ordered pork chops or a shrimp cocktail as soon as they knew they could get away with it. They weren’t acting on principle; they were responding to a new “do” replacing an old “don’t.”

Most of those reading this article have a good understanding about the principles involving unclean meats, but let’s turn to a touchier subject—birthdays. Some may wonder: *Can I get away with observing my birthday, or the birthday of a friend or family member? And, if I can, what kind of observance can I get away with?*

You can undoubtedly find some Orthodox Jewish regulations to answer those questions, and there are even some Church of God groups that will try to answer in great detail. But those questions are coming from the wrong spirit. Instead, we should ask, “What does God think about birthday observances? What is the purpose of birthday observances? What is the fruit of such observances? Do they promote the way of give or the way of get?” Answering those questions may be harder than abiding by a list of “dos” and “don’ts,” but as we answer those questions for ourselves, we will be showing God where our hearts really are.

I remember when a 16-year-old was demanding that her mother let her have a birthday party. My answer to the mother was that the question was not so much about whether a party was OK; rather, in this case, it was a matter of her daughter’s selfish and rebellious demand.

I also remember a time when a young lady asked me if it was OK to play in her school’s band concert on Friday night. I was pretty young in the ministry—not yet ordained—and I did not want to hurt her feelings, so we talked about it for a few minutes. I finally asked, “What do you think?” and she replied, “I don’t think I should.” It was then that I realized that this was what she had believed coming into the conversation, but she had been hoping that I would give her what I sometimes refer to in these situations as “papal dispensation”—trying to see what she could get away with.

Similar principles apply to how we dress—and the controversies always seem to surround ladies’ dress styles, rather than the mistakes men commonly make. Are we wondering whether we can “get away with spaghetti straps”? Or are we thinking about how to dress in a way that pleases God? “I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting; in like manner also, that the women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with propriety and moderation, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly clothing” (1 Timothy 2:8–9).

The principle is modesty. Spaghetti straps on a less physically mature 13-year-old are a very different matter than those worn by an older girl whose body has developed much more. We need to give some general guidelines, but must we

try to make a list of modest choices that apply identically everywhere, and to everyone? Should people be required to dress the same in Canada in the cold winter as they do in the Philippines in the hot summer? Or should we look to Scripture for the proper principles to apply, asking God for His help in seeking His mind? Once again, if we focus on pleasing God, the details tend to take care of themselves.

Ask the Right Questions

As members of God’s Church, we need to learn to make righteous judgments, not simply to read rulings off of a list. This does not mean that anything goes—for instance, it does not mean that if you, as an individual, think something is modest, then it is. Nor does it mean that the older ladies should not teach younger ladies lessons in modesty. Younger ladies should value the wisdom of the older ladies who may have more insight into the message that is sent by immodest dress. The *principle* of modesty—not the exact dress-length down to the millimeter, not the specific kind of straps—is what is most important to learn and teach.

Paul gave us another vital principle when he wrote, “It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak” (Romans 14:21). This goes along with another, similar idea: “Give no offense, either to the Jews or to the Greeks *or to the church of God*” (1 Corinthians 10:32). Are we looking for the longest possible list of “dos” that will let us push the boundaries and expand the limits of what we can get away with? That is not an attitude that pleases God.

Brethren, God is writing His laws on our hearts (Hebrews 8:10), and He is seeking to reproduce the very mind of Jesus Christ in us (Philippians 2:5). We do not only strive to obey the Ten Commandments as God gave them to the Israelites; we strive to obey them as magnified by Christ. To do this, we must develop spiritual maturity.

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who *by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil* (Hebrews 5:12–14).

May this Passover and Unleavened Bread season be a time of deep introspection—a time to evaluate our very way of thinking. Let us do our best to develop the discernment that God wants to see in us, so that we may draw closer to Him and His ways—and His true righteousness! (L)

The Blessing of Honest Self-Examination



By **Wallace G. Smith**

In 2 Corinthians 13:5, God commands us, “Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you are disqualified.” Before Passover comes each year, we have an obligation to examine ourselves. But it’s not that examining ourselves is a once-a-year activity, and we shouldn’t think of it that way. Rather, examining ourselves is so important that God commands it of us, explicitly, every year before Passover, so we don’t forget.

One of the most important questions we can reflect on is, “Why am I here?” But that question is of dubious value if we don’t also ask ourselves, “Where am I?” That is, where am I in my relationships with other people? Where am I in my relationship with God? What are my aspirations? What are my fears? What are my illusions—the ideas and values I’m holding onto that aren’t actually real? What *is* real to me?

As we travel through life, we take in a vast amount of information, and we use that information to try and make sense of the world. But while we all like to think we base our decisions on pure, hard facts, the truth is far less reassuring. In reality, all of us filter and process those facts so quickly that the “facts” we believe we are acting on can be so personally cherry-picked or distorted that we become self-deceived—breaking the Ninth Commandment, in a sense, by bearing false witness against ourselves. Avoiding self-deception requires rigorously honest self-examination.

An Age Prone to Blindness

Coming to see ourselves honestly is difficult, and it’s prophesied to be a particular challenge in our age:

And to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write, “These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God: ‘I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. Because you say, “I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing”—

and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked—I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see” (Revelation 3:14–18).

One of the dominant characteristics of the final era of the Church is an inability to see itself rightly, to see itself the way that God sees it. No one is guaranteed to be Philadelphian, and no one is forced to be Laodicean. We can repent and change—or we can grow worse. It’s not just a matter of attending God’s true Church and hearing God’s true message. We who aspire to be Philadelphian need to examine ourselves all the more, understanding that God calls Laodiceanism the dominant spirit of this age and recognizing our need to be diligent against it.

In this regard, the Apostle Paul warns, “Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall” (1 Corinthians 10:12). In other words—particularly if we’re confident in our spiritual state—we need to be careful of falling. Jesus Christ commands us:

But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly. For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth. Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man (Luke 21:34–36).

I hope that none of you reading this are literally carousing or getting drunk, but the *cares of this life* affect all of us. We’ve got deadlines to meet. We’ve got things to do. We’ve got people who depend on us. We have babies who aren’t going to change their own diapers. We have kids to take to soccer practice. Perhaps we have parents who are aging, and we need to take care of them. These are cares of this life—they’re not necessarily bad, but they’re also not our highest priority. They

shouldn't be drawing us away from what is far more fundamental: a relationship with God.

Prophecy assures us that, at Sabbath services all over the world, there are men and women who fit the description of Laodicea. They are absolutely clueless about the truth of their spiritual state. God characterizes them in a way that should give all of us pause: *They need eye salve, because they can't see.* In an age when that blindness is dominant, let's not take self-examination for granted.

Also, let's never assume that self-examination is easy. It's hard! If we think it's easy, we don't really understand. Our natural state is to be ignorant of ourselves in the most significant ways. "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked [or sick]; who can know it?" (Jeremiah 17:9). Nothing is more capable of distorting your perception of reality than your own heart.

Jeremiah 10:23 states, "O LORD, I know the way of man is not in himself; it is not in man who walks to direct his own steps." The right way to direct our steps is not a part of who we naturally are. Clinical psychologist Jordan B. Peterson has said, "The probability that you can understand yourself in anything approaching totality is extraordinarily low." These words correspond well to Jeremiah's observation. Regardless of what we think of ourselves, we've all surely known someone who is blind to his own faults—or perhaps blind to his own gifts. That's not unusual, and it's foolish to assume we aren't blind to some fault or gift of our own.

On top of this, we are subject to influences we have no idea are influencing us. When he's talking to younger people, Mr. Gerald Weston often focuses on how they probably don't appreciate how much they're being influenced by the world around them and don't give that influence a fraction of the credit it deserves. But even if we've survived puberty—and our 50s, and our 60s, and our 70s—we haven't become any less complicated, or any less susceptible to influences. If the devil has to work harder, he works harder.

If you combine Jeremiah 17:9 and Jeremiah 10:23, you get Proverbs 16:2: "All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes, but the LORD weighs the spirits." Don't we *all* think we're right about what we think? In fact, it doesn't make any sense to think you're wrong about what you believe. Most of us are pretty sure we're right, but none of us are right about everything.

King Solomon once wrote, "Truly the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil; madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead" (Ecclesiastes 9:3). While Solomon's language is dramatic, he is expressing a very profound truth: From God's perspective, every one of us looks a little "crazy" from time to time, making nonsensical decisions. Everyone does irrational things. How many people watch a documentary on the terrible things that smoking does to the human body, all while a cigarette hangs from their lips? If we think that somehow we're immune to those kinds of irrationalities, we don't know ourselves very well. It's just part of the human condition.

Somber Solomon also reminds us, "Better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for that is the end of all men; and the living will take it to heart" (Ecclesiastes 7:2). What does he mean? Not that you can't have a good time or even have a party now and then. He means that there's something about the time and place of mourning that wakes you up to think about things differently as you recognize, *This will also be my end.* You just don't think those kinds of thoughts at parties, and that's what Solomon is saying. As human beings, we need to be woken up—and times of seriousness tend to do that.

The Right Perspective on Self-Examination

Why don't we examine ourselves deeply enough? One reason is that, honestly, it can be scary. But it's important to understand that examining yourself is not just about discovering all the dirty deeds you've ever done. Of course, if you don't find *any* mistakes or failings that you weren't aware of before, you're probably not looking hard enough. But it's also about finding good things. Many people are unwilling to recognize some of the gifts God has given them to help others—and that's just as damaging, because someone who doesn't

recognize a gift is often someone who's not using that gift to its fullest to honor God and serve other people.

Consider the "exam" part of the word "self-examination." When a teacher gives an exam, the purpose is not for every student to get every question wrong and be proven totally inept. Instead, students will do well to varying degrees. Let's say that you earned 85 points out of 100 on the exam. That means you've mastered 85 percent of the material, and you haven't yet mastered 15 percent of it. The purpose of the exam is to

God is not looking for a reason to disown you. He has compassion for all of us. He wants us to grow into the fullness of Jesus Christ day by day, and He and His Son are pouring Themselves into that effort in us—and He recognizes that we're not there yet. **There's no need to be fearful in examining ourselves.**

help you understand *clearly* where you are, in an objective way. If you made a 25 on the exam, you've got a lot of work to do. If you made a 95 on the exam, that's great—but don't rest on your laurels. Work on that 5 percent and build on the 95 percent that you have done well with. The purpose of self-examination is not to beat ourselves up; it's to see ourselves the way God sees us, to the fullest extent we can.

The problem is that our deceitful heart often tends to push us toward the positive. We're often far more willing to judge ourselves based on our intentions and not willing to see what we truly need to change. But, even with that in mind, it shouldn't be scary. "For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him" (Psalm 103:11–13, *English Standard Version*).

God is not looking for a reason to disown you. He has compassion for all of us. "He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust" (v. 14, *NKJV*). Yes, He wants us to grow into the fullness of Jesus Christ day by day, and He and His Son are pouring Themselves into that effort in us—and He recognizes that we're not there yet. There's no need to be fearful in examining ourselves. In trying to align our view of ourselves with how God actually sees us, we must recognize that He already sees us the way we truly are. He's already aware, so we can be honest with ourselves. We must remember that He didn't call us because of how stellar we were. He knew we were dust when He did the calling. He is the ultimate expert in working with dust.

When did the Savior choose to give everything for us? It was when we were still in that unforgiven state. "For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:6–8). As an ever-living being, the most He could give is His life—and He *did*. Not because we deserved it, but because He loved us (1 John 4:9). But He died for the still-unrighteous, not so we would stay unrighteous, but so He could rescue us and begin investing in us to make us better, bit by bit. If we don't see the need to grow and to change, we won't embrace that help He's providing readily.

Paul's words should reassure us: "Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. 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" (Hebrews 4:14–15). Regardless of what we may discover in our self-examination day by day, there's nothing

we can find that He won't sympathize with. We serve a Savior who could respond to our newly discovered flaws by saying, *Yes, I already knew that. That's why I died and live now—to take you by the hand and lead you forward.*

Read *all* of Hebrews 4:16: "Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need." It encourages us to be bold before God, to ask of Him in faith. But it's also about obtaining mercy—the context is that we're going before God while our sins are holding us down. We've all got sins and faults of youth, acorns we planted and wish we hadn't, because now they're the oak trees we have to cut down. But that should not make us timid. We can go boldly before God's throne, ask for His grace, and ask for help to chop those oak trees down—ask Him to make every swing worth two swings.

And as you and I dive in to examine ourselves, God hasn't just said, *Figure out how to do it.* He's given us valuable tools that we can take advantage of.

Use Prayer as a Tool

If we're not *regularly* asking God to help us see ourselves, we need to, because we can't do it on our own. We need His active help. If we ask, *Help me see, in Your mercy, the things about me that I need to see,* He will answer.

King David understood that he *didn't* fully understand—that he didn't see everything he needed to see. "Who can understand his errors? Cleanse me from secret faults" (Psalm 19:12). King David recognized that he had faults he wasn't even aware of, and he asked God's active help and participation. How do we get past Jeremiah 17:9? By going to Jeremiah 17:10: "I, the LORD, search the heart." The Eternal weighs the hearts, and He can give us the information we need.

In Psalm 139, David finds wonder in how thoroughly God knows him.

O LORD, You have searched me and known me. You know my sitting down and my rising up; You understand my thought afar off. You comprehend my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word on my tongue, but behold, O LORD, You know it altogether. You have hedged me behind and before, and laid Your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain it.... Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed. And in Your book they all were written, the days fashioned for me, when as yet there were none of them (vv. 1–6, 16).

God knows us *thoroughly*. Nothing about us is a mystery to Him. He's never thinking, *I wonder why he did that; I just don't understand that guy.* No—He knows, and He's the ulti-

mate source of what we need to know. David takes advantage of that to pray a scary prayer: “Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me [test me] and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (vv. 23–24).

I remember reading that and being nervous about it because, honestly, I didn’t want to pray it. But if we recognize that the stakes are high, we want God to have the freedom He needs to show us our ways—so we *should* pray this. Prayer is a vital key to knowing ourselves, because if we want the One who knows us best to reveal us to ourselves, we need to ask.

The Insight of Friends and Family

I’ve never seen with my own eyes the bald spot on the back of my head—but my wife and sons have. In fact, they saw it years before I even knew it was there. If we’re constantly dismissing what our spouse says, what our parents say, or even what our children say, we need to recognize that they might be right.

In fact, even those who hate us can serve us with insight. In 2 Samuel 16, we find an illustrative occasion in the life of King David:

Now when King David came to Bahurim, there was a man from the family of the house of Saul, whose name was Shimei the son of Gera, coming from there. He came out, cursing continuously as he came. And he threw stones at David and at all the servants of King David. And all the people and all the mighty men were on his right hand and on his left. Also Shimei said thus when he cursed: “Come out! Come out! You bloodthirsty man, you rogue! The LORD has brought upon you all the blood of the house of Saul, in whose place you have reigned; and the LORD has delivered the kingdom into the hand of Absalom your son. So now you are caught in your own evil, because you are a bloodthirsty man!” Then Abishai the son of Zeruiah said to the king, “Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king? Please, let me go over and take off his head!” (vv. 5–9).

God took advantage of Shimei’s terrible attitude to say some words that He wanted David to hear at the time, because there had been a bloodthirsty time in David’s life when he had caused a man to be killed for his personal benefit, and his house never worked quite right after that.

How does David respond? “What have I to do with you, you sons of Zeruiah? So let him curse, because the LORD has said to him, ‘Curse David.’ Who then shall say, ‘Why have you done so?’” (v. 10). He didn’t become defensive or indignant, though his accuser deserved death (Exodus 22:28; 1 Kings 2:8–9).

Why is this instructive? Because sometimes uncomfortable truths come our way from people who don’t intend to be kind, and even from people who hate us, people who insult us and tear us down. It could be a sibling, a boss, or a coworker saying terrible things, and the fact that they may be saying them with a sinful attitude—an attitude for which God will hold them accountable—doesn’t mean that we don’t still need to listen. Even if 75 percent of it is sin-induced nonsense, we shouldn’t ignore the 25 percent from which we may benefit. David didn’t.

If we can learn from an enemy, how much more should we heed the words of those who love us?

Biblical Meditation and Fasting

If we don’t take the time to think about the words we hear, we won’t learn from them. But meditation must be fed by something, and that something should be the Bible. “For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow” (Hebrews 4:12). God’s word is powerful enough to carve out the hard-to-make distinctions in our lives—“a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart” (v. 12).

James 1:22–25 describes God’s word and law as a mirror given to us so that we can look into it and see ourselves, and he tells each of us not to be someone who looks into the mirror, finds something he needs to fix, and just walks away. But how many of us use the Bible not as a mirror, but as a lens through which we examine *others*? It’s always tempting to examine others, but God’s word describes itself as a mirror with which—if we’re careful, diligent, and willing—we can examine *ourselves*.

We need occasions where we are specially devoted to seeking the will of God and a right perspective on ourselves, and fasting is a tool that adds perspective to our self-examination. When we’re hungry, it reminds us that we’re not God. Rather, we *need* God, and fasting is a tool that God has given us to understand ourselves. If you find the idea of fasting regularly to be intimidating—and a lot of people do—feel free to use training wheels. Maybe you can start by simply skipping a lunch. The days leading up to Passover can be hectic for all of us, but they are also prime time for including a fast, humbly asking God to help us see ourselves more clearly. A whole day’s fast would be ideal, but any time is better than none.

Jesus Christ said, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32). Part of that truth is the truth about ourselves. In seeing ourselves truly and rightly, we have freedom from lies, freedom from illusion, and freedom to walk more effectively toward the Kingdom of God and a closer relationship with our Father, rooted in a real knowledge of who we are. The truth about ourselves is worth seeing—because, truly, that truth will make us free. (LN)

Has the Law of God Been Nailed to the Cross?

By **John Robinson**

I grew up in God's Church and was brought up keeping the Sabbath and the Holy Days. There were, of course, many advantages to learning the truth at a young age; I did not have to unlearn false teachings, nor give up any cherished traditions such as Christmas or Easter. The downside, though—if you can call it that—was spending most of my life without a strong grasp of *why* mainstream professing Christians believed and acted as they did. As a young man, I had no idea how professing Christians justified practices like Christmas and Sunday-keeping, or by what “logic” they tried to claim that God's law is no longer relevant.

But as I grew older and began taking on leadership responsibilities in the Church, I realized that I needed to have answers ready for outbursts like, “Dude, the old laws are done away with!” (And yes, that is an actual quote.) Why is this important? Because our need to keep God's commandments is one of the biggest distinctions between what His true Church teaches and what most professing Christians believe.

Colossians 2:13–14 is one of the passages of Scripture most commonly used as “proof” that God's people are no longer required to abide by His laws. In the *New King James Version*, it reads this way:

And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the *handwriting of requirements* that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.

In this article, we'll break down this passage and answer three questions: What is the “handwriting of requirements”? What was nailed to the cross? What was “against us” and “contrary to us”?

What Scripture Doesn't Say

Before we begin to answer those questions, it's helpful to understand how mainstream professing Christians interpret Colossians 2:14. Both Protestants and Catholics read this

passage and identify God's moral law as the “handwriting of requirements” in question. The following quote from *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* summarizes the popular false interpretation of this passage: “This new life came when God **forgave us all our sins** for He **canceled the written code**. Before God's written Law, His ‘written code,’ people **stood** condemned... so it worked **against** them and **opposed** them. But in Christ the Law is fulfilled... and done away with” (ed. John Walvoord and Roy Zuck, 1983).

In essence, these commentators say, *Keeping God's commandments is wrong because believers are dead to the law. Jesus fulfilled the law and therefore did away with it. He kept it so that we don't have to.*

But it's not difficult to prove this interpretation wrong. Let's do so by answering the first of our three questions.

What Is the “Handwriting of Requirements”?

As we've read, Colossians 2:14 says that Christ “wiped out the *handwriting of requirements* that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.” The two Greek words to focus on in this passage are *cheirographon*, translated “handwriting,” and *dogma*, translated “requirements.”

The *New Spirit-Filled Life Bible* says that the Greek word translated “handwriting,” *cheirographon*, is “a word commonly used when a monetary obligation was acknowledged by a debtor. It means a signed confession of indebtedness, bond, or self-confessed indictment.” *Thayer's Greek Lexicon* adds further clarity, saying that *cheirographon* refers to “what one has written with his own hand... specifically, a note of hand, or writing in which one acknowledges that money has either been deposited with him or lent to him by another, to [be] returned at an appointed time.” We could think of it like a mortgage or an IOU, in a way; a *cheirographon* is a written record of the debt we owe for our sins.

Elsewhere, the Bible uses *dogma* to refer to “decrees” of men, not God—for example, in Luke 2:1, which reads, “And it came to pass in those days that a decree [*dogma*] went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.” When referring to God's laws, the Greek Scriptures do not use the word *dogma*, but the word *nomos*. However, reflecting

their bias against God's law, many "Christian" commentators and translators assert that *dogma* in Colossians 2:14 refers to the Ten Commandments—an assumption that is inconsistent with the rest of the Bible. As we've pointed out, *dogma* refers to decrees of men—not divine decrees from God. This is important evidence that what's being nailed to the cross is not God-given law, but something that came from human beings.

Other translations of the Bible can shed more light on this passage. For example, instead of "the handwriting of requirements," the *New Living Translation* refers to "the record of the charges against us," while the *English Standard Version* mentions "the record of debt that stood against us." This certificate of indebtedness would record a massive sum that we owe but could never possibly repay—an insurmountable debt.

In Matthew 18:21–35, Jesus relates the parable of the unforgiving servant and the enormous, 10,000-talent debt he owed to his master. In today's currency, his debt would be more than two *billion* dollars—truly, a debt that none of us could ever repay. Yet even that debt is small compared to the debt incurred by all our sins. The penalty for our sins can only be death, which is why Jesus Christ submitted to crucifixion and paid that penalty for us.

As we continue, we'll see further proof that it does *not* make sense to equate the "handwriting of requirements" with the Ten Commandments.

What Was Nailed to the Cross?

At a crucifixion, both a condemned criminal and a list of his crimes were nailed to a cross. David Stern's *Jewish New Testament Commentary* notes that "when a criminal was executed on a stake, it was customary to nail a list of his crimes on the stake; an example is the sign placed above [Jesus'] head ([John] 19:19–22)." Stern comments that "some interpreters take this verse to mean that God removed not the charges against sinners but the *Torah* itself."

Since Jesus Christ lived a sinless life, how could any crimes be listed and nailed to His cross? They couldn't—so a different sort of writing was nailed there instead: "And an inscription also was written over Him in letters of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS" (Luke 23:38). One of the two criminals crucified with Him even declared, "we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong" (Luke 23:41).

Jesus Christ had done nothing wrong, which even this criminal could recognize, perhaps by the simple fact that no physical record of any crimes was placed above Him on the cross. Spiritually, though, He carried on the cross a very long record of crimes—our sins. "Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God. For He made Him who knew no sin to be *sin* for us, that we might

become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:20–21).

So, why did Jesus Christ need to die, even though He was sinless? Because of the transgressions of each and every one of us. He was crucified, having accepted the "handwriting of requirements" for our sins—the penalty for all the sins we ever committed. "Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example.... 'Who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth'; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously; who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness" (1 Peter 2:21–24). Christ took all our sins onto Himself and very humbly allowed Himself to be led to His execution.

But what is this about His body being hung "on a tree"? Why does Peter use that word, instead of "cross" or "stake"? And he's not the only one: Paul wrote in Galatians 3:13 that "Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree')."

Most professing Christians take this to mean that the *law* is a curse. But that's not what the verse says and it's not what the curse is—the curse is the *penalty for violating* the law. Both Peter and Paul were referring to Deuteronomy 21:22–23, which states the following:

If a man has committed a sin deserving of death, and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain overnight on the tree, but you shall surely bury him that day, so that you do not defile the land which the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance; for he who is hanged is accursed of God (Deuteronomy 21:22–23).

Clearly, it is the penalty or curse for breaking those laws that was nailed to the cross—not *the laws themselves*. When Jesus Christ bore our sins, He became accursed. He took the handwritten declaration of debt from each and every repentant individual who has accepted His sacrifice, and that debt was nailed to the cross in His payment of it as if He had committed the crimes instead of us.

Jesus Christ suffered the consequence of the written record of sins that were against us and contrary to us, and that penalty was death.

What Was "Contrary to Us" and "Against Us"?

Colossians 2:14 says that Christ "wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross." To confirm what it was that was "wiped out" and taken

“out of the way,” let’s analyze two phrases in the verse: “wiped out” and “against us.”

The Greek word *exaleiphō* is translated “having wiped out.” This word is also used in Acts 3:19, which states, “Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out [*exaleiphō*], so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord” (Acts 3:19). In this scripture, it is clearly not God’s written code, the Ten Commandments, being blotted out.

Another example of *sins* being blotted out is in Psalm 51, which David wrote after his adultery with Bathsheba: “Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the multitude of Your tender mercies, blot out [wipe away] my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.... Hide Your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities” (vv. 1–9).

David’s heartfelt repentance is bookended by two requests for blotting out. The first request is for God to blot out *transgressions*, or rebellions—David’s infringing or going beyond the bounds of moral principles, God’s standard of behavior.

Does not God’s law define what His standard of behavior is? In verse 9,

David asks God to blot out his *iniquities*—his guilt or his punishment. What David is asking to be blotted out is not God’s holy, perfect, and just law, but his guilt and the rebellious and perverse behavior that *breaks* that law.

For the grace [unmerited pardon or gift] of God that brings salvation [deliverance from death] has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every *lawless* deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works (Titus 2:11–14).

How are we to define “ungodliness and worldly lusts”? These are what we fall into when we break God’s law as it is defined in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20) and the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7). Jesus Christ gave Himself for us by taking away our sins, our list of crimes, and

allowing Himself to be hung on the stake so that we could be delivered from death. Part of that deliverance is freeing us from lawless deeds and making us more and more proficient in doing good works.

So, would God’s *law* being described as “against us” and “contrary to us” align with the rest of the Bible? Not at all. In fact, Paul says in Romans 7:12 that “the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good.” We were all facing death because of the penalty of *sin*, the transgression of God’s law. *That* is what was “against us” and “contrary to us.” Nothing ordained by God is contrary to human beings. God’s law is not the problem—sin is.

The Purpose of the Law

When we drive, most of us rely on speed limit signs to tell us

how fast we can go, and how fast *not* to go. We know the consequences of disregarding those signs, and we know how to avoid suffering those consequences because of what the signs tell us. But what if the speed limit were a secret? How would we know how fast to go—or not go? How nerve-wracking would it be to drive on a road where we

could be ticketed at any time for breaking a law we didn’t even know was there?

The purpose of speed limit signs is to define speeds that are too fast, and the purpose of God’s law is to define sin. “Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin” (Romans 3:20). Why wouldn’t we want God’s law to define right and wrong for us? Sin makes our lives a tragedy of suffering, whether we know what it is or not. The law gives us the opportunity to escape that suffering. That is why the law is a great blessing: with it, we can know to avoid sin. “What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, ‘You shall not covet’” (Romans 7:7).

Those who claim that the law has been abolished say it is a burden, that to live by it is to try to “earn salvation.” But many of them will still try to live by *some* of the law—usually the part that falls under loving our neighbor as ourselves, as if that is somehow more “legitimate” than the first part, which tells us how to love God (Matthew 22:37–40). In reality, we can’t truly love our fellow human beings if we don’t love our

We all have a past—even those who grew up in God’s Church have done things that make us guilty of transgressing God’s law. What Galatians 2:20 says is that this old version of ourselves should be put to death, as was Jesus Christ. **We should put an end to our old way of living and behave in a manner that shows a new, Christ-centered life.**

Creator, just as we can't truly love God without loving those He made in His image.

Our Old Man Crucified

What else was nailed to the cross, in a figurative sense? We were. Paul wrote, "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20, *King James Version*). Jesus Christ did not allow Himself to be crucified to pay the debt of our sins just so we could sit back and do nothing. This is the core misunderstanding that lets mainstream professing Christians get off track in their lives.

We all have a past—even those who grew up in God's Church have done things that make us guilty of transgressing God's law. What Galatians 2:20 says is that this old version of ourselves should be put to death, as was Jesus Christ. We should put an end to our old way of living and behave in a manner that shows a new, Christ-centered life.

In the book of Romans, Paul puts a finer point on this concept: "For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin" (Romans 6:5–6).

What's been done away with? The body of *sin*—not the law of God. "For he who has died has been freed from sin" (v. 7). The handwriting of requirements has been paid by our Savior, and we are now free from the death penalty brought by our sin.

Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, dies no more.... For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord (vv. 8–11).

There's an awful lot packed into these verses, but the gist is that, while sin and death are fundamentally linked, we can rise above sin as we make positive changes in our lives.

Baptism symbolizes our being crucified with Jesus Christ. When we go through the process of being baptized, we not only have our sins forgiven and washed away—we figuratively die. Just as Jesus Christ died on the cross, we should leave the old man behind us and come out of the water into a new life, dedicated to the service of God.

The Deeper Truth

So, what are the answers to our three questions? Let's take one more look at Colossians 2:11–14:

In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.

The "handwriting of requirements" is the debt we owe because of our sin, the penalty of which is death. What was nailed to the cross was that same debt, along with Jesus Christ and the old, sinful people we once were. Sin, along with its consequences, was contrary to us and against us.

People don't want to change; they want a comfortable message that claims they are fine as they are. To this, the Bible responds, "But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him" (Colossians 3:8–10).

The key is that after we accept Christ's amazing sacrifice, we should respond by living a new life that is dedicated to godliness. Jesus Christ is our perfect model for how we should live this new life. We will not do so perfectly. But we must try—and try our best.

God allowed Paul's writings to be difficult to understand on the surface—they are an ideal test to distinguish between those people who are trying to understand God's revelation and those who are just trying to find loopholes.

Jesus Christ did *not* nail God's law to the cross. And we should be thankful that we have a Savior who abolished not God's perfect law, but rather the debt we owe because of transgressing that law, as He paid that penalty for us. But that's not the end of it. Now that we have been pardoned, Jesus Christ expects us to live a life that is forever changed because of our understanding of His sacrifice. The purpose of God's law is to define right and wrong so that we can transform our relationship with God and man. When we follow that law, it changes life for the better.

Let's be *so very thankful* that we have been called to this understanding, that our penalty was nailed to the cross, and that we have an awesome Savior who erased our debt by dying on our behalf. We can thank Him by living a life that respects and responds to that calling. (LN)



How Is Messianic Judaism Different from the Faith Once Delivered?

By **Wyatt Ciesielka**

Messianic Judaism and the Hebrew Roots movement are decentralized and disorganized, yet they are also zealous and fast-growing. To their credit, these communities shun many of paganized Christianity's inventions and some even have an appearance that can seem close to early New Testament Christianity. But what is their history? What are some of their beliefs? And most significantly, are the Messianic Jewish and Hebrew Roots communities *truly* closer to the faith once delivered to the saints (Jude 3)?

From the earliest New Testament times, we know that the Gospel went first to the “lost sheep” of the house of Israel; first to the Jew, then to the Gentile (Matthew 10:5–6; John 1:41; Acts 18:2, 24; Romans 1:16; 2:9–11). But does this mean that God desires Christians to “get back to their Hebrew roots”? Quite the contrary. As we will see, although there has been some doctrinal progress in recent decades, Messianic Judaism and its sister, the Hebrew Roots movement, are *not* a continuation of the Church that Jesus Christ built (Matthew 16:18). They are actually *modern* phenomena, practicing doctrines *very different* from “the faith once delivered.”

Founded by Protestants

Messianic Judaism, in fact, originated in the late 1800s and the early 1900s, most prominently through the efforts of men such as Carl Schwartz (1817–1870), a Presbyterian minister and Polish-Jewish convert to “Christianity” who worked from Britain; Arno Gaebelein (1861–1945), a Methodist pastor who worked from New York; and David Bronstein (1886–1961), a Presbyterian minister and Jewish convert who worked from Chicago. The movement spread among Protestant congregations in Britain and the United States, leading to the creation of new associations such as “The Hebrew Christian Alliance” in the United Kingdom (formed in 1866) and “The Hebrew Christian Alliance of America” (formed in 1915).

By the early 1900s, Arno Gaebelein had become a prolific writer and internationally influential theologian. By 1934, David Bronstein had established one of the first “Hebrew Christian” congregations in America. Decades later, *Time*

Magazine reported on one of Bronstein's Sunday services and described it as following a “Protestant order,” writing, “David Bronstein is no rabbi, but a pastor, and the 100-odd members of his Chicago congregation, almost all of them born Jews, call themselves Hebrew Christians. Their group is the first of five organized Hebrew Christian churches in the U.S....”

In 1934 David Bronstein founded the Chicago church—*not* formally affiliated with the others—out of a feeling that “I was chosen to bring the Jewish people to Christ” (“Religion: Hebrew Christians,” *Time Magazine*, December 30, 1957).

Good intentions aside, Bronstein—like his U.S. contemporary Gaebelein, and also like Schwartz in Britain, who slightly preceded them—remained Protestant *Sunday* preachers. Furthermore, these men were influenced by leading Protestant theologians of their time, particularly John Nelson Darby (1800–1882) and Cyrus Ingersoll Scofield (1843–1921), whose theology remains a great influence on Messianic Jewish doctrine. This is important to understand if we are to understand “Messianic Jewish theology.”

Heavily Influenced by Protestant Theology

The extremely influential C. I. Scofield was a trinitarian, Sunday-keeping Presbyterian who authored the *Scofield Reference Bible*. Likewise, John Nelson Darby was an enormously influential British Protestant theologian. It was Darby who originated the doctrine that Christ would, invisibly and without warning, secretly “rapture” Christians to heaven before the Great Tribulation, which would end the current “Church age dispensation” and be followed by the literal return of Christ and the thousand-year Millennium, ushering in the next “dispensation” when the Old Testament prophecies regarding physical Israel would recommence.

Darby's teaching on the “secret rapture” and his struggle with “dispensationalism” greatly influenced how Gaebelein, Bronstein, Scofield, and many others understood the Old and New Covenants, biblical prophecy, how God was working with the Jews in the “Church age,” and more. These men embedded many of their misunderstandings deep into the fabric of Messianic Judaism.

Although dynamic leaders, none of these men were part of the *actual* Church of God, which had maintained “the faith

once delivered” through the centuries. Notwithstanding their noble desire to “reconcile their Jewish and Protestant converts,” or, as Bronstein stated, to “bring the Jewish people to Christ,” the founders of the modern Messianic Jewish movement simply *did not* and *could not* understand much of the fundamental truth that a converted member of the Church of God understands. Why? Because God gives His Holy Spirit—which is “the Spirit of wisdom and understanding” (Isaiah 11:2)—to “those who obey Him” (Acts 5:32), i.e., to those who keep His commandments (Psalm 111:10). God does *not* give His Holy Spirit to those who have replaced the Sabbath with Sunday, who teach and observe pagan holidays, or who teach the pagan doctrine of a triune God.

However, interestingly, it was around David Bronstein’s time that God began calling someone who *would* obey Him and to whom He *would* give understanding. It was around this time that God began calling Mr. Herbert W. Armstrong (1892–1986).

Messianic Judaism or the Church of God?

In 1926, God prompted Mr. Armstrong’s theological studies in response to his wife Loma’s decision to begin keeping the seventh-day Sabbath. Mr. Armstrong, resistant to the idea, was forced to prove the Sabbath, the Holy Days, and many other doctrines. God then brought him into contact with the remnant of His faithful Church—the Church of God. While a study of the history of the New Testament Church is beyond the scope of this article, what God had led Herbert Armstrong to was, in fact, the small, Sardis-era, Sabbath-keeping remnant of His faithful Church, as described in Revelation 3:1–6, headquartered at the time in Stanberry, Missouri.

God soon made it clear that Mr. Armstrong should be ordained into the ministry. And so, as with all biblical examples of ordination, in 1931, Church leadership prayed and laid hands on him, and he was ordained a “minister, and apostle of the true primitive faith” in the Church of God. For more about the history of the New Testament Church, Mr. Armstrong’s calling and ordination, and how God used him to raise up the Philadelphian era (Revelation 3:7–13), you can review *God’s Church Through the Ages* and the *Autobiography of Herbert W. Armstrong, Volume I*.

As we have alluded to, it is also vitally important to note that God called Mr. Armstrong into His true Church not only practicing right doctrine, but also practicing right *government*—organized, centralized, hierarchical, and with appointment by ordination. This also stands in stark contrast to the unbiblical, decentralized, and electoral approach—the “self-appointment” so common in the Protestant *and* “Messianic” worlds, which has even tempted some of God’s people in more recent times. (For a more detailed study about the type of government consistently established in God’s Church—in

both the Old Testament *and* the New Testament—you can review “Righteous Government: From *Ephod* to *Ekklesia* in the July–August 2013 *Living Church News*.)

Because Mr. Armstrong was willing to reject false Christianity and fully submit to Jesus Christ, God gave him discernment that the Protestant founders of “Messianic Judaism” simply never had.

Messianic Doctrinal Disunity

While the Church of God was growing and God was blessing its efforts to preach the Gospel to the world, the Messianic Jewish movement was *also* growing, and many congregations began to shed some of their Protestant trappings, mainly by replacing Sunday worship with Sabbath worship. Then, in the 1970s and 1980s, Messianic Judaism began to experience explosive growth amid a new enthusiasm for all things Judaic. However, the Messianic movement remained—and remains—decentralized, disorganized, and doctrinally errant.

Of course, the fundamental disagreement that various Messianic Jewish and Hebrew Roots movements have with traditional Judaism is that traditional Judaism does not believe that the Word emptied Himself and became flesh (cf. Philippians 2:6–7; John 1:14). But while Messianic Jews accept that Jesus is the Messiah, they remain in serious error in many other ways.

For example, as will be expounded later, most Messianic Jewish congregations remain *trinitarian*. Many Messianic congregations accept the apocrypha (non-scriptural, non-canonical writings), while other Messianic Jews question the authenticity of the New Testament gospels. (For more on the preservation and canonization of the Bible, you can review “How Did we Get the Old Testament?” in the January–February 2000 *LCN*, “How Did We Get the New Testament?” in the July–August 1999 *LCN*, and “Your Inerrant Bible” in the January–February 2011 *LCN*.)

Others, carrying over wrong “dispensationalist” ideas, believe that Jesus is the Messiah, *but only for non-Jews*. But the truth is entirely the contrary. For more on how the original New Testament Church was composed of both Jew *and* Gentile and how Jesus is the Messiah for *all*, you can review *Restoring Original Christianity*—and to quote Dr. Meredith from that booklet, “If you could somehow ‘look in on’ true Christianity during the first century and even beyond, what would you see? You would see a group of dedicated believers in Jesus as the promised Messiah” (pp. 16–17).

Many Messianic Jews believe that God is pleased with Gentile Christians observing Sunday and the typical, paganized “Christian holidays,” which, of course, God says He hates (cf. Amos 5:21). Others argue that ethnic Jews must make *aliyah*—move to Jerusalem. Some believe that the Feast of Tabernacles must be observed in traditional *succoths*, while others believe

that the Feast of Tabernacles can only be properly observed in *Jerusalem*. Some congregations—typically those with Pentecostal lineage—are becoming increasingly “charismatic” and there is a growing “speaking in tongues” debate within the community. (For more on the gift of speaking in tongues, see “The Purpose of Speaking in Tongues” in the May–June 2022 *LCN* and “Fruits of the Spirit” in the May–June 2014 *LCN*)

These are just *some* examples of the chaos and error within the Messianic and Hebrew Roots communities. Yet we know that “God is not the author of confusion” (1 Corinthians 14:33) and that His Church should not be “tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men,” but should instead exhibit “unity of the faith” (Ephesians 4:13–14).

The 613 Ordinances?

Many Sabbath-keeping “Hebrew Roots” congregations contend that they practice “the faith of the early Church,” basing this claim on their supposed keeping of the 613 *mitzvot* and arguing that statements such as “sin is lawlessness” (1 John 3:4) require adherence to these 613 manmade rabbinic ordinances. But, again, this is false.

What are the 613 *mitzvot*? First, it is helpful to explain what they are *not*. The 613 *mitzvot* are not the law of God—they are not the Ten Commandments or the Holy Days, nor are they even the sacrificial system or the Old Covenant. The 613 *mitzvot* are simply a multitude of rabbinic ordinances (in Greek, *dogma*) based on *human* interpretations of Scripture, which in some cases are valid instruction for right worship, but in other instances are instruction only for a temporary time or situation. In other instances, they are *misinterpretations* of Scripture, and in still other instances they are part of “the law”—not the Ten Commandments, but the *lower-case* law, which included the “tutor.” This, as Paul noted in Galatians 3:23–25, was superseded by the New Covenant.

For example, *mitzvot* 87, based on Exodus 23:12, says to rest on the Sabbath, and *mitzvot* 91, based on Exodus 20:8, says to sanctify the Sabbath from beginning to end. These are both valid instruction for right worship—not because they are rabbinic ordinances, but because whether under the Old Covenant or the New Covenant, the seventh-day Sabbath is holy time and a commanded, sacred assembly (Leviticus 23:3; Hebrews 10:25). Observing the Sabbath is the fourth of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:8), and Jesus Christ kept the Sabbath holy (Luke 4:16), as did His apostles (Acts 13:42–44).

However, *mitzvot* 90, based on Exodus 16:29, says not to walk outside the city boundary on the Sabbath, which was an interpretation of God’s instruction for a *temporary* time or situation. That this was not meant as a perpetual ordinance should have been blatantly obvious to the so-called rabbinic experts, since later, God Himself commanded Israel to walk

around the entire city of Jericho for seven days, which would have included at least one Sabbath (Joshua 6:3–4). And these were likely the seven days of Unleavened Bread, thus making “the seventh day,” when Israel walked around Jericho *seven* times, a *high* Sabbath. If this is not sufficient proof that *mitzvot* 90 is in error, then consider that Jesus Christ Himself utterly cast down the supposed “authority” of these additional, rabbinic ordinances when He and His disciples departed the city and “went through the grainfields” plucking and eating heads of grain (Luke 6:1), which would have violated *mitzvot* 88. The Pharisees then accused Him of “doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath” (v. 2)—but Jesus Christ never broke the Sabbath. He was simply demonstrating the error of these additional, manmade, rabbinic *dogma*.

Mitzvot 84 is based on Numbers 15:38, which required tassels on all four-cornered garments. Verse 39 explains the *purpose* of the tassels—so that people may look at them “and remember all the commandments of the LORD and do them.” Similarly, *mitzvot* 79 is based on Deuteronomy 6:8, which required phylacteries on the head. Both tassels and phylacteries were an added but *temporary* ritual under the Old Covenant *tutor*. Under the Old Covenant, with very few exceptions, the people had hard hearts that had not been converted by the Holy Spirit, so they did not remember and did not keep God’s law (cf. Zechariah 7:12; Ezekiel 11:19). Jesus Christ did *not* destroy the law or do away with the Ten Commandments (Matthew 5:17), but He did establish the New Covenant (Hebrews 7:12; 8:6). So, since Pentecost 31 AD, our hearts can be converted from “hearts of stone” to “hearts of flesh” by the power of the Holy Spirit. Instead of tassels and phylacteries as part of the temporary tutor helping us remember the law, the law is now written in the hearts of God’s saints (Ezekiel 11:19; 2 Corinthians 3:2–3).

As Mr. Gerald Weston has explained, “Ritual practices were given as temporary reminders, as a schoolmaster or tutor to teach God’s ways to those without His Spirit (Galatians 3:23–25). But without the Holy Spirit, Israel remained carnal in thinking and action. Phylacteries, tassels, and animal sacrifices were not enough. God is not interested in these outward displays. What delights Him is a changed heart. God gives us the Holy Spirit to transform us, to make us different from our worldly neighbors” (“Better than Phylacteries,” *The Living Church News*, May–June 2022).

Others of the various 613 *mitzvot* can also be easily demonstrated as either obsolete or erroneous. For example, *mitzvot* 380, based on Numbers 28:9, is to bring two additional lambs as burnt offerings on the Sabbath—but the entire sacrificial system was rendered obsolete by Jesus’ sacrifice (Hebrews 9:11–28). And while *mitzvot* 6 and 7 (based on Leviticus 22:32), *mitzvot* 10 (based on Exodus 20:7), and others give valid caution to honor God’s name, many Messianic Jews

mistakenly believe that these require people to use Hebrew words for the names of God. Although usually done with sincerity, this demonstrates ignorance—and sometimes vanity. For a deeper study about “sacred names,” you can review the *Living Church News* articles “How God’s Names Reveal His Nature and Power” (May–June 2011) and “The Truth About Sacred Names” (July–August 2000).

Ironically, the Messianic and Hebrew Roots communities are rebuilding the very “wall of separation” between Jew and Gentile that Jesus Christ tore down. Again, while Christ *never* abolished the Ten Commandments, the Sabbath, or the biblical Holy Days, He has abolished “the law of commandments contained in ordinances,” as Ephesians 2:14–15 explains. The “ordinances” spoken of in this passage are the Greek *dogma*, which can refer to civil decrees of men, as commentaries such as *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* rightly point out. (For a thorough study on how Ephesians 2:14–15 reveals that the Messiah has provided for reconciliation of Jew and Gentile, see “The Peace and Reconciliation of Ephesians 2:14” in the July–August 2018 *LCN*.)

The original New Testament Church did not follow the 613 *mitzvot*, and Jesus does not require us to do so. In fact, Jesus provided for the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile, in part by abolishing many of the very rabbinic ordinances to which Messianic Jews are returning.

What About the Trinity?

With their roots in traditional Protestantism, it should be no surprise that most Messianic Jews accept some form of the false Trinity doctrine. For example, in their article “Is the Trinity in the Hebrew Scriptures?,” the international Messianic group Jews for Jesus states, “There is clear evidence that three personalities are referred to as divine and as being God” (April 27, 2018). And, according to Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry, “Messianic Jews believe that Jesus is the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity” (“What is Messianic Judaism?,” *CARM.org*, October 14, 2013).

According to the Congregation Shema Yisrael, founded in Detroit in 1986, “The doctrine of the Trinity is one of the most important doctrines of the Christian Faith.... The knowledge of the *HaSheeloosh HaKadosh* (the Holy Trinity) does not come from nature, but from divine revelation. Reason may lead us to believe in the oneness of God, but it takes God’s self-disclosure to reveal His Tri-unity, His Three-in-Oneness.... Since God has revealed His unique Triune nature, it is essential that we think of God as He is or suffer the most dire consequences” (“The Jewishness of the Trinity,” *Shema.com*, October 11, 2012).

And finally, recall the First Hebrew Christian Church of Chicago, mentioned in the 1957 *Time* article. Like many, they have also migrated from Sunday worship to Sabbath worship and have changed their name to sound more “Jewish,” but

still teach the Trinity. According to their official website, “Adat was founded by David and Ester Bronstein in 1934, as the First Hebrew Christian Church of Chicago.... The name was changed to Adat Hatikvah in 1974” (*AdatHatikvah.org*, accessed January 2023). Additionally, according to their Statement of Faith, “We believe in one God, creator of all things, infinitely perfect, all knowing, all powerful, ever present, eternally existent in three persons, Abba (Father), Ben (Son), and Ruach HaKodesh (Holy Spirit).”

But is belief in a “triune God” biblical? As Mr. Gerald Weston wrote in *John 3:16: Hidden Truths of the Golden Verse*, “Now, consider—if the Holy Spirit is a person, then who would Jesus’ Father be? The Holy Spirit would be Jesus’ Father! But we know this cannot be. Thus, we can see the fallacy of the Trinity teaching. Of course, when Trinity-believers are confronted with this passage, one will often hear the response, ‘You don’t understand the doctrine of the Trinity.’ But that is okay, because neither does the person who responds this way” (p. 5).

Honest historians admit that the concept of a triune Godhead was *not* a doctrine of the original New Testament Church. As Harvard theologian and scholar Alvan Lamson summarized, “The modern doctrine of the Trinity is not found in any document or relic belonging to the Church of the first three centuries.... There is nowhere among these remains a coequal trinity.... It was of later origin” (*The Church of the First Three Centuries*, 1860, pp. 341–342).

True Christians Worship in Spirit and Truth

“God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:24). They must “contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). The fact of the matter is that the Messianic Jewish and Hebrew Roots movements, while perhaps having good intentions, contain *much* confusion and error. Those tempted by their teachings should heed God’s warning: “Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; *you shall not add to it nor take away from it*” (Deuteronomy 12:32; cf. Revelation 22:18–19). They need to obey the authority of Jesus Christ—not only as the One who gave the law (1 Corinthians 10:4), but also as the One with the authority to institute the New Covenant and instruct us in how to observe the law (John 5:22–27).

We are thankful for Jesus, our Savior and Elder Brother, who is “the Apostle and High Priest of our confession” (Hebrews 3:1) and “the Messiah” (John 1:41). We are thankful that our loving God has preserved His inerrant word throughout the ages and has guided His Church to teach *right* doctrine, practice *right* government, and focus on preaching the *true* Gospel as “the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15). And we pray that God will call many more into His Church: the Church of God. (LN)



An Unleavened Lineup: More Than Just Bread

One of the joys of the Days of Unleavened Bread is preparing treats that we rarely make during other times of the year. As an aid to your joy, we are publishing a collection of recipes in this year's Living Church News—hopefully you will find something new to try!

Of course, there is no requirement to bake your own bread, and you can also find appropriate unleavened bread items at many grocery stores. After a few minutes of reading labels, you take your choices to the cashier, and you have unleavened bread to remind you of lessons of these special days. However, when feasible, preparing recipes ourselves also highlights and enhances the pleasure and delight of God's ways in a way that commercial products cannot, and usually

adds the extra benefits of sharing with and serving others. We presume that everyone will adapt these recipes to fit their personal needs.

This year, the girls of Living Education–Charlotte teamed up with ministers' wives here at headquarters to bake each of these delicious dishes, and our photographers were there to capture the fun! One of the benefits of time at the “on campus” Living Education program is special opportunities just like these.

We hope that this will be a most inspiring, encouraging, and joyous Festival season for all of you! And may the food we enjoy during these days remind us to take in the true unleavened bread of sincerity and truth as we observe the Festivals God has designed for our blessing.

—Editorial Staff

Breads and Crackers

Passover Bread

Several Passover bread recipes have been circulated in the Church over the years. This recipe is based on Mrs. Isabell Hoeh's, published by the Radio Church of God and Ambassador College in 1960, and should be used for any homemade Passover bread, scaled up as necessary.

2 cups whole wheat flour
 ¾ teaspoon salt
 1½ tablespoons butter
 1 tablespoon olive or vegetable oil
 ½ cup water

Method:

Preheat oven to 400°F. Mix together the flour and salt. Cut in butter with two knives or a pastry blender, as for pastry. Combine oil and water and mix well, then pour over flour mixture and mix lightly with a fork. If more water is needed, add no more than a tablespoon at a time, just enough for dough to form a ball. When dough forms a ball, knead on floured board until dough is smooth. Working with one ¼-cup to ⅓-cup portion at a time, roll out on floured board until thin. Place on ungreased cookie sheet and trim edges neatly before baking. Bake for 7 to 10 minutes until lightly browned and slightly puffed.

Grandma's Unleavened Bread (Gluten-Free)

1 cup gluten-free flour
 2 tablespoons brown sugar
 ⅛ teaspoon salt
 4 ounces cream cheese
 ½ cup (1 stick) butter
 1 teaspoon xanthan gum (omit if already in your flour)

Method:

Preheat oven to 350°F. Mix butter and cream cheese together with a mixer. Add flour, sugar, salt, and xanthan gum. Mix well. If using a hand mixer, you may need to knead in the last of the flour, as the dough will have the consistency of roll-out cookie dough. When dough comes together, wrap in plastic and refrigerate for a few hours or overnight. Roll out dough and cut into crackers or use a biscuit-cutter or cookie cutters. Bake for about 10 minutes.

Note: You can add some flaxseed meal for a nutty flavor, or if you are new to gluten-free baking, or to add a whole-grain texture.



Herbed Unleavened Bread

Herbed Unleavened Bread

1½ cups all-purpose flour
 ½ teaspoon salt
 1 tablespoon dried oregano
 1 teaspoon dried rosemary (or thyme, basil, oregano, sage, or Italian seasoning)
 2 tablespoons olive oil
 ½ cup water

Method:

Combine flour, salt, and herbs. Stir the oil and water into the dry ingredients until the mixture forms a dough. Knead the dough for about 3 minutes, until it becomes smooth. Divide the dough into 4 pieces and roll each one into a ball. On an ungreased work surface, roll out each piece of dough to ¼-inch thickness. Heat a skillet over medium heat and cook each dough round for 2 minutes per side, or until golden brown. Don't overcook.

Soft Unleavened Bread

3 cups flour
 1 teaspoon salt
 1½ cups milk
 3 eggs (4 if using whole wheat flour)
 2 tablespoons oil or butter

Method:

Preheat oven to 450°F. Mix flour and salt together. Mix eggs and oil together. Add egg mixture to flour mixture, then add milk. Beat hard for 2 to 3 minutes, then pour into greased pan or baking sheet with sides. Bake for about 20 minutes.

Note: This recipe works very well for sandwiches.

Easy Cheesy Crackers (Gluten-Free)

5 tablespoons butter, melted
 2 cups almond flour
 1 teaspoon xanthan gum
 ⅛ teaspoon kosher salt
 1 egg, lightly beaten

½ cup shredded Cheddar cheese or grated Parmesan

Optional: “Everything bagel” seasoning

Method:

Preheat oven to 350°F. Melt butter. Set aside to cool. Mix the almond flour, xanthan gum, cheese, and salt in a medium bowl and whisk thoroughly. Pour in the butter and mix until evenly combined. Add the lightly beaten egg and knead until it forms a ball. Cover in plastic wrap and place in freezer for 5 minutes to allow the butter in the dough to firm up. Roll dough between two pieces of parchment paper, then remove top piece of parchment. If desired, sprinkle with “everything bagel” seasoning and lightly roll the seasoning into the dough. Cut crackers to desired size and carefully place them on a baking sheet. (Dough will be fragile so a small cake spatula will be helpful.) Bake for 8–12 minutes, until the crackers are lightly golden. Time may vary depending on the thickness of the crackers.

Note: The cheese can be omitted if you prefer.

Einkorn Crackers

2½ cups whole wheat einkorn flour

1 teaspoon salt

½ cup oil or melted butter

2 tablespoons honey

¼ cup water

1 tablespoon “everything bagel” seasoning



Method:

Preheat oven to 400°F. Combine flour and salt in medium-sized mixing bowl. Add butter or oil, honey, and water, and mix until fully incorporated. Place parchment paper on baking sheet and spread the dough on it. Pat dough out evenly (about 10 inches by 16 inches). The dough will be thin. Sprinkle seasoning evenly over the dough. Using a knife, slice the dough into 1½-to-2-inch squares. Bake 6 to 10 minutes, depending on thickness.

Cookies and Bars

Joyful Almond Energy Bites

Makes 20

2 cups Medjool dates, pitted (about 1 pound)

3 tablespoons cocoa powder

1 pinch salt

¼ teaspoon vanilla extract

½ cup sliced almonds

⅓ cup shredded unsweetened coconut

⅛ teaspoon coconut extract (or almond extract, or additional vanilla extract)

Optional: 2–3 tablespoons mini chocolate chips

Method:

Add dates, almonds, coconut, cocoa powder, vanilla and other extracts, and salt to food processor. Cover and blend until the mixture comes together in a ball. Depending on the freshness of the dates, the mixture may be a bit dry. If it does not come together into a ball, add 1 teaspoon of water at a time, blending between additions until mixture becomes a ball. Add chocolate chips, if using, and pulse or fold in with a spatula to incorporate evenly. Scoop out 1-tablespoon portions of dough and roll between hands to form into smooth balls. If mixture is sticky, you may need to dampen your fingers very slightly with a drop or two of water. Store in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to a week, or in the freezer for about a month.



Jam Bars

3 cups flour

½ teaspoon salt

3 cups quick oats

2 cups packed brown sugar

1½ cups (3 sticks) butter

Method:

Preheat oven to 370°F. Sift together flour and salt. Stir in oats and sugar. Cut in butter with two knives or a pastry blender until crumbly. (May need to add a bit of water to make dough hold together.) Pat ⅔ of the dough evenly into 13”x9” or 15”x10” ungreased baking pan. Spread with 2 cups of any kind of jam.

(Jam will spread more easily if stirred with a fork before spreading it.) Sprinkle remaining crumb mixture over the jam layer. Bake 30–35 minutes.

Desserts

Chocolate Cassis Cake

12 tablespoons (1½ sticks) butter
10 ounces bittersweet chocolate, chopped
½ cup unsweetened cocoa powder
6 tablespoons crème de cassis liqueur
1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
5 extra-large eggs (at room temperature)
1 cup sugar
¼ teaspoon kosher salt

Method:

Preheat oven to 350°F. Prepare pan: Spray 9-inch springform pan with baking spray containing flour. Line the bottom of the pan with parchment paper and spray again with baking spray.

Melt butter and chocolate together in a heat-proof bowl set over a pan of simmering water, stirring occasionally until smooth. Set aside to cool for 5 minutes. Whisk in the cocoa powder, cassis, and vanilla, and set aside. With an electric mixer, beat the eggs, sugar, and salt on high speed for 3 to 5 minutes, until pale yellow and tripled in volume. Pour the chocolate mixture into the egg mixture and gently but thoroughly fold them together with a rubber spatula. Pour the batter into the prepared pan and bake for 35 to 40 minutes, until just barely set in the center. Allow to cool in the pan for 30 minutes, and then release the sides of the pan. Invert the cake carefully onto a flat serving plate, remove the parchment paper, and cool completely.

Glaze:

6 ounces semisweet chocolate, chopped
¼ cup heavy cream
2 to 3 tablespoons crème de cassis liqueur
½ teaspoon pure vanilla extract

Method:

Melt the chocolate and cream together in a heat-proof bowl set over a pan of simmering water. Stir until smooth. Off the heat, whisk in the cassis and vanilla. Allow to cool for 10 minutes and spread over just the top of the cake.

Berry Sauce:

1 pint fresh raspberries
1 pint fresh strawberries, hulled and thickly sliced

⅓ cup sugar
⅓ cup crème de cassis liqueur

Method:

Fifteen minutes before serving, toss the berries gently with the sugar and cassis. Cut the cake into wedges and serve with the berries on the side.

Flourless Chocolate Cake (Gluten-Free)

(To make this dairy-free, use a plant-based butter of your choice and dairy-free chocolate.)

¼ teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
½ cup cocoa powder
1 cup sugar
6 large eggs, slightly beaten
10 ounces semisweet or bittersweet chocolate
¼ cup powdered sugar
1 cup butter (2 sticks) or margarine
Mint sprigs and assorted berries for garnish

Method:

Preheat oven to 350°F. Grease a 10-inch springform pan, then line bottom of pan with parchment paper.



Flourless Chocolate Cake

In a small saucepan, combine chocolate and butter and melt over medium-low heat, stirring occasionally, until completely melted and blended. Remove from heat and let cool. In large bowl, combine sugar, cocoa, and salt with a whisk until well blended. Add eggs and vanilla and whisk until smooth. Add ⅓ of chocolate mixture and stir until incorporated. Repeat with remaining ⅔ of chocolate. Pour batter into prepared pan and bake for 40 minutes. Cake should be just set but still soft in the center. Let cool completely. To serve, sift powdered sugar over the top of the cake and garnish with mint and berries.

Fruit Peak

1 cup (2 sticks) softened butter
 2 cups sugar
 ¾ teaspoon almond flavoring
 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
 4 eggs
 3 cups flour
 1 cup frozen blueberries or 1 can cherry pie filling

Method:

Preheat oven to 350°F. Cream together the butter, sugar, almond flavoring, and vanilla. Beat in eggs. Stir in flour until fully incorporated. Spread thinly on oiled jelly roll pan. Drop spoonfuls of the fruit onto the dough, spacing them evenly. Gently press the fruit into the dough. Bake for 35 to 40 minutes, until the dough is cooked through.

Noisette Tulipes

Serves 10

½ cup hazelnuts (or pecans), finely chopped or ground
 ¼ cup (½ stick) butter
 2 large egg whites
 ½ cup sugar
 ½ teaspoon salt
 ¼ teaspoon almond or rum extract
 ⅓ cup unsifted all-purpose flour

Method:

Preheat oven to 375°F. In shallow pan, bake hazelnuts for 10 to 15 minutes in preheated oven until skins crack. Remove from oven, wrap in towel. When cool enough to handle, roll nuts in towel to remove as much skin as possible. (Bake pecans for 7–10 minutes.) Chop nuts very small.



Spray two large cookie sheets with baking spray containing flour. In small saucepan, melt butter then set aside to cool. In small bowl, whisk egg whites with the sugar, salt, and extract

until mixture is foamy. Whisk in melted butter, then flour. Add finely chopped nuts.

Trace ten 5-inch circles on prepared cookie sheets. Spoon 2 level tablespoons of batter onto each circle and spread evenly to fill circle. Bake 5 minutes or until edges are brown. Lightly spray the bottoms of five 6-ounce custard cups or grease them. Using pancake turner, lift cookies from baking sheet and invert onto greased bottoms of custard cups. By hand, mold each cookie into a tulip shape around the cup (*tulipe* is French for “tulip”). If the cookies are too brittle, reheat them briefly in the oven. Cool completely on the cups over a wire rack, then lift the cookie tulips off the cups. Bake and shape five cookie tulips at a time.

Sauce and topping:

1 package (12 ounces) frozen unsweetened raspberries, thawed. Honey to taste. Gently simmer raspberries with honey for 20–30 minutes.

Serving Suggestion:

1½ quarts vanilla ice cream, slightly softened
 ½ pint fresh raspberries
 Mint leaves

To serve, fill cookie tulips with scoop of ice cream. Drizzle lightly with raspberry sauce, then scatter fresh berries over each tulip and plate. Garnish with mint leaves.

Note: This recipe is super easy after you have made it once or twice.

Pastries**Danish Almond Pastry****Step one:**

½ cup (1 stick) butter, softened
 1 cup flour
 2 tablespoons water

Method:

Preheat oven to 350°F. Cut ½ cup butter into 1 cup flour. Sprinkle 2 tablespoons (or more) of water over mixture and mix with fork. Round into a ball, then divide in half. On ungreased baking sheet, pat out each portion to make a strip 12 inches long and 3 inches wide. Strips should be about 3 inches apart.

Step two:

½ cup (1 stick) butter

1 cup flour
 1 cup water
 1 teaspoon almond extract
 3 eggs

Method:

In medium saucepan, heat $\frac{1}{2}$ cup butter and 1 cup water to rolling boil. Remove from heat and quickly stir in almond extract and 1 cup flour. Stir vigorously over low heat until mixture forms a ball, about one minute. Remove from heat. Beat in eggs all at one time and beat until smooth. Divide mixture in half and spread each pastry strip with half of mixture, covering completely. Bake about 1 hour, or until top is crisp and brown. Cool.



Danish Almond Pastry

Frosting Glaze:

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup powdered sugar
 1 tablespoon butter, softened
 $\frac{1}{2}$ – $\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoon almond extract or $\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoon vanilla extract
 1 tablespoon water
 Chopped nuts

Method:

Mix together until smooth. Spread half over each of the two baked pastries and sprinkle with chopped nuts.

Note: This recipe also works well with gluten-free flour.

Unleavened Fruit Pastry

1 cup (2 sticks) butter, softened
 $\frac{2}{3}$ cup sour cream
 1 teaspoon salt
 $2\frac{1}{2}$ –3 cups all-purpose flour
 Jam or jelly of your choice

Method:

Preheat oven to 375°F. Combine softened butter, sour cream, and salt. Add $2\frac{1}{2}$ cups flour. If dough is very sticky, add re-

maining flour. Allow dough to rest for 5 to 10 minutes, and then roll out to even thickness, about $\frac{1}{8}$ -inch thick. Cut circles out of the dough with a biscuit cutter. You will need an even number of circles. Put half of the cut circles onto a baking sheet. Spoon a desired amount of jam or jelly onto the circles. Use the remaining circles to cover the jellied halves and crimp the edges together with your fingers or a fork. Brush a little milk or beaten egg over the tops of the pastries. Bake for 20 minutes or until the pastries are lightly golden.

Walnut Tarts

Makes 24

Pastry:

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup (1 stick) butter
 3 ounces cream cheese
 1 cup sifted flour

Method:

Cream butter and cream cheese together. Add the flour and mix well. Roll into 24 balls. Chill for 20 minutes and then press into small (2-inch) tart pans.

Filling:

1 cup chopped walnuts
 $\frac{3}{4}$ cup brown sugar
 1 egg
 1 tablespoon melted butter
 1 teaspoon vanilla extract

Method:

Preheat oven to 350°F. Mix filling ingredients together. Divide filling evenly among the tart shells. Bake for 25 minutes.



Walnut Tarts





In Loving Memory

Mzee Ephraim Osumba Abok, the Area Pastor for Western Kenya, died December 1 after suffering with increasing health



problems over the past few years. “Mzee” is a Swahili term of endearment or honor for an elder statesman who has earned the respect of his people.

Mr. Abok was born in the area where he lived most of his **80** years of life. His grandfather gave land to the first Seventh-Day Adventist missionaries who arrived on the shores of Lake Victoria from Canada in 1911, and Western Kenya proved a

fertile ground for their work. Sabbath-keeping became very common throughout the area. However, it was an address by an elder from the Church of God about the Festivals of the Eternal that was the catalyst by which Mr. Abok was called to the truth and became convicted of the Sabbath Day and the Holy Days. He recounted those events in the “Behind the Work” video prepared for the 2022 Feast of Tabernacles.

In 1963, he married Hellen, and they were married for 59 years. Together, they raised a family of six sons and four daughters, two of the daughters proceeding him in death. From that family arose 37 grandchildren. His love for his large family was evident, with some grandchildren always present whenever I visited.

Mr. Abok spent his working life as a Veterinary Officer for the County Council of Homa Bay. In that role, he served as Skins and Hides Inspector. Eventually, the needs of the Church led him to retire from that role to be a peasant farmer and serve in the ministry. He was known as a man of integrity and as a wise counselor based on God’s word. He was an effective leader among his own people and listened to people before making a contribution. I vividly remember the first time I spent with him and the elders. He encouraged the men to speak and ask questions so that they were answered to their satisfaction before he made any comments himself.

At his funeral, conducted on December 22, some 2,500 people from across Kenya and a few from neighboring countries gathered to pay their last respects to a man who had touched their lives. Representatives of many of the Church of God groups were present for the event, which took place over 26 hours, from the time the casket was taken from the mortuary until it was laid to rest in the ground on the family property. During that time, hymns were sung by many choirs, messages were given, and relatives and representatives of many other groups offered many eulogies.

Mr. Abok is also survived by two brothers and two sisters. Three of his siblings are members of the Living Church of God.

—Peter G. Nathan

Mrs. Tafiolo Pereira, 56, died on December 2. Baptised in 2016, Mrs. Pereira set a fine example of a Christian woman who had a beautiful, quiet, and gentle spirit. Area Pastor Paul Kearns conducted her graveside service, which was attended by 150 people, evidence of how much she was loved by those who knew her. Mrs. Pereira leaves behind her husband, four children, and nine grandchildren. She will be greatly missed by her family and the Auckland, New Zealand, congregation.

Mr. John Reneman, 85, died peacefully at home with his wife by his side on December 25. Mr. Reneman was a native of West Virginia who moved to North Carolina 15 years ago. There, he came in contact with God’s Church, began attending, and was baptized in December 2019. He was much loved in the local congregation and will be greatly missed by his friends and family. He is survived by his loving wife, Sue—

We want to hear about the major events in the lives of our brethren. If your family has had a birth, death, marriage, or major anniversary, please ask your local pastor to send word to the *Living Church News*, PO Box 3810, Charlotte, NC 28227-8010 (or to send an e-mail to lcn@lcn.org). To guarantee inclusion, all submissions must be received within six months of the date of the event.

also a faithful Church member—as well as by three children, three grandchildren, and five great-grandchildren.

Mr. and Mrs. Clyde (Dorothy) Wolford died three and a half months apart in the last months of 2022. Mrs. Wolford, **82**, died September 10, and Mr. Wolford, **85**, died December 29. They had been married for 64 years. Mr. and Mrs. Wolford were longtime members, baptized together in March 1969,

and were pillars in God's Church. They served the brethren and the Church as deacon and deaconess for decades. Mr. and Mrs. Wolford are survived by their six children and 14 grandchildren, as well as by great-grandchildren and great-great-grandchildren. They will be deeply missed by their families, the Bristol, Virginia, congregation, and the other congregations they served. Mr. Lenny Bower conducted their funeral services.

Births

Mr. and Mrs. Derek (Mariah) Lee are pleased to announce the birth of their little girl, **Eden Rose Lee**. She was born at home on Thursday, January 26, weighing six pounds, 15 ounces, and measuring 20 inches long. Mom and baby are doing well, and big brothers Avery and Everest are very excited to help take care of their little sister! The Lee family attends in Charlotte, North Carolina.

After a long labor for Mum, Mr. and Mrs. Stephen (Rebecca) Mew welcomed **Katherine Violet Mew** on December 8. She weighed 3.68 kg (eight pounds) and measured 52 cm long. Mother and baby are both well and Katherine is well loved by her older brother and sister. The Mew family attends the Brisbane, Queensland, congregation in Australia.

Mr. and Mrs. William (Nadine) Mitchell are delighted to announce the birth of their firstborn son, **Ezra Wei Mitchell**, born October 30 weighing eight pounds, twelve ounces, and measuring 20 inches long. The Fort Lauderdale, Florida, brethren are excited to welcome this new addition to the congregation.

ORDINATIONS

Mr. Bruno Duval was ordained an elder on December 10 by Presiding Evangelist Gerald Weston, Canadian Regional Director Stuart Wachowicz, and Area Pastors Winston Gosse and Michael Heykoop. Mr. Duval currently works at the Canadian office.

Mr. Jean-Paul Landry was ordained a deacon on December 31 by Area Pastor Michael Aviles. Mr. Landry serves in the Hartford, Connecticut, congregation, as well as the Northeast region.

Mrs. Teri Neuman was ordained a deaconess on January 7 by Area Pastor Ed Breaux and elders Lester Clifton and David Crockett. Mrs. Neuman serves in the Ocean Springs, Mississippi, congregation.

Mr. William (Tom) Young was ordained an elder on January 7 by Area Pastor Ed Breaux and elders Lester Clifton and David Crockett. Mr. Young serves in the Ocean Springs, Mississippi, congregation.

Weddings & Anniversaries

The St. Louis congregation recently celebrated the **60th wedding anniversary of Mr. and Mrs. John (Gloria) Blakely**. They were married December 15, 1962. Mr. and Mrs. Blakely came into God's Church together and were baptized in 1968. They said that the secret to the longevity of their marriage has been knowing and living by God's truth.

COMMENTARY

Seventy-Two Hours

For most people, 72 hours is a nice three-day weekend, or maybe a short vacation. It is enjoyable, but often quickly forgotten. After all, it is only three days and nights. What could be the importance of such a short time in the larger scheme of things?

Consider the book of Jonah. God told Jonah to warn the people of the great Assyrian city of Nineveh that if they did not repent of their cruelty and atrocities, their city would be destroyed. But Jonah, a Hebrew, had seen his people become victims of great Assyrian cruelty, so he fled the scene, trying to escape his responsibility.

However, the ship on which Jonah booked passage was caught up in a terrible storm at sea. The sailors threw Jonah overboard to save their ship, but God had prepared a great fish to swallow him so that he would not drown. The Bible says that Jonah was in the belly of the great fish for three days and three nights—72 hours.

Think of what that must have been like. Jonah surely expected to die in this ordeal. Yet God made the great fish vomit Jonah out onto the seashore! One wonders if Jonah ever ate fish again, having seen the disgusting contents of fish guts from the inside. As Jonah recovered from this incredible deliverance, wondering “What next?,” God told him to warn Nineveh. This time, Jonah obeyed.

Jesus Christ used Jonah’s 72-hour ordeal as a powerful sign to answer the skeptical scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees who demanded that He do something to prove His Messiahship. Scripture records the event:

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered, saying, “Teacher, we want to see a sign from You.” But He answered and said to them, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matthew 12:38–40).

Think of it! The only direct sign Jesus Christ gave of His Messiahship was that He would spend 72 hours in the grave—as did Jonah, who was as good as dead in the belly of the great fish, were it not for God’s deliverance. The religious leaders who questioned Christ knew the story of Jonah very well, but it seems they never understood its true significance.

Today, most who profess Christianity follow a Good Friday/Easter Sunday tradition that makes a mockery of Jesus Christ’s own words of promise. There is no way to fit Jesus’ 72-hour promise within the mistaken idea of a Friday crucifixion and Sunday resurrection. The Easter story itself is a product of pre-Christian pagan traditions, and is nowhere found or countenanced in your Bible.

The Church of God rejects the false pagan corruptions of Christianity, and observes the Passover with the New Testament symbols of the bread and wine, as Jesus Christ taught His disciples to do. As we keep the Passover this year, let us be grateful for the deeply important 72 hours that our Savior spent in the grave for us!

—J. Davy Crockett III