

# *Forerunner*

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

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Should  
Mary Be  
Worshipped?



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Jesus' mother Mary receives relatively little mention in the Bible, yet the Catholic Church reveres her almost as much as her divine Son! Does the Bible give us any reason to believe that Mary is worthy of worship?  
**Reuters**

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# The Offerings of *Leviticus*

## Part Eight: Conclusion (Part One)

**R**omans 8:9-11, 15 provides an appropriate foundation for concluding this series of articles:

But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His. And if Christ is in you, the body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit is life because of righteousness. But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit which dwells in you. . . . For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by which we cry out, “Abba, Father.”

The receipt of God’s Spirit, providing union with the Father and the Son, is what essentially constitutes a Christian. Our union with God is not constantly changing, ephemeral, or merely visionary. It is reality. Because the Spirit of God begets us, we are part of His Family. But how much? Do we truly believe we have a relationship with God? Is God a part of our every day—when we get up in the morning, at work or play, in our cars, with our families, and when we go to bed at night?

The psalmist writes in Psalm 10:4, “The wicked

in his proud countenance does not seek God; God is in none of his thoughts.” Is God a reality to us all the day long, or are there long periods when He is not in our thoughts? Do we go through long stretches of time when we think only of carnal or secular things? Is everything we do filtered through the spiritual knowledge God reveals to us for creating Himself in us? Does everything we do pass the bar of His standards? Are we really part of His Family, the Body of Jesus Christ? Do we know? Does everything we do reflect the way the Family of God would do things?

Honestly answering these questions in the affirmative is a daunting order. Indeed, none of us can answer them all with a “Yes.” However, the apostle Paul charges us with this very obligation in II Corinthians 10:3-5:

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.

Could we do this? Why would God set it as a standard if it were not possible?

## Far Reaching Consequences

In I John 4, John makes a rather startling statement regarding our union with Christ. It is puzzling in that its practical application is vague to us because we are unfamiliar with the possibilities. Readers usually take a glimpse of it then move on, wondering about its meaning. The words themselves are simple enough, but their very simplicity adds to its confounding nature because, if it truly means what it appears to say, it is too good to be true! Lacking biblical evidence and a logical explanation for reaching such a wonderful conclusion, we pass on.

I John 4:15 says, "Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God." The context is obviously our union with God, as the words "abide" and "in" confirm. Verse 16 continues the thought: "And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him." *Abide* means "to live," "to continue with," or "to go on with." By substituting these synonyms, the last phrase reads, "He who continues or lives in love, continues or lives in God, and God in him."

The verse emphasizes an ongoing, unbroken, intimate relationship. Nothing can be closer than for one to be in another! Since John defines love in I John 5:3 as keeping the commandments, the word "love" in this verse indicates that it is being reciprocated between God and us, and it is what facilitates the continuance of the union and relationship. These verses in fact confirm what Jesus said on the eve of His crucifixion:

If you love Me, keep My commandments.  
And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever. The Spirit of truth, which the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. (John 14:15-17)

In verse 23, Jesus drops the term "Helper," showing more specifically who would be living in us: "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come

to him and make Our home with him." "Keep" indicates that the love of which Jesus speaks is not merely an affection, as *keep* means "to maintain, continue or carry on." It is therefore active and dynamic.

Has that wondrous promise actually taken place? Are we so united with God, so at one with Him, that Jesus Christ, our Creator, Savior, Redeemer, and High Priest has made us the place of His abode? If so, do our lives reflect that He is there? Are we giving evidence of His presence?

I John 4:17 contains the astounding statement: "Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world."

Peter announces in I Peter 4:17, "For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begin with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?" For those of us "in the church," our judgment began with God's calling and our conversion, and it continues to this very moment. Judgment will come to those living following Christ's return during the Millennium and to those in the second resurrection during the Great White Throne period.

Are we experiencing boldness or confidence (the Greek word can be translated either way; see Hebrews 3:6), or are we ashamed of Jesus Christ? Do we hide what we are? John suggests that we should be living boldly because we have a foundation of confidence that we are under the blood of Jesus Christ and have begun to keep His commandments. Are we ashamed about talking about our baptism into the church of God, His Family? Are we fearful about talking about specific doctrines, not to convert others, but simply to state our beliefs?

It is interesting that the Greek word translated "boldness" literally means "freedom of speech." It implies that nothing hinders a person. Love is being perfected in us so that we may be unhindered in our submission to God while under judgment. I John 4:17 then goes on to say, "As He is, so are we in this world." "He" is capitalized. The publishers have done this to draw attention to the fact that this pronoun refers to Christ Himself.

Whoever confesses  
that Jesus is the  
Son of God,  
God abides in Him  
and he in God.

— I John 4:15

If you love Me,  
keep My  
commandments.

— John 14:15

## Commonality in Union

The subject here is not another human being but the Deity, and John is saying we can be bold because we share a commonality with Him.

What did He accomplish? Where does He stand in relation to God and to us? How did He live His life? Jesus Christ lived His life confidently and

boldly. The apostle is essentially saying that, when God looks at us, He sees us as though we were Jesus Christ! Has anybody ever lived life closer to God than Jesus?

The phrase, "As He is so are we in this world," merits a second look. Ephesians 1:3 provides a similar illustration, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in heavenly places in Christ." Both statements say that Christ stands in place of us, another astounding aspect of God's grace. This is especially astonishing in that, if we consider ourselves soberly, we see weak, sinful human beings who have experienced many failures. By contrast, Christ was perfect in every aspect of life.

God is realistic in His perception of us. He does not fantasize when observing Mr. Smith or Mr. Jones, deluding Himself into thinking that He is looking at Christ. No, He literally sees Mr. Smith or Mr. Jones, but the converted are only accepted before Him because of Jesus Christ, because they bear His righteousness and because He lives in them. No man is accepted before Him on the basis of his own works of righteousness. Paul writes of the righteousness that enables us to be accepted before God in Philippians 3:8-9:

But indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith.

Paul comments on this righteousness again in Romans 3:21-22: "But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God which is through faith in Jesus Christ to all and on all who believe." This faith is imputed, accounted to us because of our faith in Jesus Christ when we possess no righteousness to gain us entrance or acceptance before God.

We can thus enter God's throne room and talk to Him because of Jesus Christ, and He accepts us before Him as if we were Jesus. If we extend this principle out into other aspects of Christian life, we can see that we always have the life and sacrifice of Christ preceding us as we walk the path to the Kingdom of God. This is why we can be bold: God accepts us on the basis of Christ's life and sacrifice.

We are all very concerned about sin. The concern to avoid it is good, but to be in great anxiety over it is not good. Some would be astonished to learn that God is less concerned about individual sins than He is about the overall trajectory of our lives. Showing consistent growth has a higher priority with Him than any individual sin committed out of weakness.

Galatians 5:6 says, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love." Consistent growth will be shown in the lives of those who live by love motivated by faith. The unstated but nonetheless overriding purpose of the offerings of Leviticus is to teach us the qualities needed to love God and fellow man. It is total devotion and sacrifice in keeping the commandments of God.

For in Jesus Christ,  
neither circumcision  
nor uncircumcision  
avails anything  
but faith working  
through love.

Galatians 5:6

## Identification With Christ

We cannot do this unless the closeness of our identification and union with Christ is a day-to-day reality and thoroughly understood by us. Our union with Him is incredibly close, as God perceives it. If anything can give us confidence in living life before God and the world, it ought to be our ability to perceive how we stand before Him. Paul writes in Romans 6:4, "Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life."

The word "with" will be the focus of our attention as we seek to understand more thoroughly our identification with Christ. The scrip-

ture says we were buried "with" Christ. Jesus was literally buried in the heart of the earth in a tomb because He was dead. The apostle Paul states in Romans 7:9, "For I was alive once without the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died." Like Paul, we are buried "with" Him by means of baptism.

We tend to take the word "with" for granted because we use it so commonly; it is a little preposition we stick in front of another word and hardly notice. But what does it mean? It means "in the company of." Every time we see the word "with" preceding Christ in a context that includes us, we are "in the company of" Him. It has a few other alternate usages such as, "a

For I was alive once  
without the law  
but when the  
commandment came,  
sin revived and I died.

Romans 7:9

member or associate of,” “characterized by,” “possessed of,” and many more. In fact, the *American Heritage College Dictionary* shows twenty-seven closely related but specifically different usages.

Romans 6:6 adds to being baptized with Christ, “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.” We are not only baptized with Him, we are also crucified with Him. Christ became sin to pay for our sins, suffered crucifixion, and died. We die when God reveals to us the knowledge of sin and we repent, accept the blood of Christ, and commit ourselves to be His disciples.

Our relationship with Christ is so close that we are perceived as sharing with Him His experiences. His experiences were literal and physical, and ours are every bit as literal and individually meaningful to our fulfilling God’s will but are spiritual. Each “with Him” statement shows we are on the same path in His company.

The relationship is of such closeness that Paul describes it in Galatians 2:20 as, “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.”

Paul expands further on this in Colossians 2:12-13:

[You were] 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.

Thus, resurrection with Him is added to the experiences we share as members of Christ.

However, all of this places us under certain obligations. Paul continues with this theme in Colossians 3:1, “If you then were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God.” Becoming new men in and through Christ, we are charged with making the Kingdom of God our top priority in life. Even in this, though, we seek the Kingdom in His company.

Jesus addresses our identification with Him in His prayer on the eve of His crucifixion:

I have given them Your word; and the world

has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. (John 17:14-16)

The world Jesus speaks of is Satan’s anti-God system working in and through men. Within it are the cultures of all nations on earth. Jesus is clearly not of that anti-God system, and He declares that those accompanying Him, the apostles, were not of the world either. They were of the same system as He—the Kingdom of God. The same is true of those in Christ today.

Paul mentions this in a number of places. The most detailed is in I Corinthians 12:12-13, 27, in which he compares the church to Jesus Christ’s very body:

For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit. . . . Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually.

Ephesians 1:22-23 considerably strengthens our identification with Christ, “And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head of all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.” Paul’s illustration clearly pictures Christ as the head of a human body with the church filling out and completing the remaining body parts. We are perceived as being one with Him as part of that body. Is it even possible to identify with Him any closer?

God is clearly attempting to impress this point upon us through many repetitions. Notice Ephesians 5:23, 29-30, 32:

For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. . . . For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church. For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. . . . This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church.

Paul expands the union and oneness out to what a husband and wife’s should be.

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 to sin

Romans 6:6

If you then were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God.

Colossians 3:1

These references that reveal our exceedingly close identification with Christ all lend weight as to why we can say that God looks at us and sees Christ. It is an amazing and humbling aspect of His grace because we have certainly not earned such recognition on any or even the sum total of our works.

Thus John could write, "As He is, so are we in the world." Our union with Christ is so close because we are in Him and He is in us. Two

cannot be any closer! As mentioned earlier, this brings us under obligation. Is this reflected in our lives? Do we willingly, knowingly take Christ into all our activities, fully aware that we are taking with us the great God, the Creator and Savior of all mankind? Do we think of our oneness with Him to this degree? Do we speak the words He speaks? Do we allow His thoughts and our thoughts to be the same? We are getting to a vital aspect of daily life in understanding this responsibility.

## Our Standing Before God

In the sacrifices of Leviticus, Christ is pictured as meeting all of God's holy requirements. He perfectly met God's claim on man. God is governor of His creation and its lawgiver. When we break His law, He has a claim on us, which is, according to Romans 6:23, "The wages of sin is death." That claim is our life.

However, because He was the perfect burnt, meal, peace, sin, and trespass offerings, through Christ that claim is completely met for everyone who truly believes in His standing before God as the sacrifice that pays God's claim against sinners. Thus, those who believe are reconciled to God, and their standing before God changes to be the same as Christ's. His place before God

becomes our place because of Christ's righteousness.

This standing before God has nothing to do with rank or position but strictly with being free to be in the Father's presence, to fellowship with Him, and to be a son as Christ is. Romans 5:1-2 says, "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God." Thus, our standing with God is that we are there as Christ is. This amazing act of grace on God's part has purpose beyond merely being the way to His presence.

The wages of sin  
is death  
—Romans 6:23

## Standing Walking and Conforming

The well-known Romans 8:28-29 is a broad statement that needs to be refined to reveal this purpose:

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestinated to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.

The purpose for our admittance into God's presence is that "we be conformed to the image of His Son." When first justified by Christ's blood and admitted into God's presence, we stand before Him, but we are not yet in His Son's image. At this point, the work has only begun; Christ's righteousness is only legally imputed to us. That righteousness is indeed real, but it is not yet inscribed or engraved into our character to become part of our very being. We stand free, clear, and accepted, but we do not have the same

nature, mind, or character as the Son.

Romans 6:4 restates the reason for our being admitted into God's presence: "Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so *we also should walk in newness of life.*" Our altered standing before God enables us to walk in newness of life so we can be conformed to the image of His Son.

Walking requires effort, the expending of energy, to arrive at a desired destination. Are any works involved in the salvation process? "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10). These works most assuredly do not earn salvation, but at the same time, God requires them. In fact, this verse says we are being created for the very purpose of doing them! Such works are covered within the general term "walk."

Besides requiring effort, walking implies a

For we are His  
workmanship,  
created in Christ  
Jesus for good works,  
which God prepared  
beforehand that  
we should walk  
in them  
—Ephesians 2:10

destination, a goal. When a person walks, he is moving purposefully to accomplish something regardless of whether it is to flip a light switch, shop at a store, get some exercise, or go to work or school. God requires that we “walk in newness of life.” It is our God-appointed goal in life and the reason He invites us into His presence. Our lives cannot consist of aimless drifting; we are headed somewhere, even as Israel’s goal was the Promised Land.

I Peter 1:13-19 highlights what we must do:

Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, “Be holy, for I am holy.” And if you call on the Father, who without partiality judges according to each one’s work, conduct yourselves throughout the time of your sojourning here in fear; knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot.

Christianity is a way involving far more walking than talking. It requires effort, and most

scriptures imply that the walking is voluntary. It must be this way because, most of the time when we walk, it is because we have made a voluntary decision to move from one point to another. In God’s purpose, it is the only way to make the mind, nature, and character of Christ truly ours.

The last, brief phrase of Romans 6:4 contains a great deal about life’s overriding purpose! In a broad sense, it is what life after conversion is all about. It is awakening to the reality of our spiritual slavery and responsibilities through God’s calling, followed by a change of mind toward Him, and a spiritual death, burial, and resurrection so we might walk in conformity to Christ into God’s Kingdom.

God allows the sacrifice of Christ to take the place of the claim He has on us to restore us to fellowship with Him, which is absolutely essential in providing us the strength, motivation, and gifts—whatever it takes—to complete the walk successfully. Mankind has never enjoyed this; it has not had contact with God since He cut humanity off by putting Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden.

This walking in newness of life is how going on to perfection is accomplished (Hebrews 6:1). God alters our standing with Him legally, graciously, and with generosity and kindness so we can fellowship with Him through prayer, Bible study, fasting, meditation, and obedience. God’s spiritual creation requires our participation. It cannot be impressed upon us; we must consciously make decisions to take that walk.

But as He who called you is holy you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, “Be holy, for I am holy.”  
—I Peter 1:15-16

## Difficult but Worth It

The walk is sometimes quite difficult, but Paul provides encouragement and hope in Romans 6:5-6:

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.

As difficult as our march from slavery might be at times, the glory of the resurrection and the complete putting off of the flesh lies before us.

The word “united” in verse 5 draws our attention because it is elsewhere translated “grafted” or “engrafted.” In John 15, Christ

describes Himself as a vine, and we are its branches. In Romans 9, Paul compares converted Israelites to natural branches and Gentiles as unnatural branches grafted into the same vine. Union is achieved with all sharing a part. All are receiving of the same source, and all are striving to produce the same fruit.

But how do we know we are attached to that Vine?

Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, “I know Him,” and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. (I John 2:3-5)

*(continued on page 18)*

He who says, “I know Him” and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him  
—I John 2:4

“Then we who are alive and remain  
shall be caught up together with them in the clouds  
to meet the LORD in the air.  
And thus we shall always be with the LORD.”

I Thessalonians 4:17

# Is Heaven the Reward of the Saved?

Some time ago, I joined five other members of God’s church in one of the most solemn activities that a person can ever experience: bearing the casket of a friend. In this case, we bore long-time church member Amanda Surette from a funeral chapel to a hearse and from the hearse to the grave. Sweet, little Mrs. Surette, who just a couple of weeks previously had softly murmured the Canadian national anthem in French to my family and I, had died.

On the seemingly interminable walk from the hearse to the grave site, memories of old beliefs came flooding to my mind—and questions and answers from God’s Word:

“Has Mrs. Surette’s soul gone to heaven?”

“No! It is her human spirit that has returned to God!”

“But how do we know that *our* doctrine is true?”

“We understand from God’s Word that Mrs. Surette and others will come up in the first resurrection.”

The encouraging words of I Thessalonians 4:17, often read at church funerals, speaks of this time, the first resurrection, and gives us an exciting description: “Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.”

However, some churches attempt to prove from this verse that heaven is the reward of the saved—that Christians will go to heaven and be there with

Christ forever. This article will provide a clear explanation of this verse—from the Bible.

## Origin of False Beliefs

First, where did the idea that heaven is the reward of the saved originate? Does the Old Testament teach it? Did Jesus and His apostles teach it?

A perusal of various encyclopedia articles on “heaven” will show that this doctrine originated with the pagan, polytheistic Greeks and Romans. Their deified heroes and other favorites of their multiple gods were supposedly given admission to their “heaven,” which they called “Elysium.”

Various peoples evolved their own versions of Elysium. The Germans and Scandinavians had their Valhalla. The American Indians had their Happy Hunting Grounds. The eastern Buddhists have Nirvana, which offers the dubious promise of “the extinction of all desire and personality.” Interestingly, the Western, professing Christian heaven is more similar to the original Greek concept.

Growing up in the Church of England, I never questioned the idea that one day we would go to heaven, although it was never proved from the Scriptures. What a shock I received when I first started listening to *The World Tomorrow* radio broadcast on Radio Caroline in 1966! I learned for the first time, after fifteen years of church atten-

“Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.”

dance, that Christ will come *from* heaven to be with us, rather than the other way around.

## The Kingdom of God

First, we need to review what God’s Kingdom really is and what the reward of the saved really is.

Daniel 2:36-43 describes four major kingdoms, empires, or governmental systems that have ruled over the greater part of the civilized world:

1. The Chaldean-Babylonian Empire (625 to 538 BC)
2. The Medo-Persian Empire (538 to 330 BC)
3. The Greco-Macedonian Empire (333 to 31 BC)
4. The Roman Empire (Established 31 BC. The imagery suggests that it will exist in some form until the end of the age.)

Clearly, these physical empires existed on earth. Now notice verses 44-45:

And in the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever. Inasmuch as you saw that the stone was cut out of the mountain without hands, and that it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold—the great God has made known to the king what will come to pass after this. The dream is certain, and its interpretation is sure.

These verses say that God’s Kingdom will encompass all of these previous kingdoms—on earth! Daniel 7:17-18 says much the same.

Daniel 7:27 adds a vital piece of

information to our understanding of where God’s Kingdom is:

Then the kingdom and dominion, and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven, shall be given to the people, the saints of the Most High. His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey Him.

God’s everlasting Kingdom shall not be in heaven but “*under* the whole heaven”!

Why then should we be surprised that God’s Kingdom will be on earth? God tells us through Moses that ancient Israel was a type of God’s Kingdom and, in fact, could have been His Kingdom had they obeyed Him:

Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (Exodus 19:5-6)

The very churches that misuse I Thessalonians 4:17 could better understand its meaning by studying the words of the so-called “Lord’s Prayer,” which many repeat every day: “Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10; see Micah 4:8). Jesus instructs His people to pray for God’s Kingdom to *come*, not to be taken away to it!

Obadiah 17, 21 tell us specifically where God’s Kingdom will be set up:

But on Mount Zion there shall be deliverance, and there shall be holiness; and the house of Jacob shall possess their possessions. . . . Then saviors shall come to Mount Zion to judge the mountains of Esau, and the kingdom shall be the LORD’s.

Likewise, one of our most beloved

passages shows that Jesus Christ will dwell on earth in Jerusalem, accessible to physical people and nations:

Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the LORD’s house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and peoples shall flow to it. Many nations shall come and say, “Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths.” For out of Zion the law shall go forth, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. (Micah 4:1-2)

Returning to the New Testament, Matthew 24:3 shows that the disciples knew, and therefore were taught by Jesus Himself, that He would come back to this earth, when they asked Him, “Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?”

In His reply, Jesus continually repeats that He will *come back* to this earth:

For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west; so also will *the coming of the Son of man* be. . . . Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see *the Son of Man coming* on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. . . . But as the days of Noah were, so also will *the coming of the Son of Man* be. (verses 27, 30, 37; see also verses 39, 42, 44, 46, 48, 50)

Some might argue that, because Jesus went to be with God the Father in heaven after His death and resurrection, we must go to heaven to be with Him. However, in John 14:3, Jesus tells His disciples that He will

come again to earth and will here receive them to Himself to be with Him: “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will *come* again, and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also.” If He wants us in heaven, why would He have to come here to get us? The Parable of the Minas or Pounds (see Luke 19:11-15) also makes this clear.

After all of Jesus’ teaching, the disciples, although still limited in their knowledge and understanding, knew for sure that Jesus was to restore His Kingdom to Israel (Acts 1:6). In Acts 1:9-11, their understanding is greatly enhanced:

Now when He had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, who also said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so *come* in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven.”

He will come down from heaven, through the clouds, and will set down on the Mount of Olives just outside Jerusalem (Zechariah 14:4). He will be clearly visible to human eyes.

Christ reveals to the apostle John in Revelation 19:11-21 that He will not return meekly or unnoticed to this earth. His return will be witnessed by the whole world whose kings and armies (verse 19) will gather to battle against Him. No secret, quiet “rapture,” whisking Christians off to heaven, but the most terrible battle in man’s history.

## Kingdom of Heaven?

Some scriptures speak of the Kingdom of Heaven. However, they mean just what they say: the Kingdom of heaven, not the Kingdom *in*

heaven. The word “of” denotes possession, not location: It is Heaven’s Kingdom.

In explaining this point, Herbert Armstrong often compared the grammar of the “Kingdom of Heaven” with that of the “Bank of Morgan.” We could use the Bank of New York as a more modern example. If I say, “I’m going to conduct business at the Bank of New York,” you would assume that I will be going to a local branch, not to the head office in New York City! It is the Bank *of* New York, not *in* New York, although its head office is in New York.

Similarly, it is the Kingdom *of* Heaven, not the Kingdom *in* Heaven, although its headquarters is in heaven. Our place in God’s Kingdom is, in fact, being reserved by Him in heaven right now, until Jesus Christ brings it with Him:

- [We are begotten again] to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you. (I Peter 1:4)
- And, behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according as his work. (Revelation 22:12)

## Meeting Him in the Air

There are so many scriptures that prove Christ is coming to earth to stay with us that when one puts them all together, it is astounding that any professing Christian who claims to use the Bible as his guide can believe the pagan idea that he is going to heaven. All one needs to do is to use a concordance to look up scriptures containing the words “kingdom” and “reward.”

Let us return to our original difficult scripture in I Thessalonians 4, and notice the previous verse: “For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice

of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first” (verse 16). This clearly proves that the timeframe is that of the second coming of Jesus Christ; not the death of each Christian.

Notice also that Christ is descending from heaven. We will not meet Him in heaven but in the atmosphere of the earth as He is on His way down.

Now comes the central question of this matter. We have just met Christ in the air! Where do we go from here? Up to heaven or back down to earth? I Thessalonians 4:17 says that we are to be with the Lord forever, but where will the Lord be? Again, many scriptures give the clear answer, but Zechariah 14:4 gives a concise one:

And in that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which faces Jerusalem on the east. And the Mount of Olives shall be split in two, from east to west, making a very large valley; half of the mountain shall move toward the north and half of it toward the south.

Could this be some “heavenly” Mount of Olives? No, it is the one “which faces Jerusalem on the east”! Could it be some “spiritual” Jerusalem? No, Jesus is going to split it in half!

He will have arrived on earth. Who will be with Him? The second half of verse 5 tells us: “Thus the LORD my God will come, and all the saints with You.” All the resurrected saints or holy ones will be with Him.

Will He stay on earth? Notice verse 9: “And the LORD shall be King over all the earth. In that day it shall be—‘The LORD is one,’ and His name one.” Yes, He will stay. The Kingdom of God and the reward of the saved are on this earth! As Jesus Himself tells us in Matthew 5:5, “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”

(continued on page 18)

# “Behold, A Virgin Shall Conceive . . .”

Has it ever seemed strange that Jesus Christ, our Savior, was born of a virgin? It is easy to pass off the virgin birth (Matthew 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-38; 2:4-7) as a necessary part in the physical purity of the One who would be the sacrifice for mankind’s sins, as well as a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. A moment’s consideration, though, raises a few downsides to such an unusual situation—ones God, however, considered not important enough to concern Him.

The most obvious negative is the certain stigma and thus likely rejection of Jesus as illegitimate. Cultures throughout history have shunned and demeaned children born out of wedlock, branding them as born in sin and hindering their ability to succeed in life. If they are not given up for adoption, illegitimate children often face low-class-citizen status even within their own families, particularly from step-fathers and step-siblings. It is a singularly rotten way to start out in life. Jesus had to face an accusation of illegitimacy at least once during His ministry (see John 8:41), and at the top of His accusers’ list of reasons must have been Deuteronomy 23:2, “One of illegitimate birth shall not enter the assembly of the LORD.”

Another problem with the virgin birth is its lack of believability to carnal-minded people. One can almost hear the snickering and see the winking of the typical earthy recipient of this kind of news: “Yeah, I’m sure it was ‘the power of the Highest’ overshadowing her. Heh, heh, heh!” A cynic would expect a young, betrothed woman, caught in such a compromising situation, to make up a fantastic story to get herself off the hook. Yet Mary and her betrothed husband Joseph, certainly not flighty, immature children, were so convicted of their experiences with the angelic messengers that they stood by it—and the subsequent life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ corroborates their explanation entirely.

Still another complication is the plethora of supernatural births of messiah-figures in pagan literature. Egypt, Babylon, Assyria, Greece, Rome, Carthage,

and many other ancient nations possessed stories of “sons of gods” mysteriously born into the world to save and rule their peoples. Although these stories do not describe true virgin births—they are predominantly products of intercourse between a god and a human maiden—they are close enough to warrant many raised eyebrows. The accounts in Matthew and Luke, however, are uniquely grounded in reality, sobriety, and majesty, setting them apart from the usually crass and sexual accounts of the heathen demi-gods’ conceptions and births.

A final disadvantage to the virgin birth is its lack of verifiability. In essence, we have to take God’s, Mary’s, and Joseph’s words for it, and skeptical people thus feel justified in writing it off as hearsay, fantasy, or contrivance. Because the first-century church made little mention of it, even many theologians dismiss the virgin birth as a later Christian interpolation to validate Jesus’ Messiahship and to spice up His origins. In other words, it is a nice story but made up out of whole cloth. Yet, this conclusion neither takes account of the validity of prophecy nor of the many other signs of Jesus’ authenticity as the Christ. It simply discounts the miraculous nature of Jesus altogether, while the internal evidence of Scripture conversely emphasizes it.

## The Gospel Accounts

Matthew’s account is plain and straightforward, as if he were laying out the facts in a court case, and in a way, he is building a case for the reader—particularly the Jewish reader—to accept Jesus as the Messiah. He takes great pains to present the facts that will show that Jesus fulfilled the prophecy in Isaiah 7:14 to the letter. What is more, this is an event in which Jesus Himself is passive, having no active part in the fulfillment of the prophecy. This, of course, increases the improbability of its achievement by human manipulation.

Matthew mentions Mary’s virginity several times. In Matthew 1:18, he writes, “After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, *before they came to-*

gether, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit.” In verse 20, the angel verifies this fact by repeating that her conception occurred via supernatural means: “for that which is *conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.*” Verse 23 quotes Isaiah 7:14, “Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel.” Finally, in verse 25, Matthew reports that Joseph “*did not know her* [a euphemism for sexual intercourse] till she had brought forth her firstborn Son.” In just eight verses, the apostle makes four either explicit or implicit references to Mary’s virginity, not only at the time of conception, but also throughout her pregnancy and for some time beyond.

In Matthew, this passage does not stand alone; it is only one of several scenes, along with His genealogy, in the first two chapters that together provide overwhelming proof that Jesus fulfilled many of the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament before He was old enough to have a hand in orchestrating their fulfillments. The virgin birth, however, comes first as the most astounding of them all.

For his part, Luke treats his material with precision, dignity, and grandeur. He immediately gives concrete details of time and place, setting the miraculous in the real world (Luke 1:16-27). The speech of both the angel and Mary is measured and dignified, though he is careful to include the young woman’s “troubled” reaction to the angel’s greeting, her consternation that she could become pregnant while still a virgin, and her humble, Hannah-like acceptance of God’s charge (verses 29, 34, 38). Luke does not overpaint the picture with gaudy details, reporting the simple yet astonishing announcement with respectful restraint, which adds to its solid reality.

Though the virgin birth is central to Luke’s passage, its emphasis is not on the uniqueness of this situation but on the divinity, nobility, and capability of the One it will produce. This is God’s way of putting matters in their proper perspective. The virgin birth is merely a miraculous means to an end—the advent of the Son of God in human form to perform the works that will bring salvation to humanity and eventually the Kingdom of God to this earth. Such a marvelous Person requires an astounding entrance to mark Him for His far-greater future accomplishments. The emphasis, then, is not on Mary and her condition but upon her divine Son and His purpose.

Finally, it should be noted that the angel admits that the virgin birth, along with Elizabeth’s pregnancy in old age, are things men consider “impossible.” His answer is to make us realize that in this matter we are not dealing with the things of men: “For with God nothing will be impossible” (verse 37). It is this assurance of God’s ability to turn reality on its head—from a human perspective—that elicits

Mary’s declaration of faithful submission to God’s will: “Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word” (verse 38).

## The Prophecy

Some commentators feel that the prophecy of the virgin birth appears within a longer prophecy that runs from Isaiah 7 through Isaiah 12. A theme that holds this seemingly disjointed prophecy together is a string of messianic prophecies, of which the virgin birth is merely the first (see Isaiah 7:14; 8:16; 9:2, 6-7; 11:1-5, 10). This is important in debunking a popular argument that the virgin-birth prophecy was only for the particular situation in Ahaz’s day. The other nearby messianic prophecies weaken this contention considerably.

Like many Old Testament prophecies, the sign of the virgin birth has both a typical and an antitypical—or a near and a later—fulfillment. Ahaz (c. 731-715 BC) was afraid that the recent alliance between Israel and Syria would tip the balance of power and spell Judah’s doom. God, however, assures Ahaz through Isaiah that no such thing would happen—in fact, within 65 years, Israel itself would be completely gone from the land (Isaiah 7:8)! The virgin birth, thought by some to be by a maiden within Ahaz’s house, was a sign from God that He would surely bring this to pass. Further, before the child could distinguish good from evil, both kings of Israel and Syria would be dead (verse 16; see II Kings 15:30; 16:9)!

Unfortunately, neither Isaiah nor the authors of the books of Kings and Chronicles document the fulfillment of this prophecy in Ahaz’s time. We are left to assume that it indeed happened, or it would be a worthless sign to Ahaz. The virgin and her son Immanuel remain unknown in history.

The only other significant debate regarding this prophecy is the Hebrew word *‘almâ*, translated “virgin.” The *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* comments:

Since *b’tûlâ* is used many times in the OT as a specific word for “virgin,” it seems reasonable to consider that the feminine form of this word [*‘almâ*] is not a technical word for a virgin but represents a young woman, one of whose characteristics is virginity. This is borne out by the fact that the LXX translates it as *parthenos* in two of its seven occurrences, and that its use in Isa 7:14 was quoted to Joseph by the angel as a prediction of the virgin birth. . . . There is no instance where it can be proved that *‘almâ* designates a young woman who is not a virgin.

The Greek term for “virgin,” *parthenos*, which Matthew uses in Matthew 1:23, has exactly the

*(continued on page 18)*

# Is Mary Worthy of Worship?

A major area of doctrine that sets Roman Catholicism apart from the rest of this world's Christianity is its view of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Many weighty schools of thought and doctrine center on the person and function of Mary, and if one examines Roman Catholicism to any degree, the importance Catholics place on the mother of our Savior becomes readily apparent.

These beliefs are not just intellectual. They have led to applications and manifestations that literally fill volumes. For example, when a Catholic prays the rosary, the "Hail Mary" is said *nine times* as often as the Lord's Prayer. Every Catholic church boasts a statue of Mary, if not an outright shrine, and the graven images of Mary often have more prominence than those of Christ.

This emphasis on Mary caused Mark Twain to observe in *The Innocents Abroad, Volume II*:

In all seriousness—without meaning to be frivolous—without meaning to be irreverent, and more than all, without meaning to be blasphemous,—I state as my simple deduction

from the things I have seen and the things I have heard, that the Holy Personages rank thus in Rome:

*First*—"The Mother of God"—otherwise the Virgin Mary.

*Second*—The Deity.

*Third*—Peter.

*Fourth*—Some twelve or fifteen canonized Popes and martyrs.

*Fifth*—Jesus Christ the Saviour—(but always as an infant in arms).

I may be wrong in this—my judgment errs often, just as is the case with other men's—but it *is* my judgment, be it good or bad.

Just here I will mention something that seems curious to me. There are no "Christ's Churches" in Rome, and no "Churches of the Holy Ghost," that I can discover. There are some four hundred churches, but about a fourth of them seem

to be named for the Madonna and St. Peter. There are so many named for Mary that they have to be distinguished by all sorts of affixes, if I understand the matter rightly.

## Sources of Doctrine

This past summer, as Pope John Paul II focused his efforts on reviving Catholicism in Europe, he made numerous statements entrusting the future of Europe to Mary. According to the ZENIT News Agency, he "placed Europe in Mary's hands," so that it will "become a symphony of nations committed to building together the civilization of love and peace." In the church of God, we put things in God's hands. Catholics put things into *Mary's* hands.

In October 2002, an item of controversy that reappeared in the Vatican—as it does on a regular basis—was the part that Mary plays in salvation and redemption. Large numbers of Catholic scholars, theologians, and clergy—including Pope John Paul II—are pushing for Mary to be officially recognized as "Co-Redemptrix," meaning she is a vital part of a Catholic's re-

demption, although supporters are quick to point out that they never put her on exactly the same level as Jesus Christ.

In God's church, our sole source of doctrinal teaching is the Bible, the inspired Word of God. For Catholics, though, the Bible is only *one* of the sources of dogma and doctrine—and, of course, they even have their own Bible, which allows them even more liberality when they look for scriptural backing. Another source and foundation of Catholic doctrine is church tradition. This means that if a certain person who meets their qualifications makes a statement, that statement can then be used as a doctrinal reference, just as we would use a scriptural reference. Every so often, one will hear about the Catholic Church canonizing or beatifying someone. In practical terms, this means the new saint is suddenly an authority, and church scholars can now use his or her writings to "prove" their doctrines.

The third source of doctrinal material for Catholics comes from "divine revelation." This can include statements by a Pope when he is speaking *ex-cathedra*—at which time his words are considered to be infallible—and it can also come from a vision or dream. Very often, church tradition and the associated "divine revelation" outweigh any scriptural basis. The doctrines concerning Mary are prime examples of this.

For instance, Catholics believe in the "Immaculate Conception" of Mary. This *major* doctrine states that Mary was conceived and born normally, but at the instant when her soul was fused to her flesh, she was protected and exempted from the stain of "original sin." The reasoning is that, for Jesus to be untouched by original sin, his mother, the one who conceived and bore Him, had to be "immaculate" as well.

In the *Catholic Encyclopedia* article on "Immaculate Conception," the writer admits this cannot be found in the Bible. Under the heading "Proof from Scripture," the article says, "*No direct or categorical and stringent proof of the dogma can be brought forward from Scripture. But*

the first scriptural passage which contains the promise of the redemption, *mentions also the Mother of the Redeemer*" (emphasis ours). The rest of the article then explores the "Proof from Tradition" and the "Proof from Reason." In essence, it says that this doctrine lacks scriptural backing, but it has plenty from church tradition and human wisdom. Since Catholics cannot find, or will not acknowledge, any scriptures that disprove it, then it is settled as official doctrine.

The *Catholic Encyclopedia's* article on "The Blessed Virgin Mary" also never explicitly gives a reason why Mary should be venerated as she is. The best it can do is to say that there is evidence that the early Catholic Church (AD 150-400) venerated her. This grudging admission becomes important later.

## Worthy of Worship?

The sole scriptural reference that even remotely suggests that Mary *might* be worthy of worship can be found in Luke 1:26-30:

Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And having come in, the angel said to her, "Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!" But when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was. Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God."

While the angel gives Mary a number of high compliments, nothing indicates that she is worthy of worship, let alone being an intercessor between Jesus Christ and His followers, a Co-Redemptrix, sinless for her entire life, or given any other honor aside from being God's chosen vessel for the purpose of the Son of God

being made flesh and blood. This is not to denigrate that role in the least, because truly it is a great honor, but God has throughout the ages chosen various people to fill different roles according to His will and purpose—and none of them are shown to be worthy of worship.

In verse 28, Gabriel tells Mary in his salutation that she is "highly favored," and in verse 30, that she "has found favor with God." The Greek word translated *highly favored* means "to grace," "to endue with special honor," or "to be accepted." The only other place it is used is Ephesians 1:6, where Paul says to the church at Ephesus and to the body of Christ generally, ". . . to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He *made us accepted* in the Beloved." From this example, we can see that being "highly favored" is not synonymous with being worthy of worship. Everyone in the body of Christ is *highly favored* because God has accepted us through the justification brought about by Christ's sacrifice.

In verse 30, Gabriel tells Mary that she has *found favor with God*. "Favor" is the Greek word *charis*, which means "graciousness of manner or action." It indicates favor on the part of the giver and thankfulness on the part of the receiver. It is most often translated "grace" in the New Testament. Gabriel tells Mary that she is the recipient of *charis*, of grace and favor by God—the emphasis is on what *God* is doing. The type of grace bestowed on Mary is implied to be sweetness, charm, loveliness, joy, and delight. Again, we see nothing in this verse to give any indication that Mary should be worshipped. She simply received God's favor by being chosen to fulfill this role.

## Blessed Among Women

Mary's cousin Elizabeth is inspired to recognize that Mary's baby is not just an ordinary baby, and she calls both Mary and her unborn Son "blessed":

And it happened, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, that the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Then she spoke out with a loud voice and said, “*Blessed* are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!” (Luke 1:41-42)

*Blessed* literally means “to speak well of.” It signifies celebrating with praises and invoking blessings upon a person. The New Testament uses it frequently, sometimes in relation to Christ, but often in relation to inanimate objects such as fish and loaves of bread. The *Amplified Bible* translates it as “favored of God.” Again, nothing in the wording indicates that Mary is worthy of worship.

Mary is not the only woman to be given the title of “blessed” in the Bible. In the Song of Deborah, Jael—the woman who invited the fleeing Sisera into her tent, encouraged him to sleep, and then drove a tent peg through his skull—is accorded this same honor: “*Most blessed* among women is Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite; *blessed* is she among women in tents” (Judges 5:24). Here, she is lauded as “blessed”—even “most blessed”—but there is no record of a shrine dedicated to her or of anybody worshipping her. She is simply recognized with a very honorable mention for the part she played in carrying out God’s plan.

During Christ’s ministry, a woman tries to draw special attention to Jesus’ mother, and Christ puts things in the proper perspective for us:

And it happened, as He spoke these things, that a certain woman from the crowd raised her voice and said to Him, “Blessed is the womb that bore You, and the breasts which nursed You!” But He said, “More than that, blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it!” (Luke 11:27-28)

Jesus agrees that, even though his

mother was “happy and to be envied,” as the *Amplified Bible* puts it, even more blessed is anyone who *hears* God’s Word and *obeys* it. He acknowledges that, yes, His mother was a *fine lady*—but anyone focusing on the personage of Mary was really missing the point. Christ was interested in the attitude and conduct of people, not their veneration of any human being!

We see a similar phenomenon within mainstream Christianity. Protestants tend to twist the gospel into simply a message about the person of Jesus Christ, and they like to gloss over the message that He actually spoke: “Repent [hear and obey], so you can be in alignment with the soon-coming Kingdom of God!” (Matthew 3:2; 4:17; Mark 1:15). They are so in love with the personality that they cannot hear what He says.

In addition to receiving a unique calling and favor by God, Mary was blessed in other ways. Evidence from the few Scriptural references to her shows that she was poor in spirit, meek, merciful, and pure in heart, and so, according to the Beatitudes of Matthew 5, she was blessed. She was undoubtedly persecuted for righteousness sake because she gave birth to what the world believed to be an illegitimate child. More than three decades afterward, there was still remembrance of Mary being pregnant without being married, when the Pharisees snidely remarked that *they* were not born of fornication—implying that Christ was (John 8:41). If the people did not believe that Christ was the Son of God—even after seeing Him live a perfect life and perform many miracles—it is unlikely they would have had any reason to believe that Mary was a virgin when she bore Him. She was persecuted and stigmatized because she accepted a responsibility that was anathema to those around her. She knew the truth, Joseph knew the truth, and of course, God knew the truth, and that was enough for Mary. It appears she endured the circumstance without complaining, and so was blessed.

## Pagan Origins

The references to Mary in Luke 1 are the core scriptures that Catholic scholars use to try to prove that Mary is worthy of our worship. It is evident that the verses say little more than that Mary was given grace and favor by God, as we all have. They simply cannot be used as a starting point for establishing a doctrine of worship.

Aside from the little that the Bible says about Mary, there are other significant biblical principles that directly contradict a doctrine of Mary-worship. We could also examine a whole host of scriptures relating to human death and resurrection to show that Mary is in the same condition as the rest of the dead in Christ—awaiting the resurrection, without consciousness, and not in heaven (Psalm 146:3-4; Ecclesiastes 9:5; Job 14:12; John 3:13; Acts 2:29-34; I Corinthians 15:12-55). We could look at a vast array of scriptures that show that Mary-worship is indeed idolatry, because only God the Father and Jesus Christ are worthy of our worship (Exodus 34:14; Matthew 4:10). We could delve into the singular role that Jesus Christ plays as Mediator of the New Covenant—a role in which He does not need any help (Hebrews 8:6; 9:15; 12:24). These are not difficult concepts. Nevertheless, there is a vital lesson to be learned from this obviously erroneous doctrine.

The veneration of Mary, like many pagan practices, has its origin in the heathen religious system created by Nimrod and Semiramis, and more specifically, from the worship of the “Mother and Child.” Through the millennia, the symbol of the “Mother and Child” has been endlessly repeated; one can find evidence of Mother-and-Child worship in all of the nations in ancient times. Though her characteristics varied from culture to culture, the common element is that the Mother was the Queen of Heaven, and she bore fruit even though a virgin.

In China, Semiramis became known as the “Holy Mother.” The Germans named her “Hertha.” The Scandinavians called her “Disa.”

Among the Druids, the “Vigo-Paritura” was worshipped as the “Mother of God.” To the Greeks, she was “Aphrodite.” To the Romans she was known as “Venus,” and her son was “Jupiter.” The Canaanites, and sometimes even the Israelites, worshipped “Ashtoreth” (Judges 2:13; 10:6; I Samuel 7:3-4; 12:10; I Kings 11:5, 33; II Kings 23:13), who was also known as “the queen of heaven” (Jeremiah 7:18). In Ephesus, the Great Mother was known as “Diana.” T.W. Doane in his book *Bible Myths* sums it up this way: “Thus we see that the Virgin and child were worshipped in pagan times from China to Britain . . . and even in Mexico the ‘Mother and child’ were worshipped.”

This false worship, having spread from Babylon to the various nations, finally became established at Rome and throughout the Roman Empire. James George Frazer in his *The Golden Bough* observes:

The worship of the Great Mother . . . was very popular under the Roman Empire. Inscriptions prove that the [Mother and the Child] received divine honors . . . not only in Italy and especially at Rome, but also in the provinces, particularly in Africa, Spain, Portugal, France, Germany, and Bulgaria. (vol. 1, p. 356)

One of the repeated patterns of the Roman church is *syncretism*, bringing pagan beliefs and practices into the church to keep certain groups happy. This is the same mechanism by which Christmas, Easter, Sunday-worship, and the pagan trinity-god were brought into the Roman church—and which most of mainstream Christianity has accepted without question. The church allowed the pagans within it to continue their practices—in this case, the worship of the Great Mother—only in a slightly different form and with a new name. Many pagans had been drawn to Christianity, but so strong in their mind was the adoration for the Mother-goddess, that they did not want to forsake her. Compro-

ming church leaders saw that, if they could find some similarity in Christianity with the Mother-goddess worship of the pagans, they could increase their numbers by bringing many pagans into their fold. Of course, Mary fit the bill perfectly. So the pagans were allowed to continue their prayers and devotion to the Mother-goddess, but her name was changed to Mary. In this way, the pagan worship of the Mother was given the appearance of Christianity, and the course was set.

We saw earlier that Scripture cannot be used as a starting place for attempting to prove that Mary is worthy of worship. The true beginning for this practice lies with Semiramis and the Babylonian system begun by Nimrod. When the *Catholic Encyclopedia* presents as proof the historical fact that early Catholics venerated and worshipped Mary, it conveniently leaves out the fact that this adoration started in paganism and was shifted to the personage of the mother of Christ. Once the Roman Church adopted this practice, support had to be found for it, so it “interpreted” Scripture in a way that would lend credence to this practice. However, in these explanations it is apparent that Catholics start with a conclusion and then attempt to find support for it. These *Catholic Encyclopedia* entries are excellent examples of this.

Even though the worship of Mary will likely never be introduced as doctrine in the church of God, there is still an important object lesson here: Each of us has his own preferences, perspective, inclinations, and weaknesses. These things accompany us when we study the Bible. There are things we would *like* the Bible to say, based on our experiences, perspective, and particular circumstance. Just as the Catholics created a number of major doctrines out of nothing but pagan tradition, so there is also the potential for us to start with a conclusion or a thought of what makes the most sense *to us*, and then interpret or even *twist* the Scriptures to fit our worldview.

The pagans brought their inclinations and preferences of the Mother-

goddess into the Roman Catholic Church, and the church officials then sanctified the paganism. This can happen to us, too, if we do not seek the “whole counsel of God” first, and then draw our conclusions later. This can happen to us if we are not careful to “prove all things, and hold fast to that which is good” (I Thessalonians 5:21).

It is a great irony that it was Augustine, the renowned Catholic theologian, who said, “If you believe what you like in the Gospel and reject what you do not like, it is not the Gospel you believe, *but yourself*” (emphasis ours).

Nearing the end of his life, Peter warns of twisting Scripture and of following those who do:

Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless; and consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation—as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and *unstable people twist to their own destruction*, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures. You therefore, beloved, since you know this beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked. (II Peter 3:14-17)

The false doctrine of Mother-goddess worship is propped up by scriptures that have been twisted—and those who have done this have done so to their own destruction, because they have led millions upon millions of people into idolatry. Peter’s warning applies to us, too. It is prudent, then, when we are studying, to at all times recognize our limitations, our biases, and our inclinations, so we can see biblical truth without interference from a faulty lens.

—David C. Grabbe

## "Behold, A Virgin Shall Conceive..."

(continued from page 13)

same meaning and nuances. Spiros Zodhiates writes in *The Complete Word Study New Testament*, "Generally it refers to a maiden or damsel of marriageable age," yet "particularly in the sense of one who has not known a man." The plain sense of both usages is that a literal virgin is meant. Otherwise, the sign becomes "no big deal"—thousands of young women have sons every day! But how often does a virgin bear a son?

Unlike the Catholic Church, the church of God, though believing in the virgin birth, does not make it a major doctrine. It is important as a proof of Jesus' Messiahship, and it adds detail to the transcendental nature of the Son of God. In the end, however, like Luke, we must place our focus on Him and the wonderful works He performed as a human being like us, as well as all the many things He does for us still as our High Priest before the Father.

Yes, a virgin did conceive and bear a Son—and what a Son!

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

## READY ANSWER

(continued from page 11)

Jesus will come again to earth, this time with His saints and with His army of angels too. He will take His rightful place on His glorious, earthly throne and share power with His saints over the physical nations of the earth (Revelation 2:26-27). God tells us in Revelation 5:10: "And have made us [the saints; verse 9] kings and priests to our God; and we shall reign *on the earth*."

Can the truth be any clearer?

Mrs. Surette and many others of our beloved brethren will take a well-deserved rest for a little while longer. The sadness of their deaths will soon be turned to incomparable joy when they are resurrected as Jesus Christ returns as King of kings to the earth. We will join them in a joyous meeting with the Eternal God that is beyond human imagination. Then we will accompany Him in His glorious descent, flanked by a vast army of angels, to take up our new, exciting responsibilities in ruling with Him—on earth!

—John Plunkett

## PERSONAL ►

## The Offerings of Leviticus: Conclusion (Part One)

(continued from page 8)

There must be something that proves we are united with the Father and the Son, engrafted as part of Them and in union with Them. That something is the manner in which we conduct our life.

Language identifies people and so does the clothing they wear. A person's name is probably the most common of all identifiers. But the sons of God, those in union with the Father and the Son, are identified by commandment-keeping. It verifies that we are united with Christ. Commandment-keeping *is* love. Biblical love is an action, not merely a feeling. It may contain a positive feeling, even outright affection and passion for the one or ones who are the recipients of the act of love, but its foundation lies in the act rather than the emotion.

Acts of love without emotion can be entirely sterile. This extreme is not biblical love. At the other extreme are those who emotionally say they love Christ. What they say is probably true—as far as their understanding of love goes. Their declaration of love for Him may be motivated by feeling awe and gratitude springing from a recognition that He is indeed Creator, Savior, and High Priest, and that this awesome Being actually humbly sacrificed His life for them personally. Often, such people will then

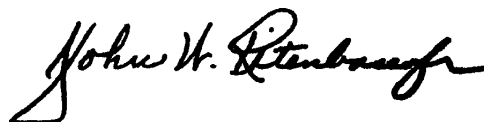
proceed to break His commandments, proving they do not know what love is.

In that kind of relationship, feelings eventually run dry, and the relationship and therefore the union ends. The love of the Bible is always first moral. This morality verifies we are yielding to Him. John commands us in I John 2:6 to walk as Jesus walked, and Jesus walked morally. The only way we can be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ is to walk as He walked.

This is the reason for our standing with God. We stand before Him as Jesus Christ for the very purpose of living life as He did as closely as possible. We cannot say we do this perfectly because our actions and reactions, our tempers and feelings, our sins of omission and commission betray us, revealing our continual need for the application of Christ's blood to restore our standing to the pristine standard of our Savior, even if for only a short time. Our gratitude to God for His thoughtful foresight and merciful patience is thus renewed in the acknowledgement of our sin.

[TO BE CONTINUED]

In Christian love,



He who says he  
abides in Him  
ought himself  
also to walk just  
as He walked.  
—I John 2:6

## EUROPEAN ECONOMICS

- A new report by Pricewaterhouse-Coopers (PwC), the world's largest financial services firm, projects that the Eurozone economy could grow faster than the U.S. by 2010. PwC's European Economic Outlook concludes that although growth in the Eurozone is likely to remain sluggish in the next two years, there is "the potential to achieve faster GDP per capita growth than the U.S. over the rest of this decade." But there are two catches: First, "this can only happen if the Euroland countries make effective reforms in areas such as pensions and labor markets." Second, for the Eurozone to outpace the U.S., the U.S. also has to experience economic instability itself. In essence, PwC is predicting what it would take for the balance of economic power to tip in Europe's favor: a restructuring of the EU, and a steady decline, turmoil, or other instability to weaken the U.S.
- This year, Germany, long considered the economic leader of the EU, has had a polarized selection of economic news. In August, it became the world's leading export country, surpassing the U.S. with exports 7% higher than America's, according to the *Financial Times Deutschland*. With \$62 billion in exports, Germany's share of world exports is now higher than 10% for the first time in several years. The German economy has benefited from growth in Eastern and Central Europe, boosting demand for German goods, especially food and machinery. Germany now exports more to Eastern Europe than it does to the U.S. In October, however, the German government admitted that the country is experiencing zero growth and that deficit spending for 2003 would exceed \$40 billion (\$51.3 billion), a far higher figure than the original \$18.9 billion government forecast. Even with its impressive export figures, Germany is still consuming much of what it brings in and spending a significant portion of it to support a jobless population approaching 4.5 million. Even though the PwC forecast, overall, concluded that the U.S. would have to weaken for the EU economy to rise, Germany's economic recovery is, in the short term, dependent upon a strong U.S. economy.

## Religion in America

- According to *Forbes*, many churches are not very different from corporations anymore. In many instances, pastors act as chief executives and use business tactics to enlarge their congregations. This entrepreneurial approach has contributed to the explosive growth of U.S. megachurches—defined as local, non-Catholic churches with at least 2,000 members. For instance, World Changers Ministries of College Park, Georgia, operates a music studio, a publishing house, and a computer graphic design suite, while owning its own record label. It boasts a total weekend attendance of over 23,000. Lakewood Church, which recently leased the Compaq Center, former home of the NBA's Houston Rockets, has a four-record deal and spends \$12 million annually on television airtime. It tops the list with over 25,000 members at its Houston campus.

In 1970, there were just ten such churches, according to John Vaughn, founder of *Church Growth Today*, which tracks megachurches. In 1990, 250 fit that description. Today, there are 740, with a total membership of about 4 million and an average attendance of 3,646 each, according to Vaughn. The average net income of megachurches is estimated at \$4.8 million. Among these churches, there is obviously a tremendous emphasis on material growth, and church leaders take this to mean that God is pleased with them. "In our society growth equals success," says Scott Thumma, faculty associate at the Hartford Institute for Religion Research.

"And religious growth not only equals success but also God's blessing on the ministry."
- A new study from the Barna Research Group of Ventura, California, shows that even with the onslaught of secular humanism, postmodernism, and multiculturalism, most people have retained mainstream Christian views about life after death. For example, 81% of Americans believe in an afterlife of some sort, and almost the same number (79%) believes in the immortality of the soul. In all, 76% believe that Heaven exists, while nearly the same proportion said there is a Hell (71%)—although it is significant that more people believe in Heaven than in Hell. Of those who believe in Heaven, 46% say it is "a state of eternal existence in God's presence"; 30% say it is "an actual place of rest and reward where souls go after death"; and the remainder believe that Heaven is just "symbolic" (14%), that there is no such thing as life after death (5%), or that they are not sure (5%). Peoples' view of their post-life destination is very revealing of the effect of mainstream Christianity: Just one-half of 1% expect to go to Hell upon their death, while nearly two-thirds of Americans (64%) believe they will go to Heaven. One in 20 adults (5%) claim they will come back as another life form, while the same proportion (5%) contend they will simply cease to exist. The remainder admitted that they have "no idea" what will happen after they die.

# BIBLE STUDY: THE PARABLE OF THE FAITHFUL AND EVIL SERVANTS

Since Christ's return comes at an unexpected hour, Jesus teaches His disciples to be ready at all times. In Luke 12:35-48, He tells two parables (verses 35-40 and 42-48) joined by a question from Peter as to whom Jesus was referring (verse 41). The second parable expands and explains the first. These illustrations are paralleled in Matthew 24:43-51.

The narrower sense of these parables is that of pre-

paredness for the second coming of Jesus Christ. All who are members of the household of faith must be found serving God and one another with regard to things of the Kingdom of God. The wider sense of this parable refers to the time when God calls us. It is a call to prepare to meet our God. Both senses express the overall theme of this parable: "watchfulness."



**1.** What is so important about watching? Luke 12:35-38; 21:36; Matthew 24:45-46; 1 Peter 1:13.

**COMMENT:** "Watching" points directly to the necessity of being ready for Jesus Christ, the Son of Man. It also includes patiently waiting, as is seen in Matthew 25:1-13, where the virgins must wait for the bridegroom. If the master's return is late at night or very early in the morning, the alertness of the servants is even more commendable. Jesus teaches that His disciples should always be ready because He would come at a time when they would not be expecting Him. The parable pictures several servants waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet. They must remain constantly vigilant so that the master could enter the house immediately upon arriving at home. If they prove worthy by being watchful and ready, their master will care for them.

**2.** What mistakes does the unwise servant make? Luke 12:39-40; Matthew 24:42-44.

**COMMENT:** Jesus' comments about the thief point out that His disciples must be ready because the Son of Man will come unexpectedly (Matthew 25:13; Mark 13:33; Revelation 3:3). The story as a whole, not the individual characters in it, provide the comparison. The unwise servant makes two mistakes. First, he says, "I'll do whatever I want while my master is away," forgetting that the day of judgment must come. Human beings have a habit of having two different attitudes toward God. Sometimes, we remember that God is present, and at others, we may not think of Him at all. Second, he says, "I have plenty of time to put things right before the master comes." Nothing may be more harmful than to assume we have more time (1 Thessalonians 5:3). Jesus says, "I must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; the night is coming when no one can work" (John 9:4).

**3.** Why is the faithful servant blessed? Luke 12:41-44; Matthew 24:45-47; 25:21.

**COMMENT:** Jesus says that exhortations to "watch" apply to everyone (Mark 13:35-37). In this case, the parable that follows shows that the apostles have a special responsibility. In it, the steward in charge of the servants is a servant himself, teaching the importance of faithfulness in doing the will of the master (1 Corinthians 4:2). Not only does Jesus teach the certainty of His return at an unexpected moment, but he also implies that the church—His disciples—would continue serving God for an unspecified time until His return. As He says, "Blessed is the servant whom His Lord will find so doing when He comes."

**4.** How did the evil servant neglect his responsibility? Luke 12:45-46; Matthew 24:48-49; 7:15-23; James 4:17.

**COMMENT:** The attitude of the evil servant is contrary to the command to be ready. His severe treatment of the other servants is similar to the description of false leaders who ravage the congregation (Acts 20:29-30). Similarly, the dramatic portrayal of the servant's punishment, "cut him in two," stresses the seriousness of his evasion of responsibility. The original statement in Aramaic was probably "he was cut off," which has two implications: to be executed or exiled for sin. With respect to the church, it means being disfellowshipped from associating with church members because of flagrant sin. Luke 12:42-46 emphasizes our responsibility for those placed under our care. On the other hand, verses 47-48 focus on our response to our Master's command.

**5.** Are we judged according to what we understand? Luke 12:47-48; Numbers 15:27-31.

**COMMENT:** The evil servants fail in their responsibility because they are not looking faithfully to Christ and hopefully toward the Kingdom. The penalty tells us that Jesus is speaking about Christians who are not ready either because they ignore their calling or because they neglect to produce fruit worthy of repentance (Matthew 3:8). Faithless Christians will be judged more strictly than those who, though wicked, do not understand about the coming of the Son of Man. Professing Christians with knowledge of God's revelation will have to answer for their lack of response to God.

Their punishment seems severe until we realize that the servant who knew his master's will represents those who sin arrogantly or presumptuously (Psalm 19:12-13). Even though the servant who was ignorant of his master's will sins unwittingly, it was his business to know his master's will. In either case, each holds personal responsibility for his actions and therefore comes under judgment. All have some knowledge of God (Romans 1:20-23), and He judges according to the individual's level of responsibility.

The parable finishes with the warning that knowledge and privilege always bring responsibility. Sin is doubly sinful to the person who knows better. We who know better would like God to find us with our work completed upon His return, just as Jesus was able to say to His Father, "I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do" (John 17:4-5). It would be wonderful for God to find us glorifying Him and at peace with our brethren when Christ comes.