

An aerial photograph of a tropical cyclone, showing a dense, swirling cloud structure over a dark blue ocean. The eye of the storm is visible in the center, surrounded by a thick wall of clouds. The overall scene is dramatic and powerful.

Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

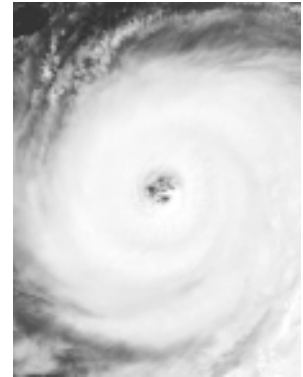
Volume 14, Number 7

August 2005

POWER

- 3 PERSONAL FROM JOHN W. RITENBAUGH
Presumption and Divine Justice (Part Two)
- 7 A READY ANSWER:
What Is the Feast of Trumpets, Anyway?
—John Plunkett
- 10 PROPHECY WATCH:
*The Zeitgeist of Suicide (Part Two):
Causes and Results of Rejecting True Values*
—Charles Whitaker
- 14 *Power*
—David C. Grabbe
- 19 WORLD WATCH:
Once Again, Britain Dominates Europe
—Richard T. Ritenbaugh
- 20 BIBLE STUDY
The Parable of the Talents (Part Two)
—Martin G. Collins

About Our Cover



Perhaps nothing else on earth—with the exception of a volcano in full eruption—impresses us more in terms of sheer power than a major hurricane. Man is essentially powerless against a hurricane's force of wind, rain, and storm surge. Even so, man has his own powers, and as Christians, we receive power from God to do an effective work for Him.

Reuters

Forerunner Magazine

Editor-in-Chief
JOHN W. RITENBAUGH

Associate Editor
MARTIN G. COLLINS

News Editor
DAVID C. GRABBE

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

Proofreaders
PHYLLIS FORD, CINDY HINDS, DIANE MCIVER, JOHN PLUNKETT

Managing Editor
RICHARD T. RITENBAUGH

Graphic and Layout Editor
KRISTEN M. COLLINS

Circulation
DIANE R. MCIVER

Contact Church of the Great God

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

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

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

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

Forerunner is published ten times a year as a free educational and religious service in the public interest. Articles, illustrations, and photographs will not be returned unless specifically requested, and if used, become the property of the Church of the Great God. Comments, suggestions, requests, and changes of address should be sent to the nearest address listed at left.

This free publication is made possible through the voluntary tithes and offerings of its subscribers and members of the Church of the Great God. All American and Canadian donations are tax-deductible.

© Copyright 2005
Church of the Great God
All Rights Reserved
Printed in the U.S.A.

Presumption and Divine Justice

Part Two

Previously, we explored the sin of presumption using a number of models from the world and the church of God. The observance of Christmas and Easter are visible examples of presumption from the world, as is the doctrine that once one accepts Jesus as His Savior, his salvation is absolutely assured. Similarly, many in the church presume that, once converted, they will go to the Place of Safety.

These presumptions and many more have led to a wide variety of religions—actually mass confusion as to which is the true religion—and a world in which true values are lost in an ocean of conflicting opinions as to how to live. The corollary to this confusing state—that everybody is worshipping the same God—can lead a rational but carnal person to conclude that, in fact, God does not care what one believes or that correct doctrine is unimportant to daily life! Presumption reigns over the whole earth because Satan has deceived the whole world (Revelation 12:9).

Most people do not deliberately intend to go astray but drift or wander into their presumptions. For the truly converted Christian, to do this is a form of “neglecting one’s salvation,” as it is termed in Hebrews 2:1-3. Yet, whether one wanders into it or deliberately determines to

do what is wrong, the result is the same. Proverbs 8:36 declares that such a one loves death! These processes have been taking place since Adam and Eve.

A huge body of religious beliefs and practices has accumulated, which Peter terms “aimless conduct” (I Peter 1:18). These presumptuous additions were deeply entrenched in the way of life of many Jews in Jesus’ day, and He warned them that to follow these practices as part of the worship of God was vain, futile, and useless (Mark 7:7). They did not know it, but they loved death, as the proverb says, despite being quite religious.

Might God consider some practices of ours to be presumptuous? The line between assuming and presuming is often very thin. To assume is to take for granted and can include the stronger sense of “arrogating to oneself.” At the base of much presumption is an assumption.

It has been a long time since God has reacted with dramatic suddenness during the course of anyone’s presumptuous behavior. Nevertheless, a pattern of His displeasure with presumption is clearly established in Scripture. God’s pattern of executing divine justice reveals that presumption is very serious business. The remainder of this article is devoted to these examples.

Strange Fire

The first example involves a curious trespass with which many are unfamiliar:

Then Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it, put incense on it, and offered profane fire before the LORD, which He had not commanded them. So fire went out from the LORD and devoured them, and they died before the LORD. Then Moses said to Aaron, “This is what the LORD

spoke saying: ‘By those who come near Me I must be regarded as holy; and before all the people I must be glorified.’” So Aaron held his peace. And Moses called Mishael and Elizaphan, the sons of Uzziel, the uncle of Aaron, and said to them, “Come near, carry your brethren from before the sanctuary out of the camp.” So they went near and carried them by their tunics out of the camp, as Moses had said. And Moses said to Aaron, and to Eleazar and Ithamar, his

sons, “Do not uncover your heads nor tear your clothes, lest you die, and wrath come upon all the people. But let your brethren, the whole house of Israel, bewail the burning which the LORD has kindled. You shall not go out from the door of the tabernacle of meeting, lest you die, for the anointing oil of the LORD is upon you.” And they did according to the word of Moses. (Leviticus 10:1-7)

What did these men do that was so awful? They were priests, sons of Aaron, the High Priest, nephews of Moses. If anybody had a close relationship with God and would receive a measure of leeway in judgment, it was these two. Nevertheless, there was none; with God, there is no respect of persons in judgment (see Romans 2:11). He reacted swiftly and violently, wiping them out on the spot. This incident involved no Temple prostitutes, no human sacrifices, just “strange fire.” Surely, such a little thing would not matter! God’s reaction allowed no time for a trial; there was just a summary execution, a terrifying supernatural judgment by God.

Verse 6 contains an interesting sidelight to this violent event. Undoubtedly, Aaron was shocked into an emotional reaction that may have ranged from pitiful wailing to a consuming anger toward God, but Moses cautioned him to control himself and give no outward demonstration of his emotional state! Why? Moses understood that they had sinned grievously and got what they deserved. Aaron was told that, despite the shocking nature of what had happened, he should express no disagreement with God’s judgment.

Consider this in a larger context. Beginning in Exodus 40:1, the Tabernacle, its altar, and the laver were erected and the interior furniture arranged, then all was consecrated in a solemn ceremony. At that point (verse 34), God came to dwell in the Tabernacle.

Leviticus 1 follows the sequence of events, showing God giving the sacrificial rituals to be performed at the Tabernacle. In Leviticus 8, Aaron and the priesthood are officially consecrated. In Leviticus 9:1, the priesthood’s ministry formally begins. In verse 24, a startling occurrence takes place during that first offering: “. . . and fire came out from before the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the fat on the altar.” This signaled God’s acceptance, showing that all had been done according to His will.

However, there is more to this story, giving us understanding of the term “strange fire” that follows in chapter 10. Within the instructions regarding the sacrifices, Leviticus 6:12-13 gives the priests an interesting charge:

And the fire on the altar shall be kept burning on it; it shall not be put out. And the priest shall burn wood on it every morning, and lay the burnt offering in order on it; and he shall burn on it the fat of the peace offerings. A perpetual fire shall burn on the altar; it shall never go out.

The term *strange* means “what is alien to.” Foreigners are called “strangers” in Scripture because they are aliens to Israel and to the covenant (Ephesians 2:12). In this case, the fire used by Nadab and Abihu was alien to what God had commanded regarding fire. Together with Exodus 30:7-9, their infraction becomes clear. The priests were to make the morning and evening incense offerings only with the special incense mixture God commanded, and they were to take the coals for these offerings only from the continually burning fire under the altar of burnt offerings, which He started in Leviticus 9:24.

Aaron was undoubtedly confused and displeased, not understanding what happened, but Moses gave him God’s answer. In Leviticus 10:3, the Lord says, “By those who come near Me I must be regarded as holy; and before all the people I must be glorified.” Nadab and Abihu were among those chosen to come near Him in service. They revealed their disrespect for Him by treating His command regarding the fire as something common. They simply did not follow His instructions.

They added or subtracted to what God said and did, attempting to get by with what they carnally assumed was acceptable to Him. By this incident, holiness is defined. Among those who are consecrated to serve God, His instructions must be explicitly followed. Thus, this example appears especially pointed toward the ministry.

The instructions are not ambiguous. Each step and instrument in the process is designed to teach certain spiritual concepts. They had been completely instructed, so they blatantly twisted God’s teaching. In response to Moses, Aaron remained silent, knowing the judgment was correct. This incident is of special importance to us because of the context and because of who we are. The context is the consecration of the priesthood in service to God, and we are, according to I Peter 2, a royal priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices. By this incident, God shows, perhaps more clearly than in any other place, what holiness is in relation to Him.

Holiness is not merely consecration or dedication to a god, but it is both moral and ethical as well. True holiness is what results from His consecration, but the consecration must be combined with our submission to His commands. In pagan religions, a person could be dedicated but not moral, as is clearly shown by the ritual prostitution practiced at their temples. The prostitute was indeed consecrated to her god, but she most certainly was not moral—nor were they who used her services.

Today, a person may claim that his god is the Creator God, but if he is not obedient to the Creator God’s commandments, he is merely deluding himself. Sincerity is only part of the picture. We are to worship in spirit *and truth* (John 4:24). The closer one is associated with God’s work, the more necessary it is to ensure that the relationship with God is not marred by spiritual blemishes. Otherwise, the person cannot function properly as a channel for God to work through. God will not be glorified before the

people unless His servants submit to His commands.

A similar careless notion got Cain into trouble. If we add or omit with knowledge, it is presumption, and presumption springs from pride. It is as if we are telling God He does not know what He is doing. We have elevated ourselves to His level. *Nothing more, nothing less, nothing else than His will must be our attitude.*

As a final note, Leviticus 10:8-10 adds:

Then the LORD spoke to Aaron, saying: “Do not drink

wine or intoxicating drink, you, nor your sons with you, when you go into the tabernacle of meeting, lest you die. It shall be a statute forever throughout your generations, that you may distinguish between holy and unholy, and between unclean and clean.”

The influence of alcohol may have contributed to what Aaron’s sons did. Perhaps they were not drunk, but had been drinking. Alcohol deludes one into thinking he is in control when he is not.

Uzza and the Ark

I Chronicles 13:1-3 introduces another episode containing a presumptuous act, immediately followed by a sobering display of divine justice. However, this time, one of the most respected names in Israelite history is directly involved. It is the story of Uzza’s sudden death while moving the Ark of the Covenant, the most sacred and revered of Israelite objects. The Ark, representing the throne of God and containing the tablets of stone Moses received from God on Mount Sinai, normally resided in the Holy of Holies.

Then David consulted with the captains of thousands and hundreds, and with every leader. And David said to all the congregation of Israel, “If it seems good to you, and if it is of the LORD our God, let us send out to our brethren everywhere who are left in all the land of Israel, and with them to the priests and Levites who are in their cities and their commonlands, that they may gather together to us; and let us bring the ark of our God back to us, for we have not inquired at it since the days of Saul.”

David desired to move the Ark to Jerusalem to continue to consolidate the kingdom under himself. As they were moving it on an oxcart, the oxen stumbled, and the Ark appeared to be toppling to the ground. Uzza, in what may have been pure reflex, put out his hand to steady the Ark, but upon touching it, he was immediately struck dead (verses 9-10)! At first, David was angry that God ruined his party (verses 8, 11)—as the whole atmosphere of the Ark’s transfer was celebratory—but shortly after, he became extremely fearful (verse 12).

The Bible shows God to be longsuffering and slow to anger. Why did they not hear His voice from heaven saying, “Thank you, Uzza, for keeping the Ark from getting damaged and dirty”? Instead, He exploded in anger and slew Uzza on the spot! However, God had given strict instructions for transporting the Ark, found in Numbers 4:4, 15, 17-20:

This is the service of the sons of Kohath in the tabernacle of meeting, relating to the most holy things: . . . And when Aaron and his sons have

finished covering the sanctuary and all the furnishings of the sanctuary, when the camp is set to go, then the sons of Kohath shall come to carry them; but they shall not touch any holy thing, lest they die. These are the things in the tabernacle of meeting which the sons of Kohath are to carry. . . . Then the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: “Do not cut off the tribe of the families of the Kohathites from among the Levites; but do this in regard to them, that they may live and not die when they approach the most holy things; Aaron and his sons shall go in and appoint each of them to his service and his task. But they shall not go in to watch while the holy things are being covered, lest they die.”

The Bible nowhere indicates that Uzza was a Kohathite. If he was, what God did is even more understandable. Everyone in the whole procedure from David on down was guilty of disobeying God’s instructions regarding the most holy things. David failed to consult with the High Priest—or any priest, for that matter—regarding how the Ark should be moved. Evidently, no priest protested that proper procedures were not being followed.

The Kohathites were not even supposed to *look* on the uncovered Ark. To God, when Uzza reached out and touched the Ark as it seemed about to topple off the cart, it was no act of heroism but the final act of desecration, arrogance, and presumption. The last thing presumed was that Uzza’s hand was less defiling than the earth that he feared would contaminate the Ark.

God’s instruction in Exodus 20:24-25 regards building Him an altar. An altar made for His worship had to be constructed of earth or unhewn stones. No altar defiled by man’s sinful hand was suitable. Dirt cannot sin; it always follows the nature God established. God did not want the symbol of His throne contaminated by the evil that manifested itself in a whole string of rebellions against His specific instructions. There was nothing arbitrary, capricious, or whimsical in God’s action.

Jesus teaches us to address God as “Father,” a title suggesting familiarity, yet we are also to pray, “Hallowed be Your name.” God shows in these two incidents that, if reverence is due to the symbols used in His worship, how

much greater reverence must be given to the realities of the New Covenant?

Those involved in this incident were well-intentioned,

Ananias, Sapphira, and Deceit

The New Testament is not without an example of divine justice similar to those in the Old Testament. Acts 5:1-4 introduces the occasion:

But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession. And he kept back part of the proceeds, his wife also being aware of it, and brought a certain part and laid it at the apostles' feet. But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself? While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God."

We can perceive a mixed bag of Ananias and Sapphira's sins involved in this tragedy. Acts 4:36-37 informs us of Barnabas' sacrificial gift for the well-being of the newly formed church. Pride and desire for acclaim motivated the couple to give a gift but without the honesty or sacrifice exhibited by Barnabas and others.

"Why has Satan filled your heart" (verse 3) is the equivalent of "Why have you dared?" They were free to give whatever percentage they set, for Peter says that the entire property sale price was under their control. Their sin lay in deceitfully alleging that the amount they gave was the whole of the sale price, when it was actually only a part. They deviously exaggerated their offering.

A King and His Rash Impatience

I Samuel 13:1-15 recounts the story of an act of presumption by another well-known figure, containing another valuable lesson for us. Saul arranged with the prophet Samuel to perform sacrifices in an appeal to God to intervene before Israel went into battle with the invading Philistines. Saul's sin was in presumptuously stepping in to perform Samuel's responsibilities when the prophet arrived later than the appointed time. Saul gave Samuel three justifications for his presumption: 1) The people were growing distressed and deserting him; 2) Samuel's late arrival; and 3) the growing threat of the Philistine army (verse 11).

On the surface, it appeared Saul and the Israelites were indeed in a difficult situation, yet Saul's reasons did not justify presuming to disobey what was commanded. He should have waited for Samuel to arrive and perform his responsibility. Saul, a Benjamite, could request a sacrifice be made and provide the animal for it, but he was not authorized by God to perform the sacrificial ceremony. Samuel was merely later than both he and Saul thought he would be.

but it illustrates for all generations that God still requires conformity with His directives concerning holy objects. Deviation from orthodoxy can be deadly.

Some think this judgment was harsh, but Peter did not. He spoke of the sin as inspired of Satan, and the passage makes clear that both Ananias and Sapphira were fully aware of what they were doing (verses 2, 9). Conscious deceit is spiritually disastrous because trust is completely violated. They should have known better.

God interpreted their action as tempting Him, seeing how much they could get away with. Their way of reaching their goals is so opposed to the gospel that God could not allow it to go unchallenged; it would have set the whole mission of the church off course. Honesty and integrity are the standard of God's way of life. Sin is no light thing with God.

These people were living behind a deceptive façade, one similar to the idea that, if one keeps the front windows clean, it does not matter how dirty the back ones are. They allowed themselves to become tools working to destroy the family relationship of trust within the church. God forcibly reminded them and us that He will not abide that.

We must treat one another with fairness and loving kindness, or we will not be in His Family. Ananias and Sapphira are shocking reminders to us that we will not get away with deceitfully cheating or taking advantage of our brethren. God may not appear to be in the picture, but only the faithless have this blindness. The penalty will be paid—unless repented of, it is only a matter of time. Ananias and Sapphira paid quickly as a lesson to us.

Saul excused himself further by saying he "felt compelled." The King James Version records that Saul said, "I forced myself." This suggests that he was not ignorant of what he was doing but convinced himself it was more important to make the sacrifice than to obey God's instruction. He was immediately stripped of the opportunity of having his dynasty continue forever (verses 12-13), as God later promised David.

Many circumstances arise in a Christian's life when following God's commands runs counter to prevailing opinion and to our own fears about the threatening conditions we imagine are building around us if we obey God. Strong thoughts are then likely to mount, urging us to turn aside from what He says—"just this once"—to relieve the swelling pressures.

As our own children do not always understand what we tell them to do, we cannot always see why God tells us to do this or that. But can we trust God that His

(continued on page 16)

“In the seventh month, on the first day of the month,
you shall have a sabbath-rest,
a memorial of blowing of trumpets, a holy convocation.”

Leviticus 23:24

What Is the Feast of Trumpets, Anyway?

Each year in the autumn, the people of God’s church celebrate the Feast of Trumpets. Before the arrival of this one-day Feast, those who work or attend school must arrange to have the day off. What do we say to our bosses or our teachers on such occasions? And what about our “non-church” friends? What if they ask us why we need a day off so soon after the summer holidays?

In asking these questions, I certainly am not recommending that we tell these people all the fine details. In fact, in Matthew 7:6, Jesus Christ Himself advised against doing so. Still, we might have one or two close friends who are not in God’s church—good friends who are open-minded and would not ridicule our beliefs—whom we do not mind explaining the details to.

In the past, when I was asked about these things by workmates, I just used to tell them that I have a “special church day” coming up, and that was usually sufficient. They rarely pursued it beyond that.

But what about us as individuals? Do *we* know why we take the day off each Feast of Trumpets? Why do we attend special church services? Are we merely perpetuating an old, Jewish ritual? Or is there really something special about the day?

Just what *is* the Feast of Trumpets, anyway?

Perhaps we once again need to clarify the details of why and how we in God’s church keep the Feast of Trumpets, particularly for our young people, as well as those who are new to the church. We will use the journalistic format of answering, What? Why? Who? When? Where? and How?

What Is the Feast of Trumpets?

Simply stated, the Feast of Trumpets is one of God’s feast days. It is the fourth of the seven annual holy days, and it is the first of the *fall* holy days.

A glance at most calendars will show that it is, in fact, a day that is still observed by the Jews. They call it *Rosh Hashanah* which means “Head of the Year” or “First of the Year.” This is because it falls on the first day of the seventh month of God’s sacred calendar. We will return to this point later.

But the Feast of Trumpets is a very special feast day. In many ways, it is a pivotal day.

In our hymnal’s version of the “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” we sing, “In the beauty of the autumn Christ was born across the sea.” This is because there is some evidence that the human Jesus may have been born on or very near the Feast of Trumpets. Also, Bible symbolism and prophecy indicate that He may well return to this earth on the Feast of Trumpets in some future year.

This feast symbolizes a vast turning point in world history. It pictures the pivotal changeover between the age of man, of darkness, and of Satan to the age of God, the World Tomorrow, the Millennium, and the Kingdom of God.

But what do trumpets have to do with all this? What is their significance?

The answer to this question is that many scriptures tell us that trumpet blasts will accompany the major, tumultuous events of the end times, the return of Jesus Christ, and the resurrection of the

"In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall have a sabbath-rest, a memorial of blowing of trumpets, a holy convocation."

dead. Here are just a few of those scriptures:

- And He shall send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other. (Matthew 24:31)
- . . . in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. (I Corinthians 15:52; see I Thessalonians 4:16))
- So the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared themselves to sound. The first angel sounded. . . . Then the second angel sounded. . . . Then the third angel sounded. . . . Then the fourth angel sounded. . . . Then the fifth angel sounded. . . . Then the sixth angel sounded. . . . Then the seventh angel sounded: And there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!" (Revelation 8:6-8, 10, 12; 9:1, 13; 11:15)

Why Do We Keep the Feast of Trumpets?

The simple answer to our second question is that we keep the Feast of Trumpets because God clearly commands us to:

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ". . . . These are the feasts of the LORD, holy convocations which you shall proclaim at their appointed times. . . . In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall have a sabbath-rest, a memorial of blowing of trumpets, a holy convocation. You shall do no customary work on it; and you shall

offer an offering made by fire to the LORD." (Leviticus 23:1, 4, 24-25)

But God does not command us to do things just to show off His power. His commands are always filled with true logic and common sense; when He commands us to do something, it is always for a very good reason. He tells us to keep His Feast of Trumpets because He wants us to take a break from the mundane tasks of our daily lives. Like God's other holy days, the Feast of Trumpets is like a 24-hour stop sign. God wants us to stop!

When she was two, our granddaughter, Madison, had a unique way of saying, "Stop": She could pronounce just the last consonant of the word. However, there was no mistaking what she meant when she wanted you to quit doing something—teasing or tickling her, for example. She sternly held up her little hand and shouted, "Puh!"

On the Feast of Trumpets, God wants us to stop, to put aside our relatively unimportant daily affairs, and to concentrate for a mere 24 hours on what is really important, not on the physical things that are not lasting or eternal (II Corinthians 4:18). Even the rocks and mountains of this earth eventually will wear away to sand and dust (Psalm 102:25-27; see Hebrews 1:10-12). On this feast, God wants us to stop in order to concentrate on the truly eternal things: the return of Jesus Christ, the resurrection of the dead, the end of the age of man, and the Kingdom of God.

That is why we keep the Feast of Trumpets!

Who Should Keep the Feast of Trumpets?

But is God's command to keep the Feast of Trumpets not just an Old Testament command? Was it not just commanded for the children of Israel? Is it not just a Jewish feast day—or at best an Israelite feast day?

No! First, we must remember that we in the United States, Canada and the rest of the British Commonwealth, and Western Europe *are* the children of Israel! We are the modern descendants of the children of Israel that we read about in the Bible.

More importantly, we are the New Testament "Israel of God" (Galatians 6:16). The physical Israelites were God's Old Testament "church." Conversely, today's church of God is the New Testament congregation of Israel. As Paul writes, "And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:29; see Romans 9:6-8).

In addition, God made His Sabbaths and holy days for *all* mankind, not just for the Israelites. These are the Feasts of God, not the Feasts of the Jews or the Israelites! In Old Testament times, God chose the Israelites to be the examples of how to fulfill His way of life to the rest of mankind (Deuteronomy 4:5-8), even though, for the most part, they did not do a great job of it. In the New Testament era, the church of God is responsible to be the example to the world of how to keep God's way of life (Matthew 5:14-16; Philippians 2:14-15).

It is sometimes hard for us to believe, but our tiny congregations are real, bona-fide parts of God's *one* true church! We are not just one of the myriad denominations of churches of the world. Our bosses, friends, and teachers might think that that is all we are. Sadly, they do not know any better.

Jesus tells us quite clearly that His one true church would be a "little flock" (Luke 12:32), so we should not worry that we are not one of those huge churches that boast gigantic congregations. We are a tiny fragment of God's little flock! *God's* church! If we are God's, then that is all that matters. It is certainly not cause for shame or embarrassment, but for true joy and even for the proper kind of pride!

When Should We Keep the Feast of Trumpets?

Leviticus 23:24 tells us clearly, “In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall have a sabbath-rest, a memorial of blowing of trumpets, a holy convocation.” The appointed time for the Feast of Trumpets is on the first day of the seventh month of God’s sacred year. Like other months, this seventh month has two names: *Tishri* meaning “beginning,” and *Ethanim* meaning “strong” or “valiant,” which may refer to the return and intervention of the supremely strong and valiant Captain of our salvation, Jesus Christ (Hebrews 2:10, KJV).

The Feast of Trumpets is actually a New Year’s Day! It falls on the first day of a new year, hence the name *Tishri* or “beginning.” There are two different (but complementary) “New Year’s Days” in God’s calendar because there are two distinct years in God’s calendar or, more accurately, two distinct starting points for counting the year. One is the sacred and religious year, which starts in the spring with the month *Abib* or *Nisan*. The other is the administrative and financial year, also called the Civil Year, and it starts in the autumn on the Feast of Trumpets. In Bible times the year’s main harvests were complete by this date and enough crops had been sold by this time to enable farmers to afford to attend the fall holy day celebrations.

Where Should We Keep the Feast of Trumpets?

Must the Feast of Trumpets, like the Feast of Tabernacles, be kept in Jerusalem? Does it have to be kept in the place “where God places His name” (Deuteronomy 14:23-24)?

Initially, the Israelites observed God’s Feasts in the wilderness where the Tabernacle was set up, and later, these celebrations were centered on the Temple in Jerusalem. It is likely that in those later days many people from outlying areas came into Jerusa-

lem and stayed for more than three weeks arriving before the Feast of Trumpets on Tishri 1, and staying until after the Last Great Day on Tishri 22. Historical records tell us that in Jesus’ day Jerusalem swelled by hundreds of thousands of people during the festival seasons.

However, unlike the Feast of Tabernacles, there is no command that the Feast of Trumpets must be kept in a specific location—what we call a “Feast site.” We are free to keep the Feast of Trumpets in our home church locations.

How Should We Keep the Feast of Trumpets?

Once again, our instruction in this area comes from Leviticus 23:24-25:

In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall have a sabbath-rest, a memorial of blowing of trumpets, a holy convocation. You shall do no customary work on it; and you shall offer an offering made by fire to the LORD.

There are a few specific instructions here on how God wants us to observe His Feast of Trumpets:

1. It should be kept as a day of rest, similar to a weekly Sabbath.
2. It is a memorial of blowing of trumpets. Most church of God congregations do not own trumpets or rams’ horn *shofars*, or have accomplished trumpeters. However, we often play some appropriate, recorded trumpet music as the holy day offering is being taken up. Such music gives us a good, aural reminder of the unique significance of this day.
3. A “holy convocation” should be held. A *convocation* is an assembly of people, and a *holy convocation* is a sacred assembly of people or a church service. Although many of God’s scattered

people find it necessary to keep the Sabbath alone or in tiny groups, it is good and worthwhile, if at all possible, to make the extra effort to keep the holy days with a larger group. On this feast day, we have two services—two servings of rich, spiritual food, one each in the morning and the afternoon, separated by a feast of excellent physical food.

4. No “customary work” should be done. *Customary work* (or “servile work” as phrased in the King James Version) is work that we would normally do on a regular day, usually for pay. To the delight of our young people, this is properly extended to prohibit household chores, school work, and school homework. God does, however, allow a small amount of work to be done for the final preparation of food for the Feast, although as much of this labor as possible should be done on the previous day, termed in the Bible “the day of preparation” (see Exodus 12:16; 16:23; Matthew 27:62; Mark 15:42; Luke 23:54; John 19:14, 42).
5. Christians are not required to sacrifice animals by fire for their holy day offerings. Rather, they are to give monetary offerings—over and above their regular tithes—that may be used for the needs of the church and for the ongoing work of preaching God’s Word.

Most of us—even our young people—have observed the Feast of Trumpets for many years. But have God’s Feasts become a burden to us? Do we take them for granted? Or are we longing for them to arrive?

Let us think deeply about the details, the meanings, and the symbolism behind God’s holy days. We should anticipate and prepare for them with eagerness and joy!

—John Plunkett

The Zeitgeist

Part Two: Causes and Results

“Children are our most valuable natural resource.” —Herbert Hoover

The previous article focused on the realities of the so-called new demographics, the three-decade-old trend toward measurably reduced fertility rates. The phenomenon appears to be waxing in both depth and breadth—in the magnitude of sub-replacement fertility rates as well as in the spread of these low rates around the globe. Part One also briefly reviewed God’s perspective of human reproduction, and the action He will take in the Millennium to reverse current trend lines.

This second part will spotlight a number of moral, social, and technological causes behind the new demographics. It will also look at some short- and long-term consequences of falling fertility among humans. While the present situation does not appear to be immediately dangerous, it nonetheless portends a crisis of major proportions. The implications of depopulation through failure to reproduce sufficiently are frightful.

Causes

Here are the causes generally cited for falling fertility rates:

- *Urbanization in an Industrial Environment.*

The cause classically cited for falling fertility rates pertains to the differing economic realities in rural and urban areas. The coming of the Machine Age witnessed a nearly *en masse* migration of rural workers to growing urban centers where they could find jobs in manufacturing plants and ancillary service endeavors.

This migration to urban areas has historically resulted in a decrease in family size. Extractive economic activity—farming, mining, ranching, fishing, lumbering—is conducive to large families. Farming, for example, provides couples with short-term financial incentives to building large families. Even quite young children can help with reaping and sowing. For this reason, couples who earn their livelihood extracting raw materials from the earth often have large families.

City dwellers, crammed as they are into small quarters and engaged in heavy industry, lack these incentives. A young city kid cannot do much to increase family revenue. It is hard for a young child to get a job at the local steel mill or locomotive factory. In such an environment, children are more of an economic liability than an asset. Yet, young-

sters remain expensive to raise: In America today, a healthy child costs his parents about \$200,000 from birth to age 18, not counting college.¹ The combination of high, upfront costs and low, near-term payback works together as disincentives for urban couples to invest in large families.²

- *Divorce and Casual Liaisons.* From 1975 to 1998, 50% of all marriages ended in divorce.³ Divorce lowers fertility in two ways. First, and most obviously, divorce by definition shortens the life of marriages, ending many in the early years when couples would normally have children. Second, more men are deferring or even foregoing marriage because they fear the specter of a messy, costly divorce, where child-support payments will hang over them for years. This is especially true in areas with easy (that is, so-called “no fault”) divorce laws on the books. (In fact, “no fault” divorce is thought to be a factor in lowered marriage rates.)

Increasingly, couples are preferring out-of-wedlock cohabitation, where relationships can be brought to an end with no questions asked and, supposedly, no hard feelings. Falling divorce rates do not reflect a turn to moral responsibility by couples, but rather the popularity of “living with” an unmarried partner.⁴ Pregnancies resulting from such casual relationships are more likely to end in abortion than those coming from relationships in wedlock. Fertility rates fall in these types of casual arrangements.

- *Materialism.* Say what one might about capitalism, as an economic system, it efficiently (if not maximally) organizes goods, services, and people for production. Hence, modern, Western, capitalistic societies have usually evolved into consumerist societies, driven by commercialism and advertising. Their peoples become enamored by the goods and services industrial societies can produce for them—the cars, boats, homes, vacations, and iPods that become part and parcel of people’s definition of the so-called good life.

Like hungry little boys in a candy store, today’s Westernized men, women, and children see so much and reach for it all. This invisible and nebulous thing they call “the good life” costs; debt is high, and debt service cuts deeply into

Cost of Suicide

Ills of Rejecting True Values

spendable income. Couples find that they cannot rear large families and have “the good life” at the same time. Captured by materialistic drives, many opt to have few, or no, children. They do not want to share their “good lives” with children.

- *Government Policy.* Responding to old socialist myths about overpopulation, many governments have implemented policies that are not conducive to large families. China’s one-child-per-family rule is an extreme example. Closer to home, America’s tax structure does not adequately relieve the financial burden children create. Tax breaks for dependents are not nearly sufficient to induce parents to create large families. In the 1950s, during the post-war Baby Boom, couples gave up about 17.5% of their income in federal taxes. They could afford to have children. Today, the average federal tax rate is a full 20 points higher, 37.5%.⁵
- *Radical Feminism.* During World War II, women entered the workplace in droves. They have not come home yet! The tension between workplace and home, between family and career, has amplified every decade. An almost exact correlation exists between the level of a woman’s education and her fertility.⁶ The more women pursue higher education, the more they compete with men in the marketplace for high-paying jobs, and the more likely they are to defer marriage or child-bearing. Many upwardly mobile women forego childbirth until it is too late.⁷
- *Contraception.* Another important reason is a technological one: easily available and reliable contraception. Worldwide, about 62% of couples practice some type of artificial contraception.⁸ Within or without marriage, motherhood has become a choice. The data clearly show that choice translates into less frequency.⁹ Contraception has become a principal enabler of “planned parenthood,” and hence a major contributor to falling fertility. It permits couples as never before to pursue human nature’s drive for the things of this world. Couples use it to ensure small families so they can enjoy the materialistic lifestyle they call “the good life.”
- *Abortion.* Finally, legalized, relatively safe, and readily available abortion has contributed to falling

fertility rates. Upwards to 46 million abortions take place worldwide every year.¹⁰ In much of the world, if a woman becomes pregnant, there are few (if any) legal sanctions, little medical risk, and waning social stigma to murdering the child.

Some of these causes—urbanization and high taxes—have their roots in our culture. Others, such as contraception, are rooted in technology. Still others, such as abortion and materialism, reflect a deep malaise in the morals of millions of people around the Western (and Westernizing) world. All of these reasons interplay to pervert peoples’ priorities, diverting them from desiring children to spurning reproduction.

Ironically, this slow suicide by sub-replacement reproduction is so unnatural, seemingly so counterproductive, that few folk a century ago would have dreamed it could happen. It did.

Consequences

Genesis 1:27-28 records God’s command to an—at the time—unnamed man and woman. He commands this first couple to multiply. Couples today disobey that command, for whatever reason, at their own risk. What are the consequences of failure to multiply?

“Growing population,” one economist claims, “has driven the economy [and] sustained the welfare state.”¹¹ Modern economies (and perhaps all economies) are predicated on population expansion. They require market growth to permit the sales of more cars, more boats, and more vacation packages. Sub-replacement fertility rates by definition make market growth impossible and bring into question the viability of Western civilization’s economic models. Put differently, in a world of falling human fertility, would you invest in a company that made diapers or toys? For that matter, in a world of declining populations, where each generation the number of potential buyers shrinks with compounding velocities, who would invest in anything?

Whenever economists build an economic model that assumes a declining human population, consumer markets inevitably shrink, while employment and production fall. As GDP falls in these models, capital and equity markets decline in lock step. This is not a pretty picture. For the average person, it translates into fewer and lower-paying jobs, higher prices, lower property values, and erratic capital markets.¹²

The world has witnessed a foretaste of these ills, at

least in microcosm, in Japan's "Great Depression." Starting in the early 1990s, it continues today in spite of some occasional sunlight in the East. Analysts have blamed this extended crisis on misplaced debt alignments, poor performing loans, inadequate banking structure, and unresponsive bureaucracies. Essentially, these analyses address symptoms, not root causes.

Some commentators, however, are gaining a grasp of the true cause of the problem. One, for example, refers to Japan's protracted, perhaps neverending, "aging depression."¹³ More Pollyanna analysts disavow such doom-and-gloom forebodings.¹⁴ Undeniably, though, Japan's situation today is a leading example, perhaps a prototype, of what happens whenever a people fail to multiply in sufficient numbers.

Color the World Gray

At its crux, the problem is one of color: gray. The Japanese are living longer but having fewer children. Increased life expectancies and decreased fertility team up to increase the age of her population. Demographers report age by looking at the mean (or average) age and the median age of a population. (Median age is the age that divides a population into two numerically equal groups; that is, half the people are younger than this age and half are older.)

Japan's population is aging fast for two reasons. First, modern medicine extends life. In 1950, the combined life expectancy of Japanese citizens was 63.9 years. Today, it is 81.9, and by 2045, it is projected to be 88.3.¹⁵ The second contributing factor to Japan's aging is that too few young people are replacing old ones as they die. Japan's total fertility rate (TFR) has fallen from 2.75 in 1950 to 1.33 today.¹⁶ This is well below the replacement TFR of 2.1.

The math is unforgiving: As people live longer in an environment of fewer and fewer children, median national age increases.¹⁷ In 1950, the median age of Japan was 22.3; today, it is 42.9; in 2045, it is estimated to be 52.3.¹⁸ By 2025, when Japan could have a median age of 50, 11% of her citizens will be over 80. She will then have as many seniors over 80 as children under 15. For every "retired" person over 65, Japan will have only two working people between 15 and 65.¹⁹

Who will man Japan's steel mills and automobile factories and chip assembly lines? Who will pay the pensions of Japan's retirees? Like America and Europe, Japan has built a system of vast entitlement programs. Because, for political reasons, they have become highly underfunded over the years, these programs operate today on a "pay-as-you-go" basis. This means that young workers pay retirees' pensions. However, in a society with fewer young workers and more retired people, who will write these monthly checks?

It is not at all evident that any nation that is aging so fast and so dramatically as Japan is can sustain economic viability, much less growth. Japan's problems may be very long-term indeed.

Japan's is not an isolated case. Graying is "sweeping the Asian/Eurasian region. . . . Only a catastrophe of biblical proportions could forestall the tendency for Asia's population to age substantially between now and 2025."²⁰ Some of these nations will age "at a pace or to an extreme never before witnessed in any ordinary human society."²¹ "Throughout East Asia, many populations will be more elderly than any yet known, and some will be aging at velocities not yet recorded in national populations."²²

Indeed, China's future looks even bleaker than Japan's. China's over-80 population will increase from today's 14.77 million (1.1% of the population) to 100.55 million

TABLE 1

Region & Nation	Median Age
North America	
Canada	38.54
Cuba	35.36
Mexico	24.93
United States	36.27
South America	
Argentina	29.42
Brazil	27.81
Chile	30.07
Uruguay	32.46
Europe	
Belgium	40.55
France	38.85
Germany	42.16
Great Britain	38.99
Ireland	38.70
Italy	41.77
Russia	38.15
Spain	39.51
Asia	
China	32.26
Japan	42.64
India	24.66
North Korea	31.74
South Korea	34.51
Singapore	36.76
Africa	
Egypt	23.68
Libya	22.68
Sudan	18.04
Union of South Africa	23.98
Oceania	
Australia	36.56
Indonesia	26.48
New Zealand	33.65
Philippines	22.26

Table 1: Sample National Median Ages
CIA World Factbook at www.odici.gov/cia/publications/

(7.2% of the population) in 2045.²³ This almost seven-fold increase in 45 years translates into real problems for China, because she, unlike Japan, has no national pension system. In a nutshell, “Japan became rich before it became old; China will do things the other way around.”²⁴ Chinese seniors will need to depend on younger family members for support. Yet, with so few young people around after 2025 or so (in no small measure the result of her decades-old one-child-per-family rule), there will eventually be almost a one-to-one ratio between elderly retirees and workers. The economic difficulties this math puts on workers will be intense. China’s is not a pretty situation at all.

The picture is much the same for North America and Europe. By 2050, fully 20% of Americans will be over 65²⁵, and 42% of Italians will be over 60. By then, Europe will have 75 pensioners for every 100 workers.²⁶ Mexico’s aging is truly phenomenal. In 1950, only 0.5% of her population, or 130,000 individuals, was over 80. Today, a full 1% of her population is over 80, a figure that translates to 1.1 million people. By 2045, 5.8% of her population will be over 80, or 5 million people.²⁷ By that time, she will have just crossed the line from absolute population increase to absolute decrease.

Around the World in Eighty Years

The median age of the world as a whole is 27.60. Table 1: Sample National Median Ages indicates median

ages for major nations by region. It is obvious that median age increases with the level of a nation’s industrialization.

Globally, the number of individuals over 80 has increased from 13.78 million in 1950, when these individuals represented only 0.5% of the population, to 86.65 million in 2005. Today, the 80-plus cohort represents about 1.3% of the population—a five-fold increase in 55 years. The number of individuals over 80 could increase to 394.22 million in 2045, when they will represent a whopping 4.5% of the world’s population.²⁸ By then, the median age of the world will have increased from its 1950 level of 23.9 to 37.8.²⁹

These figures tally more or less with Japan’s trend lines. These lines converge to point directly to a world of increasingly stagnant economies, a prolonged period of standard-of-living decline, as nations struggle with ways to support their dependant seniors and maintain industrial and food production with fewer and fewer young workers.

The answer to the economic problems triggered by sub-replacement fertility rates has as its foundation Herbert Hoover’s assertion that children represent a folk’s “most valuable natural resource.” Children are valuable. Politicians, economists, and technologists, all refusing to build on this foundation, offer solutions that address symptoms, not causes. The third installment of this four-part series will focus on some of those solutions and how they miss the mark.

—Charles Whitaker

Endnotes

¹ U.S. Department of Agriculture figures cited by Richard John Neuhaus, “Where Have All the Children Gone?” *First Things*, May 2005, p. 58.

² When combined with industrialization, urbanization has historically resulted in decreased fertility. However, urbanization in *pre-industrial economies*, as in the Middle East and some Asian nations, has not typically resulted in lower fertility. So it is that sprawling urban centers like Calcutta, Cairo, and Manila are characterized by high fertility rates. Children are everywhere. Statistics clearly show that, as these urban areas industrialize due to globalization, fertility rates decline.

³ Witte, John, Jr., “The Meanings of Marriage,” *First Things*, October 2002, pp. 30-41.

⁴ Himmelfarb, Gertrude, quoted by Brian C. Anderson, “Capitalism and the Suicide of Culture,” *First Things*, February 2000, pp. 23-30. Along these lines, Stanley Kurtz comments:

Especially in Europe, marriage is morphing into parental cohabitation. And in societies where parents commonly cohabit, the practice of “living alone together” is emerging. There unmarried parents remain “together” yet live in separate households, only one of them with a child.

⁵ Kurtz, Stanley, “Demographics and the Culture War,” *Policy Review*, February/March 2005, p. 33.

⁶ Wattenberg, Ben, cited by Kurtz, *ibid.*, p. 36.

⁷ In “Overcoming Motherhood” (*Policy Review*, December 2002/January 2003, p.31), Christine Stolba comments that middle-aged women who have deferred childbirth for years “form a large portion of the fertility industry’s customers, spending tens of thousands of dollars for a single chance to cheat time.” Many have waited too long. “By the time a woman is in her forties, the odds of having a child, even with some form of intervention, are less than 10 percent.”

⁸ Neuhaus, *ibid.*, p. 58

⁹ Kurtz, *ibid.*, p. 36.

¹⁰ Neuhaus, *ibid.*, p. 58.

¹¹ Kurtz, *ibid.*, p. 37.

¹² For details, see England, Robert Stowe, *Global Aging and*

Financial Markets: Hard Landings Ahead, Center for International and Strategic Studies, 2002.

¹³ England, *The Macroeconomic Impact of Global Aging: A New Era of Economic Frailty?*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2002. Nicholas Eberstadt (“Power and Population in Asia,” *Policy Review*, February/March 2004) also cites Paul S. Hewitt, “The Grey Roots of Japan’s Crisis,” *The Demographic Dilemma: Japan’s Aging Society*, Smithsonian Institution, Woodrow Wilson Center, Asia Special Report 107, January 2003, pp. 4-9.

¹⁴ See, for example, Herbert London’s “Red Sun Rising,” *The National Interest*, Winter 2004/05, p 105. A more useful analysis is that of Peter Hartcher, “Can Japan Come Back?” *The National Interest*, Winter 1998/99, p.32.

¹⁵ *World Population Prospects: The 2002 Revision*. United Nations Population Division Database, accessed May 20, 2005, available at <http://esa.un.org/unpp>.

¹⁶ *World Population Prospects, ibid.*

¹⁷ Currently, the median age ranges from a low of about 15 years in Uganda and Gaza Strip to 40 or more in several European countries and Japan.

¹⁸ *World Population Prospect, ibid.*

¹⁹ Eberstadt, *ibid.*, p. 3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, p. 12. The author cites the United Nations Population Division, *World Population Prospects: The 2002 Revision*. Also cited is the United States Bureau of the Census, International Database, available at <http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/idbacc.html>.

²³ *World Population Prospects, ibid.*

²⁴ Eberstadt, *ibid.*, p.15.

²⁵ U. S. Census Bureau figures forecast that the age 85-plus segment of the population will grow from 4,259,000 in year 2000 to 13,552,000 in year 2040. All America at that time will be as old as today’s “oldest” state, Florida.

²⁶ Kurtz, *ibid.*

²⁷ *World Population Prospect, ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

POWER

When we hear the word *power*, many pictures and ideas may come to mind. We often associate power with authority or rulership, and we use phrases such as “the powers that be” and “power corrupts.” This meaning of the word *power* invokes images of political influence, of commanding figures or elite individuals who operate by their own rules and impose their will on others. In this regard, *power* and *control* are closely linked.

We frequently have the chance to witness the “power of nature.” We know that “nature” is not really a power by itself, but that the natural world, created by God, has the potential to release or display tremendous energy. Every year, North and Central America experience a hurricane season, officially from June 1 to November 30, which often provides a spectacular display of power.

In the last decade or so, hurricanes Andrew, Charley, Frances, Hugo, and Ivan perfectly exemplified the meaning of the word *power*, and it is a testament to God’s watchfulness that more lives were not lost. Considerable loss of life and destruction of property can result from the power that God built into the earth’s atmosphere.

Sebastian Junger, author of *The Perfect Storm*, gives us an idea of the power within a hurricane:

A mature hurricane is by far the most powerful event on earth; the combined nuclear arsenals of the United States and the former Soviet Union don’t contain enough energy to keep a hurricane going for one day. A typical hurricane encompasses a million cubic miles of atmosphere and could provide all the electric power needed by the United States for three or four years. During the Labor Day Hurricane of 1935, winds surpassed 200 miles an hour and people caught outside were sandblasted to death. Rescue workers found nothing but their shoes and belt buckles. So much rain can fall during a hurricane—up to five inches an hour—that the soil liquefies. Hillsides slump into valleys and birds drown in flight, unable to shield their upward-facing nostrils. . . . In 1938, a hurricane put downtown Providence, Rhode Island, under ten feet of ocean. The waves generated by that storm were so huge that they literally shook the earth; seismographs in Alaska picked up their impact five thousand miles away. (p. 102)

DYNAMIC POWER

Of course, power does not have to be quite so dramatic or destructive. We have another saying, “If it is in his power,

he will do this or that.” In this sense, the word *power* means “ability,” “capability,” “the capacity to accomplish.” It can also mean “talent,” “skill,” or “aptitude.” We might tell a person, “The power to do something is in your hands,” meaning he has what is necessary to accomplish or to produce that “something.” People can be powerful because they make things happen. A person may be physically weak yet still be powerful due to his ability to achieve goals, control situations, and manipulate events in spite of opposition.

We talk of athletes as being powerful, not necessarily because they have the brute strength of a heavyweight boxer, but because they also have *precision* and *finesse*. Michael Jordan was not the physically *strongest* NBA basketball player, but he is perhaps the most *powerful* player in the history of the game because of his *skill* and *effectiveness*—his demonstrated capacity to play well.

In the New Testament, the Greek word translated “power” is *dunamis*, the source of the English words *dynamic* and *dynamite*, both of which are easily associated with “power.” In addition, *dunamis* can also be translated “mighty works” and “wonderful works.” The implication is not just the capacity for activity or accomplishment, but actual actions and achievements of such magnitude that they inspire a sense of wonder in others. Similarly, *dunamis* is also translated “miracles” a few times. These powerful accomplishments, typically beyond normal human capability, refer both to things that Jesus Christ did (Mark 5:30; Acts 10:38), as well as works performed by God through others, such as the apostles (Mark 9:39; Acts 6:8; 19:11; II Corinthians 12:12).

Dunamis does not have an inherent moral quality; it is neutral. On the one hand, the angel told Zacharias that John the Baptist would come “in the spirit and power [*dunamis*] of Elijah” (Luke 1:17), meaning the prophet’s *effectiveness* and *ability*, which we would consider to be positive. On the other hand, the Samaritans all wrongly said that Simon Magus—Simon the Sorcerer—was “the great power [*dunamis*] of God” (Acts 8:9-10). Similarly, in Revelation 13:2, the end-time Beast receives *dunamis* from Satan, and the ten kings give their *dunamis* to the Beast (Revelation 17:13).

Thus, *dunamis*, this capacity for achieving, accomplishing, and controlling things, is morally neutral. It can be used for God’s glory or in Satan’s service. However, it is mostly used in a positive light, describing God’s authority, ability, or outworking by means of the Holy Spirit (for example, Matthew 6:13; 24:30; Romans 1:20; 9:17; I Corinthians 6:14; Ephesians 3:7; Hebrews 1:3; II Peter 1:3; etc).

In Acts 1:8, just before Christ ascends to heaven, He gives His disciples their final marching orders: “But you shall receive power [*dunamis*] when the Holy Spirit has come upon you. . . .” Jesus links the Holy Spirit with power—*dunamis* (see Luke 24:49). Similarly, Paul tells Timothy that Christians have not been given “a spirit of fear, but of power [*dunamis*] . . .” (II Timothy 1:7). When combined, these verses show that the Holy Spirit gives a person *the effectiveness for God’s will and God’s work to be done* through him.

Even when Christ performed miracles, the Father actually did the work (John 14:10). Jesus was His chosen vessel through whom the works were accomplished to do the Father’s will. It is clear *dunamis* is more than just a capacity or ability; it is an *actively used* capacity or ability. It is not static. Once this power is set in motion, it continues to move, work, and accomplish.

Also in Acts 1:8, Christ tells the disciples that, with the Holy Spirit, they would receive the ability to be effective witnesses for Him. But more than receiving just the *capacity* for effective witnessing, the Holy Spirit—the power of God—would actively begin working in their lives, essentially without the disciples governing it! Christ said, “You *shall* receive power . . . and you *shall* be witnesses to Me.”

God gives power to all mankind in the form of the spirit in man. The mind, the intellect, is the basis of man’s power. To His Spirit-begotten children, though, He gives an extra, *realized capacity* to perform His will, just as He gives *dunamis* to the angelic host to carry out its responsibilities (II Thessalonians 1:7). He equips us with whatever we need to accomplish what He is working out.

If something needs to be done for God’s design to be realized, we can be sure that God has delegated the power—the capacity, aptitude, authority, and active effectiveness—for it to be done. Sometimes this means working only through a person’s natural ability. At other times, it means bestowing additional power for miracles to be performed. For instance, the power God gives to each of us to understand the Bible is on the level of the miraculous. No amount of natural aptitude or scholarship can bestow that ability. God provides the ability to understand.

A LITTLE STRENGTH

With this in mind, the oft-read letter to the Philadelphia church (Revelation 3:7-8) takes on a different meaning—and adds tremendous encouragement: “And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write, ‘. . . I know your works. See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it; for you have a little strength [*dunamis*].’”

Jesus Christ tells the Philadelphians that they have only a little strength! They have a little power. They have a small, effective capability for wonderful works and mighty deeds, a limited ability to get things done. If they are dynamic, it is only on a small scale. This has some implications about the letter to Philadelphia that we may not have considered before.

There are at least four applications or audiences to the

Letters to the Seven Churches: They are written to 1) seven literal, first-century churches in Asia Minor; 2) seven end-time churches; 3) seven historical church eras; and/or 4) individuals Christians. In each letter, Christ gives the admonition, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the *churches*” (Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). The seven letters can represent attitudes or conditions as well as organizational units and periods. Looking through the lens of the fourth application gives the letter to Philadelphia meaning regardless of the era or corporate organization one may be part of.

Christ’s statement that the Philadelphian has only a little strength is not necessarily a criticism. The overall tenor of the letter is extremely positive. However, He is giving a statement of fact: Philadelphians have only a small effective capability for miraculous work, a little physical or spiritual aptitude, a small measure of effectiveness. *Dunamis* is not entirely lacking, but it is present in only a small amount.

The Philadelphian, by this accounting, will probably not be the one healing people when his shadow passes by, or the one moving mountains. Nor will He be prophesying of future events or speaking in unfamiliar languages. He may not have great speaking ability or a dynamic personality. This is not to say that power and effectiveness are entirely lacking, just that the Philadelphian will probably not have the same dramatic outworking we observe in other biblical figures.

Why is this *dunamis* lacking? From the rest of the letter to Philadelphia, it does not appear that the lack of *dunamis* is because of a great failing or negligence in duties to God. On the contrary, the letter is a commendation because of *faithfulness*. Perhaps part of the reason, seen in one of Jesus’ parables, is that not much natural ability is there for God to enhance. Perhaps also, mighty deeds are lacking because there is no *need* for such works to be done. Remember, if God has ordained that something be done, *He* will give the power for it to be accomplished. If He has not given that power, it is because it is His will that a thing not be accomplished.

The Parable of the Talents adds to the picture:

For the kingdom of heaven is like a man traveling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them. And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own *ability*; and immediately he went on a journey. (Matthew 25:14-15)

The word *ability* in verse 15 is also *dunamis*. These verses affirm that 1) talents are given by God, and 2) apparently the bestowing of talents depends somewhat on the effective capability the person already possesses. Along the same lines, it is interesting to note that Christ Himself was limited in the works—*dunamis*—He could perform because of the unbelief in some areas (Matthew 13:58; Mark 6:5-6)!

(continued on page 18)

(continued from page 6)

reasons are good? For instance, He tells us to give three tithes and to travel to far places to keep His feasts. He commands us to love our enemies and do good to them. He asks us to become like little children and to sacrifice ourselves in service when we would rather give orders.

Rebellion, He Does It Again!

Sadly, Saul's rash presumption did not end there; he did not learn his lesson. In I Samuel 15:1-3, Samuel gave him clear instructions about a responsibility God laid on him:

Samuel also said to Saul, "The LORD sent me to anoint you king over His people, over Israel. Now therefore, heed the voice of the words of the LORD. Thus says the LORD of hosts: 'I will punish what Amalek did to Israel, how he laid in wait for him on the way when he came up from Egypt. Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and do not spare them. But kill both man and woman, infant and nursing child, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.'"

Saul and the Israelites again took things into their own hands, devising what they thought was a better strategy, a way to honor God more: They would magnanimously save the Amalekite king's life and spare the best animals to sacrifice to God.

"Now the LORD sent you on a mission, and said, 'Go, utterly destroy the sinners, the Amalekites, and fight against them until they are consumed.' Why then did you not obey the voice of the LORD? Why did you swoop down on the spoil, and do evil in the sight of the LORD?" And Saul said to Samuel, "But I have obeyed the voice of the LORD, and gone on the mission on which the LORD sent me, and brought back Agag king of Amalek; I have utterly destroyed the Amalekites. But the people took of the plunder, sheep and oxen, the best of the things which should have been utterly destroyed, to sacrifice to the LORD your God in Gilgal." (verses 18-21)

Samuel then responded with God's sentence:

Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold

Holiness, Justice, Sin, and Grace

These examples of divine justice may anger or offend us. At the very least, they are sometimes confounding in the face of what we have learned about a merciful and patient God of love. Perhaps we have difficulty because we do not understand the linkage between four vital, biblical concepts: holiness, justice, sin, and grace.

We may not grasp the seriousness of holiness by failing

He tells us to submit ourselves to one another in love and to be subject to corrupt and unjust governments. Keeping these instructions is sometimes far easier said than done. Can we see God in the picture even in difficult circumstances and trust Him? In this case, Saul did not.

to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, He also has rejected you from being king. (verses 22-23)

This time he paid more dearly for his carnal reasoning, which had given him permission to twist God's commands into something he thought was better. Such presumptuous, stubborn pride!

Saul was generally a brave and honest man, but he also had a streak of rash impatience. He sinned by not trusting God to fulfill His word through Samuel. This amounts to theological blackmail. By taking action into his own hands, he hoped to force God's hand to come to Israel's aid or to bless despite His commands not being followed.

By contrast, we have David's example and why God respected him so much. *Adam Clarke's Commentary*, in its explanation of I Samuel 13:14, gives four reasons why the Bible speaks so highly of David:

1. In his strict attention to the law and worship of God.
2. In his admitting, in the whole of his conduct, that God was King in Israel, and that he himself was but his vicegerent.
3. In never attempting to alter any of those laws, or in the least change the Israelite constitution.
4. In all his public official conduct he acted according to the divine mind and fulfilled the will of his Maker: thus was he a man after God's own heart.

Not also that David penned Psalm 19:13, in which he asks God to keep His servant from presumptuous sins.

to see the purity God requires; we may have an unbalanced perspective of justice; we may misunderstand the deadliness of sin; and we may see little need for grace for ourselves. The stories of Nadab and Abihu, Uzza, and Ananias and Sapphira are clearly not examples of divine mercy.

Before we can understand divine mercy, we must first

understand the seriousness of sin and the necessity of divine justice. Divine justice is linked to righteousness: God's justice is *according to righteousness*. Evil justice in God does not exist because His every judgment is according to His righteousness, for there is absolutely no unrighteousness in Him. The justice of God is always an expression of His perfect, righteous, holy character.

Biblically, *justice* refers to "conformity to a rule or norm." If life and salvation were a game, we would say that God plays by the rules. He sets them and never deviates from them. The norm of justice is His own holy character. What God does is always consistent with who and what He is. His righteousness is absolutely pure; there is no shadow of turning in Him (James 1:17). He is utterly incapable of an unholy, unrighteous act. We call people "crooks" because they are crooked. God is absolutely "straight." Genesis 18:23-25 speaks of this very issue:

And Abraham came near and said, "Would You also destroy the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there were fifty righteous within the city; would You also destroy the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous that were in it? Far be it from You to do such a thing as this, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous should be as the wicked; far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

Never did a man ask a more rhetorical question. Abraham had no idea how far such an act was from God. There was never even the most remote possibility that God would kill the innocent along with the guilty! For God to do that, He would have to cease being holy and righteous—He

would have to stop being God! God is the Supreme Judge of all the earth. As man's sordid histories show, if He is unjust, there is no hope that justice will ever prevail.

We know human judges can be corrupt, take bribes, and be partial. God, though, is never corrupt, cannot be bribed, refuses to show partiality, never acts out of ignorance, has every fact necessary for judgment, and never makes mistakes. Nadab, Abihu, Uzza, Saul, Ananias and Sapphira all got what they deserved. There is no injustice with God.

God's justice is never divorced from His righteousness. He never condemns the innocent; never clears the guilty; never punishes with undue severity; never fails to reward righteousness. His justice is perfect justice.

What Abraham fails to address in his question is sin. Mankind utterly fails to appreciate the seriousness of sin. God's Word clearly states that the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23) and that sin is the transgression of God's law (I John 3:4, KJV). From the beginning in the Garden of Eden, God proclaims to mankind in the persons of Adam and Eve, ". . . in the day that you eat of it [sin], you shall *surely die*" (Genesis 2:17).

He does not say they would die immediately, but die they did. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). We have all earned this judgment by the way we live. Is God unjust because He warns Adam and Eve? No, the problem is that man in his pride thinks he deserves better.

However, God does not always act with justice—sometimes He acts with mercy. Mercy is not justice, but neither is it injustice, since injustice violates righteousness. Mercy manifests kindness and grace, doing no violence to righteousness. We may see non-justice in God, which is mercy, but we never see injustice in Him.

There Is a Way That Seems Right

Exodus 32:1-8 gives us one last look at presumption for the purposes of this article:

Now when the people saw that Moses delayed coming down from the mountain, the people gathered together to Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make us gods that shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." And Aaron said to them, "Break off the golden earrings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." So all the people broke off the golden earrings which were in their ears, and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold from their hand, and he fashioned it with an engraving tool, and made a molded calf. Then they said, "This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!" So when Aaron saw it, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, "Tomorrow is a feast to the LORD." Then they rose early on the next day, offered

burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play. And the LORD said to Moses, "Go, get down! For your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt have corrupted themselves. They have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them. They have made themselves a molded calf, and worshipped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!'"

They did this in their ignorance and their impatience to get things moving. Even though most of the people wanted it, and a renowned religious figure proclaimed it "a feast to the LORD," it did not make it so. God was definitely not positively impressed, nor was Moses. In one of the gravest acts of presumption shown in God's Word, and one of the largest in terms of the number involved, they took it on themselves to add this to the worship of God. What they did was very seriously disrespectful to God; they attempted to configure the nature of God according to their own desires.

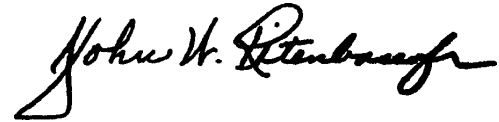
Proverbs 14:12 says, “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.” People say they keep Christmas and Easter to worship Christ, but they are also defining the nature of God according to their own ideas. Just as surely as the ancient Israelites blended paganism with what God truly revealed, so people do today. This is the basic principle of acts of presumption, and each of us has done this, not once, but sadly, repeatedly, even though we may know better.

Jesus says in John 4:24, “God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth,” meaning we must worship to the fullest of God’s intent as revealed in

His Word, with every act guided and determined by His revealed truth. Yet, how many corners do we cut when we feel it serves us better at the time?

All of us have plenty of repenting to do, for we are all guilty before God of acts every bit as bad as those highlighted in these articles. We are all guilty of making our own “adjustments,” adding or subtracting to God’s instruction when we feel the need fits our convenience.

In Christian love,



POWER

(continued from page 15)

The two faithful servants double what is given to them. The amounts are not as important as the growth. Both give Christ a 100% increase on what He bestowed on them. The unfaithful servant produces nothing at all.

In this example, we can see the Philadelphian as the servant who receives only two talents rather than five. He does not have the same natural ability. However, even though he may have fewer responsibilities, or the scope of what he controls is much smaller, he is *just as faithful* as the servant who receives more. The Philadelphian may have only a little ability, but with that ability he is able to *keep God’s word and not deny His name* (Revelation 3:8). His power enables him to keep God’s command to persevere (verse 10).

“AN OPEN DOOR”

We commonly interpret the “open door” in the letter to Philadelphia to be a reference to preaching the gospel. This seems plausible, as Paul uses the imagery of an open door in three places to signify the opportunity to preach (I Corinthians 16:9; II Corinthians 2:12; Colossians 4:3). However, an “open door to preach the gospel” does not fit the context of the seven messages. Does *every* Philadelphian have an open door to preach the gospel? All of the letters involve moral, spiritual, and attitudinal strengths and weaknesses. They emphasize *overcoming* rather than accomplishing one specific, external task.

In Revelation 3:8, the phrase “open door” is being used, not so much as an *opportunity*, but as a *reward*. *Young’s Literal Translation* shows this emphasis: “I have known thy works; lo, I have set before thee a door—opened, and no one is able to shut it, *because* thou hast a little power, and didst keep my word, and didst not deny my name” (emphasis ours). Christ sets before the Philadelphian an “open door” *because* he has only a little capacity for mighty works, and yet he still keeps God’s Word and does not deny God’s name by the way he lives his life. He still is able to overcome.

The door Christ opens to the Philadelphian, the door no man can shut, may well be the door to the Kingdom itself! In the Parable of the Ten Virgins, the door is open to some of the virgins and closed to others (Matthew 25:10-12). In the description of New Jerusalem, the gate is open only to those whose names are written in the Book of Life (Revelation 21:27; 22:14). Christ opens the door to the Kingdom because of the Philadelphian’s faithfulness, just as He promises to keep him from the hour of trial because of his perseverance (Revelation 3:10).

God may have given him only two talents, but He knows that if he is faithful with a small amount of power, in the Kingdom he will faithfully administer all of the responsibility and effectiveness that God bestows upon him. Individually, we may only have a little “power,” but if we are faithful with what we have been given, God is pleased, knowing we will also be faithful with great power. As Christ says in Luke 16:10, “. . . faithful also in much. . . .”

We have been given a measure of *dunamis*. If we have God’s Spirit, we have *ability, talent, effectiveness, and strength* in some measure, in some area. It does not matter how much is given, or in what area our strength resides, but that we remain faithful in what God has given to us and that we make use of the power we have to further God’s purpose.

Having only a little *dunamis* should not be a deterrent from achievement, even if it is only on a small scale. God is interested in what we do with what we have been given. Martin Luther King, Jr., put it this way:

If a man is called to be a street-sweeper, he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the host of heaven and earth will pause to say, “Here lived a great street-sweeper, who did his job well.”

—David C. Grabbe

Once Again, Britain Dominates Europe

Here in America, July 1, 2005, passed without a great deal of stir. It was the beginning of a new quarter and—other than for personal milestones and the fact that it was the last workday before the Independence Day holiday—the date held little significance for most people.

In Europe, however, July 1 was a day for concern for some, if not for real fear. For it was on this date that the United Kingdom—Britain—ascended to the six-month rotating presidency of the European Union (EU). To those of us across the pond, the internal politics of the Continent make little impression, so we lack the sensitivity to perceive just how significant euroskeptic Britain's taking of the EU's reigns is. We might argue—and quite convincingly—that EU presidents never succeed in their proposals for the bureaucratic behemoth that is the EU, so why should British Prime Minister Tony Blair be any different? And we would be right—except that the future of Europe has already been decided in favor of the British model of the EU.

This is where the fear begins for many across the English Channel.

Peter Zeihan, in his “Victory Before Battle: The U.K. Presidency” (Stratfor Geopolitical Intelligence Report, July 5, 2005), makes this case. He argues that, though Blair's stated agenda for the presidency is a non-starter in all respects, Britain's Prime Minister will direct the transition from the primacy of the Franco-German model to that of the British model. The previous EU President, Luxembourg's Jean-Paul Juncker, commented following the disintegration of the June 17 EU summit:

[Europe] is in a deep crisis. During this budgetary debate there were two conceptions of Europe that clashed and will always clash. There are those who, in fact without saying it, want the big market and nothing but the big market, a high-level free-trade zone [the British model], and those that want a politically integrated Europe [the Franco-German model]. I have felt for a long time this debate would blow up one day.

France, in particular, is the country that most fears this development, and her fear is based almost entirely on geopolitical realities. Over the years since the Revolution, Paris has learned that her nation lacks both the population and resources to dominate Europe by itself. However, during the presidency of Charles de Gaulle, the French realized—with both Germany and Italy on the long road to recovery from defeat in World War II—that in a Continent-wide political and economic union, France would be top dog. No one would have the stature to oppose them in setting the agenda and the pace of progress. France would be the de facto head of a superpower.

But her old nemesis, Britain, has played the spoiler once again.

The British have always known that the only real threat to Britain is a united Continental power, so the various British governments over the past few centuries have commonly held to the balance-of-power principle. When the EU began to rear its head as a possible successor to Napoleon and the Axis Powers, Britain sought to join it—not to help it along—but to *hinder* its development into a political, military powerhouse, while benefiting from its economic advantages. Suspecting this, de Gaulle vetoed Britain's ascension to the European Economic Community every time it came up while he lived, but eventually Britain was allowed to join. Ever since, London has successfully blocked French aims in forming a stronger, more political union. Zeihan explains:

The real genius in London's strategy is its support for the steady expansion of majority voting on EU developments, while carefully limiting veto power on issues that would actually allow Europe to function as a unified entity. . . . France not only agreed to such voting structures, but actually was responsible for proposing most of them, in the name of European integration.

Meanwhile, British opposition has ensured that the tools that would allow Europe to function as a multi-state country—such as centralized discretion over foreign affairs and tax policy—remain firmly in the hands of national governments. . . .

The end result is that the EU, as it stands now, poses minimal threat to the United Kingdom from a political and military point of view, but represents a massive threat to the French economic model. Under current EU voting strictures, the United Kingdom—along with the new members, which tend to be more liberal in their economic outlook—can outvote the French four-to-one. France's efforts to build a superpower have instead stitched its own straitjacket.

From this ensues the French fear of being sidelined in the union it founded and forged during more than half a century of tough maneuvering. With the defeat of the European Constitution, the French citizenry, along with the Dutch, have decided they favor the “Anglo-Saxon” economic union over the Franco-German political union. The vote also revealed that the EU is not a popular dream but an elitist vision designed to consolidate power among a select few in the political class.

Once again, the descendants of Joseph's younger son Ephraim have pushed the peoples of Europe to conform to their desires (Deuteronomy 33:17). However, do not count the rest of Europe out just yet. History shows that “pushing” eventually goes both ways. ■

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

BIBLE STUDY: *THE PARABLE OF THE TALENTS*

Part Two

Since the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30) is often confused with the Parable of the Pounds (Luke 19:12-26), it will help our understanding to compare them. Both parables describe a rich man going to a distant country and entrusting a sum of money to his servants to invest for him. In both, there is a promise that, when the traveler returns, he will deal with his servants according to the use they have made of that money. He promises to reward the faithful and punish the negligent. Here, it seems, the similarities end.

Yet, they contain important differences between them. In the Talents, Jesus addresses His own disciples at the Mount of Olives, while in the Pounds, He speaks to a multitude at

Jericho. In the Talents, the servants differ from each other in the amount of gifts they receive, which is according to personal ability. In the Pounds, the amount given is the same, but they differ in the diligence they display. In the Talents, two servants use their talents equally, and their reward is therefore equal too. In the Pounds, the servants make different uses of the money and are therefore differently rewarded. While both parables distinguish between the faithful and the faithless, as well as the reward for diligence and the punishment for indolence, they show responsibility from different angles.

Part Two will analyze the allocation of talents, how they are used and misused, and how the servants are rewarded.



1. What can we learn from the unequal allocation of talents? Matthew 25:15.

COMMENT: To a few chosen servants, God gives five talents to fulfill special needs in the church. These may be evangelists, pastors, or teachers, and their knowledge of spiritual truths along with their gift to preach carries great responsibility (James 3:1). As a result, God expects more of them than others less gifted (Romans 12:6; Ephesians 4:11-12; Luke 12:48).

Perhaps most members of God's church have two talents. They may be deacons with a natural desire to serve the church in physical ways. Maybe they are those who give opening and closing prayers or have a musical talent to help others offer up praise to God the Father and Jesus Christ. They may have a gift in organizing activities or in helping children or the elderly. As gifts, these are somewhat less notable than the more evident ones (Romans 12:8).

The servant with one talent describes the potential slug-gard in Christ's service (Proverbs 6:6). Yet those of us who have the least must serve God with what we have, and if we serve Him faithfully with the little He has given, honor and reward will be ours. We must support the church in less noticeable yet vital ways, such as in prayer, encouragement, contributions, and positive attitudes (Acts 12:5; Luke 11:9-13).

2. How are the talents used and misused? Matthew 25:16-18.
COMMENT: Since the servants did not know how long their master would be gone, they began trading without delay. The one with five talents increased his by 100%, as did the servant with two talents. In each case, their original assets were doubled. If the servant with one talent had just worked by trading with it, his reward would have been the same.

The motivation for service and producing good fruit should be love for the Master, a virtue the servant with one talent lacked. Sadly, he failed to trade with his talent and multiply it. Fearing the master's severity, he wrapped his lord's asset in a handkerchief and hid it in a hole in the earth. Fear is a sad thing when a person dreads losing something valuable so much that he hoards it instead of putting it to good use. So it is with a spiritual gift also.

While his fellow-servants were actively trading their tal-

ents, the third servant was idle. He was neither actively obedient nor disobedient, but passively disobedient. He did not intend to hurt his master's property; he simply failed to improve it. Similar to the foolish virgins suffering because they neglected to prepare, the third servant in this parable suffers because he did nothing with his talent. We must not hide our light under a basket (Matthew 5:14-16). Spiritual talents must be used in service to Christ for the glory of God—for the joy and honor of Him who is the Giver of every good gift (I Corinthians 10:31; James 1:17).

3. How are the servants rewarded? Matthew 25:19-30.

COMMENT: The master never sets a time for his return, indicating he could return at any time. However, we know that his return does not occur before his servants have time to increase their talents. The first and second servants cheerfully relate their success in trading, giving their master his property with double interest. Both are rewarded the same, receiving the praise, "Well done!" Both receive the promise, "I will make you ruler." Both receive glory, "Enter into the joy of your lord." Though these two servants differ in the talents they receive, they are the same in obedience, diligence, and faithfulness to their master, and so receive the same reward.

The master passes a serious judgment on the burier of the talent: condemnation for neglecting his trust. This servant's true character reveals itself in his reply. His flawed view of his master's intentions leads him to excuse his own failure to the point of flagrant disrespect. To his idleness, he adds injustice, so his lord sees him as lazy and wicked (Matthew 25:26).

We must always appreciate all of Christ's gifts. "For if there is first a willing mind, it is accepted according to what one has, and not according to what he does not have" (II Corinthians 8:12). The true Christian's attitude is contentment with what he has and making the very best use of it. It is better to have a low position in God's service with faithfulness than a high position with unfaithfulness. Our limitation should be an incentive to spiritual and moral action and persistence. In the end, what God commends and rewards is not brilliance, popularity, or cleverness, but faithfulness and obedience to Him regardless of human recognition or praise.