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A MAGAZINE RESTORING PLAIN UNDERSTANDING



MIDEAST ON THE BRINK

What Happens Next?

THE REAL TRUTH

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■ **VOICING ANGER:** Protesters march in central Athens during a demonstration against fascism and the Golden Dawn party's attacks on immigrants (June 8, 2012).

PHOTO: LOUISA GOULIAMAKI/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

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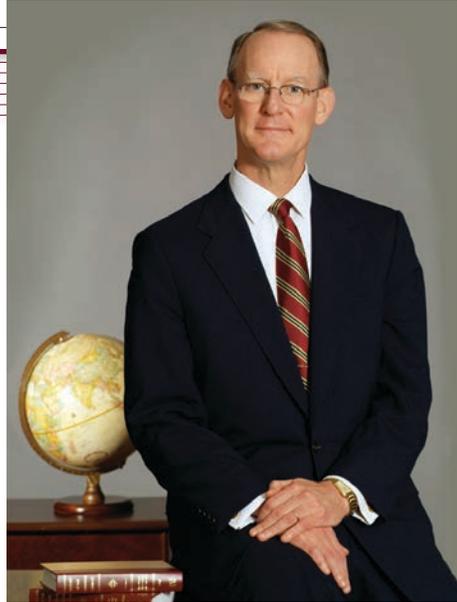
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PERSONAL FROM

David C. Fack



Christmas Unveiled!

CHRISTMAS IS THOUGHT to be a wonderful time, focusing participants on giving, family togetherness, beautiful music and decorations, feasting on special foods, and singing traditional carols. All of this is supposedly centered around the worship of Jesus Christ, and His birth on December 25.

Where did Christmas originate? What is the origin of Santa Claus—mistletoe—Christmas trees—holly wreaths—Yule logs—and exchanging gifts? Many seek to “put Christ back into Christmas.” Was He ever there? Surely the Bible instructs to do all these things. Or does it?

I grew up keeping Christmas, and it was a big event in our family every year. We left out none of the usual trimmings of this occasion. On Christmas Eve, excitement grew with every passing minute. After going to bed, I could neither sleep nor wait until morning to see all that “Santa” had brought me.

Christmas certainly *felt* wonderful to me. I trusted what my parents told me. I had no reason to doubt them. I was not taught to question the true origin of Christmas!

Most never reflect on *why* they believe what they believe or do what they do. We live in a world filled with customs, but few ever seek to understand their origin. We generally accept them without question. Most people basically do what everyone else does—following the crowd because it is easy!

Let’s look at the roots of Christmas. Let’s see *why* people follow the customs associated with it. Why is it kept

on December 25? The early New Testament Church never kept it. Why?

This Personal introduces facts from history and Scripture that, when placed together, paint a complete picture. Let’s avoid all assumptions and only accept what can be *proven!*

The truth of this holiday celebration will shock you!

True Origin

Nearly all aspects of Christmas observance have their roots in Roman custom and religion. We will look at many respected sources (all emphasis will be mine), starting with the following admission from *The Buffalo News*: “The earliest reference to Christmas being marked on Dec. 25 comes from the second century after Jesus’ birth. It is considered likely the first Christmas celebrations *were in reaction to the Roman Saturnalia*, a harvest festival that marked the winter solstice—the return of the sun—and honored Saturn, the god of sowing. Saturnalia was a rowdy time, *much opposed by the more austere leaders among the still-minority Christian sect*. Christmas developed, one scholar says, as a means of replacing worship of the *sun* with worship of the Son. By A.D. 529, after Christianity had become the official state religion of the Roman Empire, Emperor Justinian made Christmas a civic holiday. The celebration of Christmas reached its peak—some would say its worst moments—in the medieval period when it became a time for conspicuous consumption and unequaled revelry.”

Think. It was 300 years after Christ when the Roman church began keeping Christmas!—and not until hundreds

of years after this that it was mandated to be kept throughout the empire as an official festival honoring “Christ.”

Consider these admissions from the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, under “Christmas”: “Christmas was *not* among the earliest festivals of the Church...the first evidence of the feast is *from Egypt*.” Further, “Pagan customs centering around the January calends [the early days of each month] gravitated to Christmas.” Under the topic “Natal Day,” Origen, an early Catholic writer, admitted, “In the Scriptures, no one is recorded to have kept a feast or held a great banquet on his birthday. It is *only sinners* (like Pharaoh and Herod) who make great rejoicings over the day on which they were born into this world.”

The *Encyclopedia Americana* reveals, “Christmas... was not observed in the first centuries of the Christian church, since the Christian usage in general was to celebrate the *death* of remarkable persons rather than their *birth*...a feast was established in memory of this event [Christ’s birth] *in the 4th century*. In the 5th century the Western church *ordered* the feast to be celebrated [forever] on the *day of the Mithraic rites of the birth of the sun and at the close of the Saturnalia*, as no certain knowledge of the day of Christ’s birth existed.”

Here are more facts from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, under the heading “Christmas”: “In the Roman world the Saturnalia (December 17) was a time of merrymaking and exchanging of gifts. *December 25 was also regarded as the birth date of the Iranian mystery god Mithra*, the Sun of Righteousness. On the Roman New Year (January 1), houses were decorated with greenery and lights, and gifts were given to children and the poor. To these observances were added the German and Celtic Yule rites when the Teutonic tribes penetrated into Gaul, Britain, and central Europe. Food and good fellowship, the Yule log and Yule cakes, greenery and fir trees, gifts and greetings all commemorated different aspects of this festive season. Fires and lights, symbols of warmth and lasting life, have always been associated with the winter festival, both pagan and Christian.”

Stunning information! I ask: do you care?

Consider what *The Democrat and Chronicle* admitted regarding who mandated the celebration: “The Roman festival of Saturnalia, Dec. 17-24, moved citizens to decorate their homes with greens and lights and give gifts to children and the poor. The Dec. 25 festival of *natalis solis invicti, the birth of the unconquered sun*, was decreed by the emperor Aurelian in A.D. 274 as a Winter Solstice celebration, and sometime (later)...was Christianized as a date to celebrate the birth of the Son of Light.”

Dr. William Gutsch further publicly confirmed the true origin and nature of Christmas with this: “The early Romans were not celebrating Christmas but rather a *pagan feast* called the Saturnalia. It occurred each year around the beginning of winter, or the winter solstice.

This was the time when the sun had taken its lowest path across the sky and the days were beginning to lengthen, thus assuring another season of growth.

“If many of the trappings of the Saturnalia, however, seem to parallel what so many of us do today, we can see where we borrowed...our holiday traditions. And indeed, it has been suggested that while Christ was most likely *not born in late December*, the early Christians—then still an outlawed sect—moved Christmas to the time of the *Saturnalia* to draw as little attention as possible to themselves while they celebrated their own holiday.”

Let’s understand. Saturnalia simply means “festival or celebration of Saturn.” Saturday derives from the name of this god, as do all the other days of the week from pagan gods—Sun’s day, Moon’s day, Tiws day, Woden’s day, Thor’s day, Frigga’s day, and Saturn’s day.

But who *was* Saturn? Saturn was the god of sowing—or planting—the fire god—because heat from the sun was required to allow for planting and growth of crops. He was also worshipped in this dead-of-winter festival so that he would come back (remember, he *was* the “sun”) and warm the earth again so that spring planting could occur. The planet Saturn was later named after him because, among all of the planets, with its rings and bright red color, it best represented the god of fire!

Virtually every civilization has a fire/sun god. The Egyptians (and sometimes Romans) called him Vulcan. The Greeks named him Kronos, as did the Phoenicians—but they also called him Saturn. The Babylonians called him Tammuz, Molech or Baal, as did the Druids. These were all simply the various names for *Nimrod*, the infamous biblical rebel of Genesis 10. Nimrod was considered the father of all the Babylonian gods.

There is no mistaking the origin of the modern Christmas celebration. And many more sources could be cited. Let’s tie in other facts.

Christmas Tree

The modern Christmas tree originated in Germany. But the Germans got it from the Romans, who got it from the Babylonians and the Egyptians.

The following quote from *Curiosities of Popular Customs* demonstrates what the Babylonians believed about the origin of the Christmas tree: “An old Babylonish fable told of an *evergreen tree which sprang out of a dead tree stump*. The old stump symbolized the dead Nimrod, the new evergreen tree symbolized that Nimrod had come to life again in Tammuz [a false god condemned in Ezekiel 8 as abominable]! Among the Druids the *oak* was sacred, among the Egyptians it was the palm, and *in Rome it was the fir*, which was decorated with red berries during the *Saturnalia*!”

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THE DISAPPEARANCE OF TRUST



■ **GOVERNING BODIES:** Top, international leaders attend a plenary session during the ninth Asia-Europe (ASEM 9) summit in Vientiane, Thailand (Nov. 5, 2012). Bottom left, a flag flies from the roof of the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. Bottom right, the United Nations General Assembly chamber votes on a resolution to upgrade the status of the Palestinian Authority to a non-member observer state at the UN headquarters in New York (Nov. 29, 2012).

PHOTOS: MOHAMMED ABED/AFP/ (TOP); CELSO DINIZ/ISTOCKPHOTO (BOTTOM LEFT); STAN HONDA/AFP/ (BOTTOM RIGHT) GETTY IMAGES

The confidence of ordinary citizens in leaders, governing bodies, and long-standing institutions is crumbling. Could we have seen this coming?

BY JEFFREY R. AMBROSE

IN ANCIENT GREECE, birthplace of democracy, the philosopher Democritus is reputed to have said, “Do not trust all men, but trust men of worth; the former course is silly, the latter a mark of prudence.”

Trust, or confidence in another’s integrity—foundational to all relationships and necessary, to some measure, for a civil society to function—has been under assault in modern democratic nations, particularly the United States. As 2012 draws to a close, the cracks are beginning to show.

Changing Times

Just weeks before the United States’ November elections, a Gallup poll revealed grim but unsurprising statistics. The polling organization has tracked Americans’ trust in the three branches of federal government for decades. An initial poll in May 1972 showed that 66 percent had “a great deal” or “a fair amount” of trust of the judicial branch, which is led by the Supreme Court. Seventy-one percent reported the same view of the legislative branch (the Senate and House of

The REAL TRUTH

Representatives), and 73 percent felt the same about the executive branch, led by the president.

The same poll conducted in early September 2012 found that 67 percent had a great deal or fair amount of trust for the federal judiciary. Having fluctuated from a low of 63 percent in 1976 to a high of 80 percent in 1999, that figure has returned to near its 1972 baseline.

But the 2012 figures for the other two branches were very different. The executive branch garnered only 56 percent, while Congress fared even worse at 34 percent!

Let that sink in: *two-thirds* of Americans do not trust the group that authors the laws of the land, by which they must live. Almost half do not have confidence in its “CEO” (the president), who is entrusted with oversight of the ongoing American Experiment, not to mention holding the most powerful single office in the world. And these are the men and women *they and their fellow Americans chose* to put into office!

Further, the branch they trust most is headed by nine people who are *nominated* and *confirmed* by the executive and legislative.

But is this just an American phenomenon?

The picture is scarcely better in Europe. A March 2011 *Guardian* article stated, “The results of the unique Guardian ICM poll of Britain, France, Germany, Spain and Poland show common trends and some distinctive differences between countries...The main message from all five is that European citizens do not trust their governments or the honesty of their politicians...”

“Only 6% of people across Europe say they have a great deal of trust in their government, 46% say they have not very much and 32% none at all. Only 9% of Europeans think their politicians—in opposition or in power—act with honesty and integrity.”

“...[Few] Europeans think their politicians are honest. In Poland, only 3% of those questioned agree; in Spain 8%; in Germany 10%; in France 11%;

in Britain 12%. Overall, the percentage of those who think politicians are not at all, or not very, honest outweighs those who disagree by a massive 89 percentage points.”

Yet this view is not reserved solely for politicians.

Beyond Government

Another part of society increasingly viewed with suspicion is the world of business, finance and banking. Distaste or open hostility toward these groups was a mainstay of the Occupy movement, which became a global phenomenon in 2011.

In the U.S., discontent has been simmering since 2008, when the first large banks collapsed due to massive exposure to high-risk loans. Since then, growing numbers have come to believe there is too much disparity between the wealth of what they call the “one percent” (the richest top percentile of the population) and the “ninety-nine percent” (everyone else).

This resentment is stoked by headlines such as, “Corporate Profits Reach Record High, While Workers Struggle.” The article stated, “Corporate profits reached a record high in the third quarter [2012], according to a Commerce Department report...And the financial sector is doing particularly well. Financial companies accounted for all of the net growth in domestic corporate profits during the third quarter...”

“Meanwhile, workers are struggling. Average hourly pay, when adjusted for inflation, has fallen 0.7 percent over the past year, according to the Labor Department. And the unemployment rate in October was 7.9 percent—it was at a low of 4.4 percent in May 2007 before the recession” (*The Huffington Post*). The article is accompanied for good measure by a photo slideshow titled “CEOs Who Look like Villains.”

How has this dynamic affected the upcoming generation—the “youth vote” now carefully courted in election campaigns? According to an opinion poll of high school students commissioned by the University of Arizona’s

Take Charge America Institute for Consumer Financial Education and Research, “...it appears that young people’s opinions about the financial system have been shaped by the constant drumbeat of negative stereotypes and criticisms so dominant in the public discourse during and since the [global economic] crash. The result? A healthy skepticism about financial institutions has soured into cynicism, where teenagers almost expect to be victimized by financial firms. The poll...shows that the majority strongly distrusted financial institutions even while expressing great confidence in other things like their likelihood to find employment and to achieve financial security. Many of them failed to disagree with even the most extreme negative characterizations of the financial services industry.

“For example, 60 percent of students polled firmly believe that credit card companies often entice people into taking on more debt that they can handle, while 70 percent believe that businesses try to ‘trick’ young people into spending more than they should. Only 25 percent of students disagreed with the statement, ‘the stock market is rigged mostly to benefit greedy Wall Street bankers,’ and only 17 percent disagreed with the statement, ‘banks are mostly interested in getting my money through hidden fees’” (*American Banker*).

While these views are not unreasonable in light of recent events, younger Americans’ ignorance also plays a part: “Sixty-eight percent did not know that owning stocks is a riskier form of investment than owning government bonds...When asked about credit scores, more than half didn’t know that a high credit score is better than a low score” (*ibid.*).

British banking confidence took a similar massive hit in summer 2012, with revelations that large banks had colluded to manipulate the Libor (London Interbank Offered Rate), which affects loan interest rates around the globe.

The Independent captured the public response: “Nearly two-thirds of

banking customers no longer trust their lender to look after their money, a poll has revealed.

“As public outrage over the unfolding banking crisis grows, a YouGov poll commissioned by the *Sunday Times* showed 60% of people losing faith in their bank.

“Some 49% believe the high-street banks to be dishonest while 45% think of them as incompetent, the poll revealed.

“And just 1% of respondents believe that senior executives of the biggest banks have improved their behavior since the financial crisis began.”

The article went on to quote a consumer advocate who stated, “...revelations about widespread interest rate fixing have obliterated any remaining consumer trust in the big banks.”

With confidence in those who govern, employ and provide financing to them fading, where do citizens turn next?

The Rest of the Story

How do other institutions of society fare in citizens' eyes? A number of recent polls are as eye-opening as the one tracking trust in government (all quotes below from Gallup):

■ **Education:** “Americans' confidence in public schools is down five percentage points from last year, with 29% expressing ‘a great deal’ or ‘quite a lot’ of confidence in them. That establishes a new low in public school confidence from the 33% measured in Gallup's 2007 and 2008 Confidence in Institutions polls. The high was 58% the first time Gallup included public schools, in 1973.”

■ **Media:** “The majority of Americans still do not have confidence in the mass media [newspapers, radio and television] to report the news fully, accurately, and fairly. The 44% of Americans who have a great deal or fair amount of trust and the 55% who have little or no trust remain among the most negative views Gallup has measured.”

■ **Religion:** “Forty-four percent of Americans have a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in ‘the church or

organized religion’ today, just below the low points Gallup has found in recent years, including 45% in 2002 and 46% in 2007. This follows a long-term decline in Americans' confidence in religion since the 1970s.”

Gallup's list goes on: among the following institutions, these were the proportions of poll respondents who professed “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in them: the police—56 percent; the medical system—41 percent; the criminal justice system—29 percent; organized labor—21 percent; big business—21 percent; health maintenance organizations (HMOs, a type of insurance provider)—19 percent. The military tops the list with 75 percent, with, again, Congress in the basement at 13 percent.

Root of the Problem

Why cannot modern men and women trust in their institutions—which, after all, are comprised of other men and women?

Author George F. Will once opined that those who hold to some ideologies accept a delusion—the belief that “they can make something straight from the crooked timber of humanity.”

Similarly, President Abraham Lincoln, in an 1860 speech delivered in New York City, stated, “Human action can be modified to some extent, but human nature cannot be changed.”

In essence, both these quotes acknowledge *human nature* as an insoluble problem.

The most popular, widely owned book in history, the Bible, most likely informed Lincoln's belief. It confirms that his view is correct—under current circumstances. The apostle Peter described “the corruption that is in the world through lust” (II Pet. 1:4). His counterpart John stated that “the whole world lies in wickedness” (I John 5:19). So it is no surprise that elsewhere in the same Book we find, “Put not your trust in princes, *nor* in the son of man...” (Psa. 146:3).

But for those who believe the Bible, is the situation hopeless?

Ultimately, only God is truly trustworthy. There *is* a solution, however,

for mankind. A lesson from the world of business illustrates it.

In 1920, just ahead of a market crash and flash depression, prominent statistician Roger Babson warned business executives and bankers they were about to enter the most severe economic depression of their lifetime. “I advise you all to set your houses in order,” he said (*Herbert W. Armstrong – His Life in Proper Perspective*).

“Mr. Babson explained that he was able to know a depression was coming by looking at the way people *lived*—how they dealt with one another as a whole.

“He said, ‘I looked to the source which *determines* future conditions. I have found that the *source* may be defined in terms of “righteousness.” When 51 percent or more of the whole people are reasonably “*righteous*” in their dealings with one another, we are heading into increasing prosperity. When 51 percent of the people become “*unrighteous*” in their business dealings with their fellows, then we are headed for bad times economically!’” (ibid.)

While the term “righteous” can conjure many images in the mind, there is a simple definition: “...all [God's] commandments are righteousness” (Psa. 119:172). The laws of God, which many in this age dismiss as harsh, arbitrary “thou shalt nots,” are based on love for God, as well as love—outflowing concern—for neighbor. It follows that if one is habitually acting out of love for others in his business dealings—being “righteous”—he will become known as generally trustworthy, on the human level.

So “righteousness,” far from being a sanctimonious notion that belongs only to Sunday morning preachers, is actually the solution to all the trust problems that pollsters uncover.

Would you like to become more trustworthy yourself—and to get on the path to *overcoming* human nature? Take the next step of learning exactly what it is—read the free booklet *Did God Create Human Nature?* at rcg.org/dgchn. □



Mideast on the Brink

What Happens Next?

Despite a ceasefire, Israel, Gaza and the entire Middle East remain far from lasting peace—and one step from all-out war.

BY SAMUEL C. BAXTER

AFTER EIGHT DAYS, 1,506 Hamas rockets, and roughly 1,500 Israeli airstrikes, a truce was ordered in a conflict centered in the Gaza Strip. On November 21, Palestinians and Israelis returned to a strained stalemate—the status quo for the region since the 1948 creation of the Jewish state.

■ **WAR IN THE HOLY LAND:** Top left, members of the armed wing of Hamas carry their weapons as they celebrate after the truce between Gaza and Israel (Nov. 22, 2012). Top right, Ismail Haniya, head of the Hamas government in the Gaza Strip, addresses the public during a morning prayer in Gaza City (Aug. 19, 2012). Bottom left, smoke billows after an Israeli airstrike destroys smuggling tunnels between southern Gaza and Egypt (Nov. 21, 2012). Bottom right, Israeli soldiers pray at dawn close to the northern Gaza Strip border with Israel (Nov. 22, 2012).

PHOTOS: MOHAMMED ABED/AFP/ (TOP LEFT); SAID KHATIB/AFP/ (TOP RIGHT AND BOTTOM LEFT); CHRISTOPHER FURLONG/ (BOTTOM RIGHT) GETTY IMAGES

Since the ceasefire began, a dozen or so rockets have shot across the border from Gaza. *The Weekly Standard* reported that a television station run by Islamist Hamas, the ruling political party in Gaza, aired a “Death to Israel” music video. A short time later, the Israel Defense Forces successfully tested “David’s Sling,” a missile defense system capable of intercepting mid- to long-range missiles.

Yet what can be lost in the heated rhetoric and political/media biases is the human toll—the mounting deaths of both Israelis and Palestinians. And citizens on both sides of the conflict continue to live with the daily possibility of a full-scale war.

Unresolved Issues

To launch what was labeled Operation Pillar of Cloud, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) ordered a pinpoint missile strike that killed Ahmed Jabri, the head of the Hamas military wing. The move was in response to continued rocket fire from Gaza—with 451 rocket attacks from January to October 2012, *The Christian Science Monitor* reported. The strikes were aimed at destroying Hamas caches of advanced weaponry and hindering the organi-

zation’s ability to carry out terrorist attacks.

Gaza responded with Operation Stones of Baked Clay, upping its steady stream of rocket fire and employing Fajr-5 missiles, which could strike at the heart of the Jewish state, including Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

The IDF’s new Iron Dome missile defense system limited Israeli casualties to five—yet there were still 252 people wounded. Airstrikes and stray “friendly fire” rockets killed more than 140 in the Gaza Strip, some of whom were Hamas militants.

Ultimately, the eight-day clash punctuated an increasingly unstable Middle East. During Operation Pillar of Cloud, a handful of the rockets shot at Israel originated from terrorist groups in Egypt and Syria.

As a sign of his increasing political clout in the region, Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi helped facilitate a truce, bringing praise from the United States and United Nations alike. On the following day, however, Mr. Morsi made a grab for sweeping power in his nation. The move drew criticism that the president had set himself up as a modern-day “pharaoh.” His declaration spawned mass protests in Cairo’s Tahrir Square, reminiscent of the Arab

Spring movement that ousted strong-arm President Hosni Mubarak.

Also, since the ceasefire, the United Nations upgraded Palestine to a “non-member observer state,” which means it now has the same status within the organization as the Vatican.

While Israeli military strikes may have hindered Hamas’ ability to strike at Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, Israel and its neighbors remain at an impasse, the peace process stalled. A *New York Times* article title summed it up: “A Fragile Cease-Fire Achieved by Leaving Thorny Issues Unresolved.”

Arabs and Israelis are engaged in a seemingly habitual blood feud. The two sides fought in 2008’s Gaza War following regular clashes after Hamas rose to power in 2006. The Arab League, with Egypt, Syria and Jordan taking starring roles, mounted the Yom Kippur War in 1973, Six-Day War in 1967, and Arab-Israeli War in 1956.

Given the track record, these periods of “peace” and “ceasefire” were, in a sense, code words for a lull in a war that has continued throughout Israel’s history.

Conflict has raged in Israel for millennia. Look at the Crusades. Greece and Rome conquered it, as did Babylon and Assyria. Year after year, century after century, nations have lifted swords against Jerusalem—often with Arab/Israeli involvement.

Culture Clash

Religion on either side of Arab-Israeli violence plays a huge factor in both cultures.

Notice Hamas’ mission title: Operation Stones of Baked Clay. To most Westerners, this name seems a bit strange, even odd. What does “baked clay” have to do with anything?

To Muslims, however, the message is loud and clear. The phrase comes from the 105th chapter of the Quran. For Hamas, the reference alludes to Ethiopians attacking Islam’s holiest site, Mecca, in AD 570. The chapter tells a story of Allah intervening to destroy an invading army.

The five-verse chapter reads, “Seest thou not how thy Lord dealt with the

■ **STEADY STREAM:** Trails of smoke hang in the sky after rockets are launched from the Palestinian Gaza Strip toward southern Israel (Oct. 24, 2012).

PHOTO: JACK GUEZ/AFP/GETTY IMAGES



Companions of the Elephant? Did He not make their treacherous plan go astray? And He sent against them Flights of Birds, striking them with stones of baked clay. Then did He make them like an empty field of stalks and straw, (of which the corn) has been eaten up” (translated by Abdullah Yusuf Ali).

The story goes that the Ethiopian army with greater military strength (including war elephants) threatened to destroy the birthplace of the prophet Muhammad. Allah’s intervention left the stronger force decimated like “eaten up” chaff. This echoes the regular calls from Muslim extremists who desire nothing more than the complete destruction of Israel by whatever means necessary.

IDF’s Operation Pillar of Cloud is also a reference to divine intervention. In the Old Testament, after Israel (led by Moses) left Egypt, it states that “the LORD went before them by day in a *pillar of a cloud*, to lead them the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light; to go by day and night” (Ex. 13:21).

This “pillar of cloud” protected Israel when Pharaoh’s army caught up with the former slaves along the banks of the Red Sea.

Notice: “And it came to pass, that in the morning watch the LORD looked unto the host of the Egyptians [who were on the floor of the parted Red Sea] through *the pillar* of fire and of the cloud, and *troubled the host of the Egyptians*, and took off their chariot wheels, that they drove them heavily...And the LORD said unto Moses, Stretch out your hand over the sea, that the waters may come again upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots, and upon their horsemen” (14:24-26).

Verse 28 states, “And the waters returned, and covered the chariots, and the horsemen, and all the host of Pharaoh that came into the sea after them; *there remained not so much as one of them.*”

How can the conflict between these two peoples end when both sides earnestly believe they have God (or Allah) on their side?

Roots of War

More than just preserving the history and religion of Israel, the Bible also reveals the genesis of modern Arab-Israeli tensions.

It all goes back to a sibling rivalry between two half brothers, Ishmael and Isaac, who were both sons of the patriarch Abraham. For Muslims, Ishmael is a prominent figure and a prophet. In the Bible, God states that Isaac would carry on birthright blessings given to Abraham.

Ishmael was born to Hagar the Egyptian, who was a servant in Abraham’s house. The patriarch had a child with Hagar because his wife, Sarah, felt she could not conceive. Fourteen years later, however, Isaac was born to Sarah and became “the son of promise” (Rom. 9:9).

This news did not sit well with Ishmael and Hagar.

The account in the book of Genesis demonstrates this resentment: “And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian...*mocking* [his younger brother]” (Gen. 21:9).

From the original Hebrew, “mocking” can be translated “to make sport of, to jest” (*Gesenius’ Lexicon*).

The next verse shows that Ishmael’s *harsh* mocking was because he, as the oldest son, felt entitled to a share of the family inheritance, perhaps even a larger portion than Isaac. Due to this animosity, Sarah told Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away.

Continuing the account, “And the thing was very grievous in Abraham’s sight because of his son [Ishmael]. And God said unto Abraham, Let it not be grievous in your sight because of the lad, and because of your bondwoman; in all that Sarah has said unto you, *hearken* unto her voice; for in Isaac shall your seed be called” (vs. 11-12).

Yet Ishmael would not be left out completely. God continued, “And also of the son of the bondwoman *will I make a nation*, because he is your seed” (vs. 13).

Earlier, God had promised Hagar that her son would become a world power: “And as for Ishmael...I have

blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a *great nation*” (17:20).

This is a similar promise made to Isaac who carried the promise of Abraham: “And I [God] will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing” (Gen. 12:2).

These two men *have* become great nations. They have spawned three of the world’s largest religions. The Bible is undoubtedly the most influential book of all time. And the Arabs have pushed forward fields such as architecture and mathematics (developing algebra and the use of irrational numbers).

Yet the sibling rivalry between these two nations and religions has persisted throughout millennia. Nowhere is this more evident today than on the Temple Mount. Those of Jewish descent claim the site is the place *Isaac* was bound and ready to be sacrificed by Abraham before God intervened (Gen. 22), while many Muslims claim it was *Ishmael* under his father’s blade. The Old Testament states that two temples stood on the hill. For Muslims, Muhammad landed there on his “night journey.”

Today, Israel faces persistent rocket fire from Ishmael’s descendants—who surround the tiny nation.

This brings to life another Bible passage written about Hagar’s son: “... his hand will be against every man, and every man’s hand against him; and *he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren*” (Gen. 16:12).

Think. What other people fit the description of Ishmael? His “hand against every man, and every man’s hand against him”—dwelling “in the presence of all his brethren”?

Missing Keys

While there is historical insight found throughout the Bible, most overlook approximately one-third of its text—prophecy. Thirty-three percent of this Book contains details about the future—in effect history written in advance. This text reveals *definitely* and *explicitly* what the coming years will bring for the Middle East.

Most scoff at this notion. Many professing Christians get confused by prophecy and skip over it or read through it the best they can—gaining little understanding. Others attempt to put things together using their own pet theories and misinformed insights.

What is missing in all of these approaches are the *keys* to properly handling the subject of prophecy.

First, you must know whether the Bible is absolutely true. Fulfilled prophecy is a crucial way to prove that it is in fact God’s Word. A small example of this was already seen in the verse showing that Ishmael’s descendants “will be against every man, and every man’s hand against him.” (There are many other towering examples of this. Some of these can be found in the booklet *Bible Authority...Can It Be Proven?* available at rcg.org/bacibp. God does not leave the answer up to blind faith!)

Once biblical validity is confirmed, the next step is understanding the modern *identities* of nations named throughout the Bible. Especially important is where the United States and British Isles fit into the proverbial Rubik’s Cube that is prophecy. Read David C. Pack’s book *America and Britain in Prophecy* at rcg.org/aabibp to learn the exciting answer—which is backed by the Bible and extensive historical facts.

Another critical principle is that *prophecy is often dual*, meaning that many foretold events may have *smaller* fulfillments before a final MAJOR fulfillment in the near future. Duality is the missing piece to “solving” dozens of prophecies.

Using these keys to study prophecy reveals what will soon befall modern Israel and the Arab world. It also shows who will rule the Middle East and what nations will rally against Israel.

The Bible speaks of three *soon-coming* power players that will vie for influence in the Middle East—especially over Jerusalem. Two are symbolically known as the “king of the north” and the “king of the south” (Dan. 11). The third is detailed in the New Testament book of Revelation as “the kings of the east” (16:12). (Note that the compass directions “north,” “south” and

“east” are from the vantage point of Jerusalem.)

These coming power blocs will include multinational alliances. All of them will want to take a starring role in the Middle East.

Coming Coalitions

Today, Arab nations tend to stick together against the common adversary of Israel. Yet the Bible reveals that there will be a split among Islamic nations.

Notice: “For they have consulted together with one consent: they *are confederate against you* [meaning modern Israel]” (Psa. 83:5).

The nations making up this confederation are listed in verses 6-8: “The tabernacles of Edom [modern Turkey], and the Ishmaelites [Saudi Arabia]; of Moab [southern Jordan], and the Hagarenes [Syria]; Gebal [Lebanon], and Ammon [northern Jordan], and Amalek [scattered in the Middle East]; the Philistines [Palestinian Arabs, including Gaza] with the inhabitants of Tyre [Lebanon]; Assur [Assyria, whose descendants now live in Germany] also is joined with them: they have helped the children of Lot [Jordan and western Iraq].”

These Arab nations align themselves with Germany, who will be the military arm for the “king of the north.” As mentioned many times before in *The Real Truth*, this civil leader will be given power by 10 European nations (Rev. 17:8-9, 12). (Read the article “Germany’s Renewed Nationalism,” available at realtruth.org, for more on this modern nation’s connection with ancient Assyria.)

Egypt is conspicuously missing from this list, as it will lead a separate confederation of nations as the king of the south.

Daniel 11 reveals that north and south will clash when the king of the north brings his army to Jerusalem, most likely as a peace-keeping force: “And at the time of the end shall the *king of the south* push at

him [the European army]: and the king of the north shall come against him like a whirlwind, with chariots, and with horsemen, and with many ships; and he shall enter into the countries, and shall overflow and pass over” (vs. 40).

The king of the north “shall enter also into the glorious land [modern Israel], and many countries shall be overthrown: but these shall escape out of his hand, even Edom, and Moab, and the chief of the children of Ammon” (vs. 41). Recall that these three nations will be allies of Europe.

Verses 43-45 show that the king of the north will subdue Egypt, Libya and Ethiopia.

After this, “...tidings out of the east and out of the north shall trouble” the European power bloc (vs. 44). These “tidings” are from the aforementioned “kings of the east,” which will be an eastern coalition led by Russia and China. This group of Asiatic countries will enter the Middle East likely to cut off oil supplies from a rapidly expanding European empire.

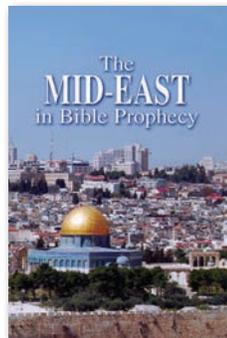
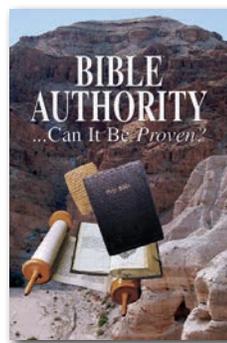
Soon the armies in the region will take part in a climactic battle for world power, popularly known as Armageddon. (Read the article “*What Is Armageddon?*” at rcg.org/wia to learn more.)

For a detailed verse-by-verse explanation of Daniel 11, which outlines the future for Israel and Arab nations, read David C. Pack’s *The Mid-East in Bible Prophecy* available at rcg.org/tmeibp.

The recent clash and ceasefire in Israel and the Gaza Strip are but tiny birth pangs of what is coming for the Middle East.

Watch Europe as it morphs into a tight-knit group of 10 nations. Watch as Russia and China grow more vocal on the world stage. Watch as Egypt coalesces power.

WATCH THE MIDDLE EAST! □



WHAT DID THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH LOOK LIKE?

Professing Christianity is comprised of many groups and endless schools of thought. But does the picture today reflect the New Testament Church of 2,000 years ago?

BY KEVIN D. DENEEN

MORE THAN TWO billion people on Earth profess to be Christian. In other words, nearly every third person believes he is following Jesus Christ and the Bible.

Dominant in Western nations, Christianity is the world's most popular religion, appearing in all sorts of shapes, sizes and varieties.

Huston Smith, author of *The World's Religions*, described the world of Christianity this way: "From the majestic pontifical High Mass in St. Peter's to the quiet simplicity of a Quaker meeting; from the intellectual sophistication of Saint Thomas Aquinas to the moving simplicity of spirituals such as 'Lord, I want to be a Christian'; from St. Paul's in London, the parish Church of Great Britain, to Mother Teresa in the slums of Calcutta—all this is Christianity."

Was he correct? Is this the picture of true Christianity?

Traditional Churches

Have you ever wondered why there are so many different groups? Have

you ever thought to yourself: "Is this what Christ meant when He said, 'I will build my Church'?" Additionally, have you asked, "What is the difference between these groups?"—"Which one is the exact continuation of the first-century Church?"

If you are religious, then your beliefs are important to you—religion is a central part of your life.

But have you ever examined the traditional view of Christianity? Have you compared it with your Bible? Or do you simply assume that the church you attend is correct?

If religion is an important part of your life, then you should not take the answers to these questions lightly. On the other hand, if you do not consider yourself religious, this article will change your perspective of those who call themselves followers of Christ.

What Did the Church Look Like?

Suppose you are living during the first century, and you are asked what you think Christianity will look like in 2,000 years. The only item you have to determine your answer is the Bible. What

picture would you paint? Would it look similar to what exists today? Since the Holy Bible is Christianity's foundation, it must hold the answers to the religion that comes from it.

Why, therefore, are there so many groups today claiming to be Christian? The simplest answer is that they all teach different things. If they taught the same doctrines, they would be united under one Church government—in one group.

The book of Acts begins with the birth of the New Testament Church. Therefore, this is the place to begin. Notice how the Church was described after 3,000 people were baptized in one day: "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship..." (Acts 2:42).

Why is this significant? The two most defining features of God's Church are evident: steadfast continuation in (1) the apostles' doctrine (teachings), and (2) fellowship. Verse 43 explains that the fear of God was apparent in "every soul," with verse 44 adding, "...all that

Please see **CHURCH**, page 18



Five Signs of a Fragmenting World

A Look Back at 2012

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION: DARNITRA D. JACKSON/THE REAL TRUTH



■ **DIVISION AND DEVASTATION:** Bottom left, opposite page, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon (right) meets with Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi during a United Nations General Assembly in New York City (Sept. 25, 2012). Bottom right, opposite page, the iconic Princess Cottage, built in 1855, remains barely standing after being ravaged by flooding in Union Beach, New Jersey (Nov. 21, 2012). Top left, Mario Draghi, president of the European Central Bank, delivers a speech at the European Banking Congress in Frankfurt, Germany (Nov. 23, 2012). Top right, a vehicle burns after it was set on fire inside the United States consulate compound in Benghazi, Libya (Sept. 11, 2012).

PHOTOS: SPENCER PLATT/ (BOTTOM LEFT, OPPOSITE PAGE); MARIO TAMA/ (BOTTOM RIGHT, OPPOSITE PAGE); DANIEL ROLAND/AFP/ (TOP LEFT); STR/AFP/ (TOP RIGHT) GETTY IMAGES

Across the globe, it was a year of constant political, ethnic and religious clashes.

BY NESTOR A. TORO

WHenever a year kicks off with fears of nuclear war in the Middle East or end-of-the-world predictions, it is not a sign of good things to come.

So began 2012. From rumors of Iran building a nuclear bomb to supposed cataclysmic predictions by an ancient culture, it has been a wild year.

Presidential elections in multiple countries, including the United States, Mexico, Russia, France, Venezuela and Egypt, as well as leadership changes in North Korea and China, added to the year's volatile recipe. And if those were not concerning enough, the assassination of an American ambassador in Libya on the anniversary of 9/11 and

renewed violence between Israel and Hamas should have at least sounded a few warning bells.

Quite a few events throughout the year gave stark warnings that instead of being more unified, the world is becoming increasingly fragmented. Five trends are of particular note as another calendar year begins.

(1) Gridlock Between America's Liberal Left and Conservative Right

In June 2012, a Pew Research poll showed Americans are "more polarized along partisan lines than at any point in the past 25 years." Six months later, during the presidential election, incumbent President Barack Obama's victory of approximately 50.6 percent over Mitt Romney's 47.9 percent confirmed it.

Did the nation's divisive atmosphere dwindle after election night? Perhaps the best answer is exemplified by the fact that dissatisfied Americans from every state requested secession from the union following the vote results.

Just days after the election, on the White House's "We the People" online platform in which citizens can file petitions to the federal government, "North Carolina, Tennessee, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana and Texas—all states that voted for former Gov. Mitt Romney—as well as Florida each had accumulated more than 25,000 signatures, the threshold needed to trigger an official response from the Obama administration," *Yahoo! News* reported. "Collectively, the secession petitions now have more than 700,000 digital signatures."

With a Republican-majority House of Representatives, a Democrat-majority Senate, and unending challenges such as a potential "fiscal cliff," it appears continued division in 2013 is

inevitable. (Read *The Real Truth* article “U.S. Presidential Election: Gridlock as Usual?” to understand more about the implications of America’s sharp political rift.)

(2) Worsening Situation for the European Union

Across the ocean, the European Union became more entrenched in squabbles about indebted nations, unemployment, bailouts, riots and immigration issues.

“Riots have now occurred in the three of the EU’s most troubled nations—Spain, Portugal and Greece—in the wake of government budget and wage cuts at a time [of] growing economic and social turmoil in the region,” *MoneyWatch* reported.

Almost a quarter of the workforce in all three countries is unemployed and a total of almost 26 million people across the power bloc are out of work.

The *Guardian* stated, “In the case of Spain, its national integrity is threatened by the separatist demand made by the Catalan nationalists, who think the austerity policy is unfairly reducing the region’s autonomy.”

Italy, France and Belgium have also been affected.

“In central Rome, students stoned police in a protest over money-saving plans for the school system,” *Reuters* reported. “A few dozen protesters, hurling bottles and large firecrackers, clashed with riot police, who fired tear gas and dragged away at least one bleeding protester into a police van, a Reuters witness said.

“International rail services were disrupted by strikes in Belgium and workers in Greece, Italy and France demonstrated as part of a ‘European Day of Action and Solidarity’.

“It was the biggest Europe-wide challenge by organised labour to austerity policies that have aggravated recessions and mass unemployment in nearly three years since the start of the euro zone’s debt crisis.”

These and other aspects have seemingly forced the power bloc down a previously walked path—a two-speed Europe with greater fiscal and political integration.

A *PublicServiceEurope.com* article, “Fragmented EU at the crossroads between collapse and unity,” stated that German Chancellor Angela Merkel put forward “a Utopian vision of the European Commission as a government backed by an ‘upper chamber’ of member states and a more powerful European Parliament. She insisted that Germany was still ‘deeply committed to’ the European project some 22 years after reunification, adding: ‘We must be courageous

of national capitals’ sovereign power, is necessary to overcome the economic crisis,” *The Associated Press* reported. “He said eurozone countries should be allowed to pool their debt to protect financially weaker member states.”

While some leaders pursued greater political and fiscal unification, including former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, others showed signs of wanting out.

“Well over half of British voters now want to leave the European Union,



■ **DEMOCRATIC PROCESS:** Top, U.S. President Barack Obama and Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney participate in the third and final presidential debate at Lynn University in Boca Raton, Florida (Oct. 22, 2012). Bottom, German Chancellor Angela Merkel speaks during a debate at the Bundestag in Berlin, Germany (Nov. 21, 2012).

PHOTOS: JEWEL SAMAD/AFP/ (TOP); SEAN GALLUP/ (BOTTOM) GETTY IMAGES



and not shy away from treaty change if needed.”

Other leaders also called for the Continent to face its financial problems in a unified way.

“EU Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso claimed that more integration and centralization of decision-making in Brussels, at the expense

according to an opinion poll that shows anti-EU sentiment is sweeping through all three main political parties,” the *Guardian* reported.

This comes amid further internal fracturing within the UK. *The Washington Post* stated that Scotland sought to end its 300-year-old ties with England and Wales: “An inde-

pendent Scotland would significantly weaken the foremost military and diplomatic ally of the United States, while creating another European mini-state unable to contribute meaningfully to global security.”

(3) Rise of Radical Groups

Global turmoil has led to the rise of far-left and far-right groups, which have pushed harder for extreme change to what they consider failing governmental systems.

According to *The Hill*, “In recent months, Greece’s economic woes have continued their downward spiral, coupled with an alarming rise in violence and political extremism, and the rhetoric has now spread into Greek diaspora communities in the United States. The movement is being led by the ultranationalistic, neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn, which has emerged from the shadows of Greek society to win 18 seats in Parliament, and which has reportedly opened satellite offices...in New York City.”

The article added, “The worsening economic crisis in Greece has provided a fertile breeding ground for groups like Golden Dawn, whose leaders deny the Holocaust and whose members have been implicated in violence and hate crimes against immigrants, political opponents and native citizens of non-Greek origin...Groups of non-Greek ethnicity are forced to hide or disavow their own identity and culture. Meanwhile, religious groups, such as the Macedonian Orthodox Church, fare no better.”

But Greece is not the only country that has seen a rise in such groups.

“A Hungarian far-right politician urged the government to draw up lists of Jews who pose a ‘national security risk’, stirring outrage among Jewish leaders who saw echoes of fascist policies that led to the Holocaust,” *Reuters* reported.

“Marton Gyongyosi, a leader of Hungary’s third-strongest political party Jobbik, said the list was necessary because of heightened tensions following the brief conflict in Gaza and should include members of parliament.”

According to the media outlet, “The group gained notoriety after founding the Hungarian Guard, an unarmed vigilante group reminiscent of World War Two-era far-right groups. It entered Parliament at the 2010 elections and holds 44 of 386 seats.”

Far-right parties in Sweden, Ukraine and Russia have also garnered clout.

“Thousands of black-clad Russian nationalists have marched through central Moscow to mark a ‘National Unity Day’ holiday created by Vladimir Putin by calling for an end to his rule and expressing hostility to ethnic minorities,” *The Herald* stated.

“Mr Putin instituted the holiday in 2005 to replace the annual Soviet-era celebration of the Bolshevik revolution. However, civil rights activists say his own flirtation with ethnic nationalism has stoked a rise in far-right violence, and is partly to blame for the hijacking of the holiday by hardline militants.”

In addition, Germany has experienced this trend, as shown by a *Times* of London article.

“Chancellor Merkel is known to be worried about the potential spread of far-right views and her government is considering making another attempt to ban the National Democratic Party after a previous effort failed in 2003.”

According to a report about the topic by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, “Xenophobia was the most common prejudice, held by 25.1 per cent of the whole population, the highest since East and West Germany were reunited in 1990, and most prevalent among respondents from the East at 38.7 per cent” (ibid.).

The United States has not been immune either. The rise of extreme political agendas has seen a rebirth in fringe cultures.

“Currently, there are 1,018 known hate groups operating across the country, including neo-Nazis, Klansmen, white nationalists, neo-Confederates, racist skinheads, black separatists, border vigilantes and others,” Southern Poverty Law Center reported.

“Since 2000, the number of hate groups has increased by 69 percent. This surge has been fueled by anger and fear over the nation’s ailing economy, an influx of non-white immigrants, and the diminishing white majority, as symbolized by the election of the nation’s first African-American president.”

Extremist groups that experienced a resurgence in membership include the Ku Klux Klan and New Black Panther Party.

“In Philadelphia, the New Black Panther Party was back in election news after a reporter at Philadelphia magazine snapped a picture of a uniformed member of the group in front of one polling place,” *The Washington Times* reported. “In 2008, members of the group were at the center of a voting-intimidation complaint filed by the George W. Bush Justice Department but later dropped by the Obama administration.”

Elsewhere in the country, a “sovereign citizen movement” is under way, as an Anti-Defamation League report showed.

“The sovereign citizen movement is an extreme anti-government movement whose members believe the government has no authority over them. It began a resurgence of activity, including criminal activity, in 2009 that has shown no signs of stopping. In 2012, the sovereign citizen movement is currently one of the most problematic domestic extremist movements in the United States.”

(4) Religious Division

Nowhere was there more apparent religious division than in the Catholic Church. The year 2012 forced Catholics everywhere to contemplate what it meant to stand by their religion.

The Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), America’s largest organization of nuns, disputed with the Vatican over a church-issued controversial review that charged the group with promoting “radical feminism,” among other issues.

“These same conflicts are gripping the Catholic Church at large,” *The New York Times* stated. “Nearly 50 years after the start of Vatican II, which was intended to open the church to the modern world and respond to the ‘signs of the times,’ the church is gravely polarized between a progressive wing still eager for change and reform and a traditionalist flank focused on returning to what it sees as doctrinal fundamentals.”

The U.S. presidential election has served to further complicate the issue.

“The Catholic Church in the United States has been at odds with the Obama administration over his healthcare law, which requires private employers, including most religious private institutions, to provide workers with health insurance that covers contraceptives,” *Reuters* wrote.

“The Church has seen this as a threat to the freedom of religion enshrined in the U.S. constitution, a cry that was taken up by Pope Benedict this year.”

The pope has also been active in advocating for peace in the fracturing Middle East. In September, he visited Lebanon for three days to stress the need to bring “stable and lasting peace” to the region.

Elsewhere, in Nigeria, followers of Islam and professing Christianity have increasingly come to blows. *The Associated Press* reported, “Christians and Muslims have lived together peacefully across the country of 160 million for years, but the growing violence is creating a climate of religious distrust and local communities have lost faith in the government’s ability to protect them.”

There has also been a drastic increase in religious persecution in China and surrounding nations. One non-profit group reported a 400 percent increase in persecution of professing Christians over the last 10 years.

In addition, Sunni and Shiite Islamic sects continued to clash. Syria’s ongoing civil war can be boiled down to this bitter division, as can the majority of terrorist attacks in Iraq.

(5) East/West Split

Perhaps the largest form of world fragmentation has been relationships between countries in the Eastern and Western hemispheres. Old alliances that once existed are now being disregarded and new ones created.

This has especially been illustrated during the Syrian crisis.

“Russia and China have opposed military intervention in Syria throughout 17 months of bloodshed and have vetoed three UN Security Council resolutions backed by Western and Arab states that would raise pressure on Damascus to end violence,” according to *The Jerusalem Post*.

While initially joining the West in favor of certain actions being taken in the region, such as deposing Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, Russia has publicly declared support of Syria and Iran in their respective conflicts—and turned its nose up at the U.S.

Russia is not alone in its support of certain countries in the region. China will not easily give up its abundance of natural resources from the Middle East or jeopardize relationships so vital to its economic well-being.

In addition, Russia and China have continued increasing their military ties.

“China has pledged to strengthen military ties with Russia during a visit by its defense minister Sergei Shoigu to Beijing,” *China Daily* reported.

Egypt was another example of a nation that moved farther away from the West by electing Muslim Brotherhood candidate Mohammed Morsi.

“Islamists in the Middle East are speaking out following President Barack Obama’s re-election...” a *CBSDC/AP* article showed.

“The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood feels that the only foreign policy change Obama can bring is by ‘accepting the will of the Arab people.’”

“‘We must rely on ourselves and on our resources and build our country,’ Issam Al-Aryan, a top Muslim Brotherhood official, said, according to *The Times of Israel*. ‘In the absence of direct American influence, Egypt can affect and lead the process

of building a democratic and constitutional regime that will become a dream for African and the southern hemisphere.’”

That dream, however, means making Islamic Sharia law the foundation of the country’s revamped constitution and giving the presidency more absolute power, including the ability to be exempted from any legal challenges.

The change in leadership has meant that Egypt has opted to support Palestinians over maintaining peace with Israel.

“The Muslim Brotherhood has expressed sympathy for the Palestinian population under embargo in Gaza and skepticism toward Egypt’s treaty with Israel,” *The Washington Post* stated. “It is also more sensitive to Egyptian public opinion—which is not terribly pro-Israel—than was Hosni Mubarak’s government. The Egypt-Israel relationship has remained generally stable since the Egyptian revolution, and Egypt has held up its end of the embargo, but analysts have worried that an Israeli assault on Gaza could change Cairo’s calculus...Egypt has already recalled its ambassador from Israel over the Gaza strikes, something it threatened to do in August over an Israeli airstrike that killed three Egyptians.”

(For more about this topic, read “Mideast on the Brink – What Happens Next?” in this issue.)

Unmistakable Signs

Notice each of these five signs portrays dynamic changes between peoples of different mindsets, countries or ethnicities.

As these conflicts brew, note that they match exactly with the Bible’s description about conditions at the end of the age. One such verse is Mark 13:4, in which Jesus’ disciples asked Him about “the *sign* when all these things shall be fulfilled...”

His detailed answer included: “And when you shall hear of wars and rumors of wars, be you not troubled: for such things must needs be; but the end shall not be yet. *For nation shall rise against nation...*” (Mark 13:7-8).



■ **IN OPPOSITION:** Delegates from Russia (left) and China (right) raise their hands to veto a measure about Syria during a United Nations Security Council meeting in New York City (July 19, 2012).

PHOTO: DON EMMERT/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

A closer look at this passage reveals the Greek word translated “nation” is *ethnos*, from which comes the English word “ethnicity.” It is defined by *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* as “a multitude...associated or living together; a company, troop, swarm...a multitude of individuals of the same nature or genus...race, nation.”

Signs give warnings. They are designed to call someone’s attention to danger or a destination ahead. Mark 13:7-8 is no different. For anyone paying attention, this passage is a sign to be heeded as prophetic events ramp up worldwide.

Recall that in Mark 13:4 the disciples called it “the sign *when* all these things shall be fulfilled.” Throughout the rest of the chapter, as well as parallel accounts in the books of Matthew and Luke, Jesus greatly expanded on other “things” to take place as part of this comprehensive sign. Among them are:

- Rise of false Christianity and false prophets (Matt. 24:24)—think of various failed end-of-the-world predictions in 2012.

- Famine and disease (vs. 7)—remember the severe drought across the U.S. in 2012 and disease outbreaks such as U.S. West Nile virus and the vomiting virus in Britain.

- “Great earthquakes” (Luke 21:11)—consider deadly earthquakes in 2012 in places such as Afghanistan, Italy and Nicaragua.

- “Troubles” (Mark 13:8)—the Greek word translated *troubles* means

“disturbance, that is, (of water) roiling, or of (a mob) sedition” (*Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*). Think of Superstorm Sandy or mob-fueled riots in Greece due to anti-austerity protests.

Yet within the same warning sign Christ reveals an amazingly good “thing” that happens simultaneously.

Positive Announcement

In the Matthew 24 account, the same sign is referred to as “the sign of [Christ’s] coming, and of the end of the world [age]” (vs. 3).

Thayer’s defines the word translated “sign” in these passages as “a sign, prodigy, portent, i.e. an unusual occurrence, transcending the common course of nature...of signs portending remarkable events soon to happen...of miracles and wonders by which God authenticates the men sent by him, or by which men prove that the cause they are pleading is God’s.”

Understand. This sign is God’s last message to anyone willing to listen and turn to Him. Besides warning of the precipice toward which governments, systems and religions devised by men are leading, this overarching sign is also designed to declare that a new worldwide *God-devised* government must soon be established on Earth.

The Bible is plain about this. Old Testament prophets such as Daniel stated: “And the kingdom and dominion, and the greatness of the kingdom under the whole heaven, shall be given

to the people of the saints of the most High, whose kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey Him” (7:27).

New Testament apostles such as Jude also wrote: “And Enoch also, the seventh from Adam, prophesied of these, saying, Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of His saints, to execute judgment upon all, and to convince all that are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have ungodly committed, and of all their hard speeches which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him” (1:14-15). The Bible is brimming with bright “signs” proclaiming this soon-coming SUPERGOVERNMENT, headed by the returning Jesus Christ Himself!

Though trends will get worse for a little while longer, they *will* come to a sudden halt before it is too late. Notice: “And except that the Lord had shortened those days, no flesh should be saved [remain alive]: but for the elect’s sake, whom He has chosen, He has shortened the days” (Mark 13:20).

God promises the world will not fragment to the point of rubble. He will intervene. To learn more about how this will happen, as well as many other things that “shall be fulfilled” before the Return of Jesus Christ, take time to read David C. Pack’s free e-book *The Bible’s Greatest Prophecies Unlocked! – A Voice Cries Out* at rcg.org/tbgpu.

Unlike any other book on the topic, it encompasses extensive details about the largest *sign* you do not want to miss! □

CHURCH

Continued from page 11

believed were together.” Verse 46 also states that they continued to be of “one accord [agreement],” meeting together “daily” in various houses in “singleness of heart.”

The Church of God was unified!—not divided in varying and disagreeing groups all calling themselves Christian.

One Church or Many?

Professing Christianity believes that God’s Church is split into different branches. Perhaps The United Methodist Church best explains on their website the common position of Christianity: “Nourished by common roots of this *shared Christian heritage*, the branches of Christ’s church have developed *diverse traditions* that enlarge our store of *shared understandings*. Our avowed *ecumenical commitment* as United Methodists is to gather our *own doctrinal emphases* into the *larger Christian unity*, there to be made more meaningful in a *richer whole*” (emphasis added).

While this sounds honorable, is it what Christ intended? Were there to be many groups of “diverse traditions” all with their own “doctrinal emphases”?

Even Roman Catholics, who, for the most part, believe that God’s Church cannot be divided, say this: “Those [outside the Roman Catholic Church] ‘who believe in Christ and have been properly baptized are put in some, though imperfect, communion with the Catholic Church’” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*).

Again, did Christ intend for all these differing groups?

The Bible is clear that the Church—Christ’s Body (Eph. 1:22-23; Col. 1:18)—is unified. Notice:

■ I Corinthians 1:10: “Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you *all speak the same thing*, and that there be *no divisions* among you; but that you be *perfectly joined together* in the *same mind* and in the *same judgment*.”

■ I Corinthians 12:25: “...there should be *no schism* in the body.”

■ Ephesians 4:16: “From whom the whole body *fitly joined together* [Moffatt translation: “*welded together*”] and *compact*ed by that which every joint supplies...”

Do these scriptures describe modern Christianity? The answer is clear!

The world is filled with all sorts of different groups professing to be Christian, and most profess that the other competing groups are also Christian. Yet notice Christ’s words: “And if a house be divided against itself, that house cannot stand” (Mark 3:25). The Greek word for “stand” can also mean “abide, continue, be established, hold up.” A house or any organization cannot stand—abide, continue, hold up—if divided. But the world of Christianity *is* divided!

Would Christ have built His Church to contradict His statement in Mark 3:25? Of course not.

Simply put, Christ said, “I will build My church” (Matt. 16:18)—not churches!

This is only the first of *many* differences.

Is God a Trinity?

When researching the statements of belief of various Christian denominations, invariably, the description of God is listed first. Of course, since Christianity should be based on following the God of the Bible, it is understandable that God is central.

Notice the common view of conventional Christians: “The most distinctive belief of mainstream Christianity is the doctrine of the Trinity, which views the one God as consisting of three Persons: the Father, the Son (Christ) and the Holy Spirit” (*ReligionFacts*).

Yet nowhere in the entire Bible is the trinity mentioned, even if one combines a number of verses to try to prove it! (One scripture does mention this triune relationship in the King James translation, but biblical scholars admit that this verse was not part of the original text.) The convoluted, confused picture of God that professing Christianity presents is simply not there.

Of course, the true nature of God cannot be explained in a few short statements. Nevertheless, God’s Word is clear on *who* and *what* God is. There are only two god-beings—the Father and Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit is not a person. (To understand God’s true nature, read the book *The Trinity – Is God Three-in-One?* found at rcg.org/ttigitio.)

True Gospel

Another common emphasis among modern Christian churches is the mission of spreading and teaching the gospel. But how do all these groups *define* Christ’s gospel?

The word “gospel” means “good news.” Christ was a Messenger who preached a message of good news. Almost every church, however, believes and teaches that the gospel message is about Jesus Christ Himself—in effect, their message is about the Messenger. They focus on teaching and spreading stories about His life to new believers.

Christ *does* play an extremely important and central role in Christianity, but *He* is not the gospel. The Bible clearly shows that Jesus *preached* the gospel—and He did not talk about Himself when He did so! (Read John 7:18.)

Methodists believe the following, as stated by their website: “Gospel has a number of distinct meanings. It refers to the Good News concerning Christ, the Kingdom of God, and salvation. It also refers to the teachings of Jesus and the apostles.”

As can be seen from this definition, Christianity takes a vague approach to this basic, fundamental teaching. As a result, the actual mission of Christianity is watered down, confused and simply taught incorrectly.

How does the Bible define the gospel? Notice Mark 1:14: “...Jesus came into Galilee, preaching *the gospel of the kingdom of God*.” This is the gospel that Jesus preached. It was in this same context that He said, “Repent you, and believe the gospel” (vs. 15). Which gospel? “...of the kingdom of God.” (The booklet *Which Is the True Gospel?* thoroughly explains this topic and is available at rcg.org/wittg.)

Holidays and Holy Days

Central to modern Christianity are its many holidays: “The most important Christian holiday is Easter, a spring holiday that celebrates Christ’s resurrection from the dead. Easter is immediately preceded by Holy Week, which includes Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday. The 40 days prior to Easter are the Lenten season, a time of fasting and repentance. Another holiday that came to be important is Christmas, which commemorates the birth of Jesus on December 25. Saints’ days are also important. Some of these, such as St. Patrick’s Day and St. Valentine’s Day, have come to play a prominent role in popular North American and European culture” (*ReligionFacts*).

These are commonly observed days for both the religious and non-religious—but they are not taught in the Bible! Neither will you find that New Testament Christians kept these worldly holidays. (Only once does the word “Easter” appear in the Bible. However, upon closer examination, the Greek word actually should be translated “Passover.”)

So then, we must ask: what days, if any, *did* the New Testament Church observe?

The Old Testament describes the Holy Days instituted by God millennia ago. Physical Israel kept those days as did spiritual Israel, which the Bible shows is the New Testament Church.

Notice that Paul mentioned the Days of Unleavened Bread: “And we sailed away from Philippi after the days of unleavened bread, and came unto them to Troas in five days; where we abode seven days” (Acts 20:6).

Also, in Acts 2, we find the Church keeping the Feast of Weeks (or Pentecost). Because it was a Holy Day, the Church was “all with one accord in one place” (vs. 1).

Then there are the other Holy Days established by God—Passover, the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, the Feast of Tabernacles, and the Last Great Day.

These Holy Days picture God’s Plan for mankind. (The booklet *God’s Holy Days or Pagan Holidays?* explains the full meaning of these days and can be found at rcg.org/ghdoph.)

Seventh-day Sabbath

Another common trait of traditional Christianity is Sunday worship: “Christian practices vary by denomination, but common elements include a Sunday worship service...” (*ReligionFacts*). The vast majority of professing Christians claim that Sunday is the “Lord’s Day,” and that those who believe in God are to keep this day.

Many also believe that Christ did away with the seventh-day Sabbath. Then why did Christ say to His disciples, “Therefore the Son of man is Lord also of the sabbath” (Mark 2:28)?

Notice this astonishing admission on whether Christ authorized the change from the Sabbath to Sunday: “For example, nowhere in the Bible do we find that Christ or the Apostles ordered that the Sabbath be changed from Saturday to Sunday. We have the commandment of God given to Moses to keep holy the Sabbath day, that is the 7th day of the week, Saturday. Today most Christians keep Sunday because it has been revealed to us by the [Roman Catholic] church outside the Bible” (*The Catholic Virginian*).

The Bible commands God’s people to have a “holy convocation” (or assembly) on the Sabbath and Holy Days (Lev. 23:3). Read the book *Saturday or Sunday – Which Is the Sabbath?* at rcg.org/tsosw for proof that Jesus Christ and first-century Christians kept the Sabbath, and that God’s people are still required to observe the seventh day.

By keeping Sunday instead of God’s Sabbath, modern Christianity differs from what the Bible teaches and from what New Testament Christians practiced.

Little Flock

Could so many of these large, well-established churches—with hundreds of millions of people—be wrong?

Society, especially in Western cultures, stresses “bigger is better.” More money, more friends, larger cars, bigger houses, and so on are all seen as a *better* way of life. The more people one can find to support this or that group, idea or cause, the better. This way of thinking is prevalent in professing Christianity. People feel safe in numbers. Therefore, large congregations are more popular and grow faster than small ones.

But just because the majority follows a certain way, does that make it right?

“The god of this world”

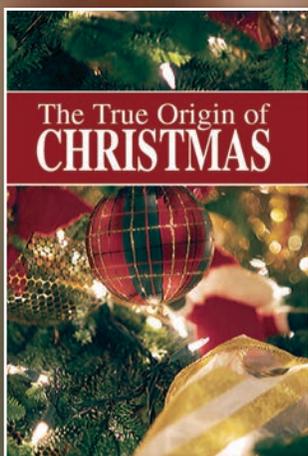
Clearly today’s Christianity and the Church that Christ established are not one and the same. Notice how Jesus described counterfeit religion: “Howbeit in vain do they worship Me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. For laying aside the commandment of God, [they] hold the tradition of men...Full well [they] reject the commandment of God, that [they] may keep [their] own tradition” (Mark 7:7-9).

This article has only briefly touched on several common beliefs to which the majority of so-called Christians adhere. With that in mind, what happened within the last 2,000 years? How could so many today be so deceived?—and so wrong?

The Bible reveals that the whole world is deceived (Rev. 12:9) by the “god of this world” (II Cor. 4:4)—Satan the devil. The world is cut off from God, and Satan has deceived a large part of it into thinking they are following Christ. But they are following “another Jesus” (11:4)—and, in fact, are not part of true Christianity.

With a clear picture of the New Testament Church now painted in your mind, realize that it has looked the same throughout the centuries. The informative and eye-opening book *Where Is the True Church? – and Its Incredible History!* available at rcg.org/thogtc can help guide you to where it still exists today!

Will you put forth the effort to find it? □



'Tis the Season?

How did Christmas come to be? What is the real origin of Santa Claus—mistletoe—Christmas trees—holly wreaths—and the custom of exchanging gifts?

To understand the stunning answers, read *The True Origin of Christmas*, available at rcg.org/ttooc.

PERSONAL

Continued from page 2

The book *Answers to Questions*, by Frederick J. Haskin, states, “The Christmas tree is from Egypt, and its origin dates from a period long anterior to the Christian Era.” How many know the Christmas tree long preceded Christianity? Did you?

What the Bible Says

Most aspects of Christmas are not referred to in the Bible. Of course, the reason is that they are not from God—they are not part of the way He wants people to worship Him. The Christmas tree, however, is mentioned in the Bible! Read Jeremiah 10, verses 2-5, “Thus says the LORD, *Learn not the way of the heathen*, and be not dismayed at the signs of heaven; for the heathen are dismayed at them [I ask: why do countless millions ignore God and read their horoscopes every day?] For the *customs* of the people are *vain*: for one cuts a tree out of the forest, the work of the hands of the workman, with the axe. They deck it with silver and with gold; they fasten it with nails and with hammers, that it move not. They are upright as the palm tree, but speak not: they must needs be borne [carried], because they cannot go [of themselves]. Be not afraid of them; for they cannot do evil, neither also is it in them to do good.”

This description of the modern Christmas tree is plain. God directly refers to it as “the way of the heathen.” Just as directly, He commands: “Learn *not* the way of the heathen,” calling these customs “*vain*.” (Remember this word “*vain*.” It will return.)

Next, the *Encyclopedia Americana* states, “The holly, the mistletoe, the Yule log...are relics of *pre-Christian times*.” In other words, PAGANISM! The Yule log was commonly used in a rite of Teutonic nature worship.

Frederick Haskin further states, “The use of the *Christmas wreath* is believed by authorities to be *traceable to the pagan custom* of decorating buildings and places of worship at the feast which took place at the same time as our Christmas.”

“The book *Answers to Questions*, by Frederick J. Haskin, states, ‘The Christmas tree is from Egypt, and its origin dates from a period long anterior to the Christian Era.’”

Britannica exposes the origin of the holly wreath, under the topic “Celastrales,” which are flowering plants: “European pagans brought holly sprays into their homes, offering them to the fairy people of the forests as refuges from the harsh winter weather. During the *Saturnalia*, the Roman winter festival”—how many times have we seen this celebration directly referenced in relation to Christmas?—“*branches of holly* were exchanged as tokens of friendship. The earliest Roman Christians apparently used holly as a decoration at the Christmas season.”

There are dozens of types of holly. Almost all come in *male and female varieties*—such as “Blue Prince and Blue Princess” or “Blue Boy and Blue Girl” or “China Boy and China Girl.” Female holly plants cannot have berries unless a nearby male

plant pollinates them. It is easy to see why the holly wreath found its way into pagan rituals as a token of friendship—and *fertility*!

Christmas is incomplete to many unless it involves “kissing under the mistletoe.” This also pagan custom was natural on a night that involved much revelry during what were *drunken sex orgies*. Just like Christmas today, this “kissing” usually occurred at the beginning of the *Saturnalia* celebration. Mistletoe was considered to have special powers of healing for those who *reveled* under it.

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, under “Santalales,” states, “The European mistletoe is thought to have had special ritual significance in Druidical ceremonies and lives in folklore today, its special status as the Christmas mistletoe having come from Anglo-Saxon times.”

Mistletoe is a parasite that lives on oak trees. (Recall the Druids worshipped in oak tree groves.) The ancient Celts—associated with the Druids—used to give mistletoe as an herbal remedy to barren animals to make them fertile. This herb is still referred to as “all healer” in Celtic.

Like mistletoe, holly berries were also thought to be sacred to the sun god. The original “sun log” came to be called the *Yule log*. “Yule” simply means “wheel,” which has long been a pagan representation of the sun. No wonder people today commonly speak of the “*sacred* yule-tide season.”

How interesting—and sobering!—are the facts of history.

The most common justification one will hear regarding Christmas is that people have *replaced* old pagan intents and customs by asserting that they are now “focusing on Jesus.” I have heard many say they are “honoring Christ” in their Christmas-keeping. The problem is that God does not say this is acceptable to Him! *We saw He plainly commands against it!* Keeping Christmas *dishonors* Christ!

First, Jesus made a stunning statement—but how many believe it? He said in Matthew, “But in *vain* they do worship Me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men” (15:9). Christmas is not a command of God, it is a tradition of men—a vain one, meaning empty or useless. Christ added this in Mark: “Full well you *reject* the commandment of God, that you may keep your *own tradition*” (7:9). Every year, throughout the world, on December 25, hundreds of millions do just that! No wonder Jesus asked this in Luke: “Why call you Me, Lord, Lord and do not the things which I say?” (6:46).

We saw God plainly commands, “Learn not the way of the heathen.” But most people do not fear God, and He allows them to make their own decisions. Human beings are free moral agents—free to learn or not learn what God instructs—free to obey or disobey Him!

God Warned!

Notice how specific God’s warning was to ancient Israel in Deuteronomy 12—and *why* His warning! “When the LORD your God shall cut off the nations from before you...and you succeed them, and dwell in their land; take heed to yourself that you be not snared by following them...and that you *enquire not after their gods*, saying, How did these nations serve *their gods*? *Even so will I do likewise*. You shall *not* do so unto the LORD your God: for *every abomination* to the LORD, which *He hates*, have they done unto their gods...” (vs. 29-31).

Let this passage sink in. Then read Deuteronomy 20:18, which bluntly labels any practice of pagan customs to be sin. Many similar verses condemning the practices of false gods should be studied. Read Exodus 34:10-17 and chapter 23:23-33, as well as Leviticus 20:22-26, among others. These passages are so clear, so strong—and so *many*!

In the Second Commandment—forbidding all forms of idolatry—and in other passages, God declares He is a jealous God. He wants His people

doing what *HE* commands, not what false gods say!

Men want to observe their own holidays—including New Year’s and Easter, Halloween and Valentine’s Day—in place of God’s annual Holy Days, and then tell themselves that they are pleasing and worshipping the true God.

Deuteronomy 12:32 makes clear that God does not want us to mix His ways with ANY *false* ways: “What thing so ever I command you, observe to do it: you shall not *add* thereto, nor *diminish* from it.” In other words, do *exactly* what I say—nothing more, nothing less!

These are God’s *plain words* to all who say they can mix the horrible customs of outright paganism with a supposed “focus on Jesus.” Am I a scrooge for reporting the truth? Then what about God, who declares He hates the pagan customs associated with a pagan celebration? Will you listen to confused, deceived ministers—or to *God*?

The real Jesus Christ was *never in* and *never will be in* Christmas! Nor can He be put back into where He never was. You cannot re-enter a house you never entered. But the “god of this world,” Satan the devil (II Cor. 4:4), has *always* been in Christmas. In fact, he is seen to be its author!

The God of the Bible commands that His true worshippers “MUST worship Him in spirit *and in truth*” (John 4:23-24). This does not mesh with all the pagan Christmas lies.

There is no “safety in numbers” for those who keep Christmas because Satan, the Bible states, “deceives the *whole* world”! (Read Revelation 12:9.) He is also called the “father of lies” (John 8:44). Recognize that Christmas is truly a testimony to the tremendous power of deception.

Christ calls His Church a “little flock” (Luke 12:32). Other verses show this. This Church does not have the large numbers of the respected, established brands of what can only be called humanly devised *Churchianity*. But it does obey God! □

Whatever you do this season, read the booklet *The True Origin of Christmas* at rcg.org/tooc. You will learn Christ was not born on or near December 25—whether it is scriptural to exchange gifts—the origin of Santa Claus—about Christmas’ roots in child sacrifice, and how this connects to parents today with the Santa Claus and Christ-is-in-Christmas falsehoods—about religious leaders the Bible warns will change times and laws—and how the day is associated entirely with “another Jesus,” the one the apostle Paul directly warned against.

Jesus said twice that “you shall know them by their fruits” (Matt. 7:16, 20). Everything that people say or do, good or bad, has fruits. The *fruits* of Christmas are terrible. Christmas is about getting for the self—and pure commercialism.

This season also leads the entire year in adultery, loneliness, jealousy, drunkenness and drunk driving, family arguments (and worse), and accumulation of debt that often lasts until March. This problem is so significant that almost all churches report that their incomes *drop* during this period as people recover from all their spending!

Obey God!—and *save your money!* Reject the falsehoods about the supposed right, purpose-driven Christmas. Do not be fooled by Christian-sounding names pasted over rank paganism and idolatry.

God declares it is *sin* to observe the customs of false gods! Make yourself read this in Deuteronomy 20:18, before reading I John 3:4.

The prophet Isaiah was inspired to write, “Cry aloud, spare not, lift up your voice like a trumpet, and show My people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins” (58:1).

This has been done. The writers of *The Real Truth* magazine also do this, and will continue to do it, on many topics.

But you have only *begun* to learn the *real* origin of Christmas. I repeat, read *The True Origin of Christmas* at rcg.org/tooc before getting caught up in the “holiday spirit” this year. □

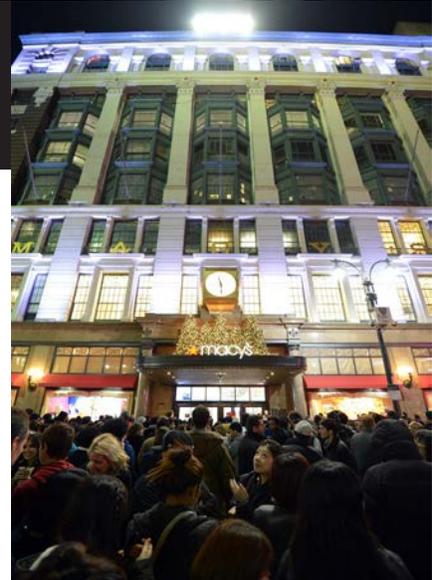
SOCIETY & LIFESTYLES

Another Violent Black Friday



■ **SHOPPING FRENZY:** Above, people shop on Thanksgiving night at a Target department store in Highland, Indiana (Nov. 22, 2012). Right, crowds gather outside Macy's in New York in advance of the midnight November 23 opening to start the store's Black Friday shopping weekend.

PHOTOS: TASOS KATOPODIS/ (ABOVE); STAN HONDA/AFP/ (RIGHT) GETTY IMAGES



The Black Friday deals throughout the retail world again caused widespread mayhem in the United States with huge crowds, long lines, and violent shopping incidents.

Around 247 million Americans went shopping over the Black Friday weekend—a new record, and almost equal to the 2010 census statistics of the total number of American citizens over 14 years of age. A staggering \$59.1 billion was spent—a 13 percent increase over last year.

During the spending spree, violence broke out. In one instance, a mob of young girls rushed a store in northern California, leading to fist fights and a giant brawl.

Of the incident, one employee stated, “I’ve been in the retail business six years now, and I’ve never [seen] a Black Friday this bad... They were throwing merchandise in the air, and we had some boxed

gift sets and it hit another girl in the head...Some people got trampled on, and a 15-year-old got punched in the stomach” (*New York Daily News*). The damage to the store took all day to clean up.

Although the stories are too numerous to list, a few examples include:

■ Two people were shot in Tallahassee, Florida, in a Walmart parking lot.

■ In Moultrie, Georgia, one Walmart saw an uncontrollable crowd fighting over cheap cell-phones, despite having six police officers there to help control the throngs of people.

■ One man in San Antonio, Texas, pulled a gun at a mall after being punched in the face by another man trying to cut in front of him in line.

A telling aspect of this trend is the shift in focus from observing

Thanksgiving Day to shopping that night. The holiday has been changed by the advent of stores opening their doors at 9:00 p.m. Thursday night, with many Americans now leaving their table after finishing their Thanksgiving Day meal to head straight to the mall.

It begs the question: how long before Black Friday is changed to Black Thursday Night? □

HEALTH ISSUES

Study: Smoking Leads to Mental Decline

Smoking is worse for mental function than having high blood pressure or being overweight, according to a new study.

A sampling of 8,800 participants over age 50 were given various cognitive tests, including learning new words or naming as many animals as they could in a minute. They were then retested after intervals of four and eight years.

While the tests were originally done to determine the effects of the aging process, the research showed there was a “consistent association’ between smoking and lower scores in the tests,” *BBC* reported.

The media outlet quoted Dr. Simon Ridley from Alzheimer’s Research UK, who stated, “Research has repeatedly linked smoking and high blood pressure to a greater risk of cognitive decline and dementia, and this study adds further weight to that evidence.

“Cognitive decline as we age can develop into dementia, and unravelling the factors that are linked to this decline could be crucial for finding ways to prevent the condition.

“These results underline the importance of looking after your cardiovascular health from mid-life.” □



PHOTO: THINKSTOCK

AMERICAS

Murders Skyrocket in Sao Paulo



■ **INVESTIGATION:** Police officers listen to a witness after a law enforcement official was shot in Sao Paulo, Brazil (Nov. 14, 2012).

PHOTO: YASUYOSHI CHIBA/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

A wave of gang violence in Sao Paulo, Brazil’s largest city, is putting pressure on the government and police force to bring the number of killings down.

In October alone, there were 176 murders—double the number of killings in the same period last year. In addition, 95 police officers were killed so far this year—double the total of 2011, in which 47 officers died in the line of duty.

Additionally, in the state of Sao Paulo, 571 people were murdered—an increase of almost 50 percent over October last year.

The wave of violence has led to the removal of Sao Paulo’s chiefs of police.

After one state security chief resigned, Fernando Grella was appointed. He quickly replaced the heads of the civil and military branches of the police, stating, “We’re going to work

intensely to reverse the homicide rate in the state to what it was months ago... We are not discarding any measures” (*The Associated Press*).

Mr. Grella promised to hold daily meetings with the chiefs of all the police departments and investigate every murder. Yet the weekend after he took charge, 15 civilians and police officers were killed—some execution-style—by hooded men on motorcycles.

The rising violence started earlier in the year when a police unit called “the Rota” killed six men. This unleashed a surge in revenge killings from the Primeiro Comando da Capital gang, with many attacks being planned by gang members inside prison. Officials also believe the gang has grown more violent since the police began more heavily cracking down on the sale of illegal drugs. □

Britain Inundated by Heavy Rains

A massive storm system bringing heavy rain and fierce winds caused widespread flooding across Britain. So far, three people have died from the wild weather and more than 900 homes, mostly in the southwest, have been flooded.

Agence France-Presse reported, “The Cornish village of Millbrook was reportedly under five feet (1.5 metres) of water with 40 homes evacuated, a BBC reporter who lives there said, after torrents of muddy water swept through the village...Many communities were cut off after police shut water-logged roads in Cornwall, where four severe flood warnings were issued...over rapidly rising river levels, and neighbouring Devon.”

The flooding is some of the worst the nation has ever experienced.

Britain’s Prime Minister David Cameron said in a Twitter message that it was “shocking.”

To make matters worse, if a deal is not struck between the government and insurance companies, over 200,000 homes that are at a high risk of flooding will be uninsurable.

Mary Creagh, an environmental spokesperson for the Labour Party, one of the main political factions in Britain, urged the government to come up with a deal to give residents universal flood insurance coverage in a *Financial Times* article.

“If they can’t sort this out it would be catastrophic for householders who could be

left with properties that they cannot insure, cannot mortgage and cannot sell,” she said.

As of this writing, more rainfall is expected for the area. □



■ **DELUGE:** Above, standing water can be seen in fields near Glastonbury, England (Nov. 25, 2012). Below, the city of St. Asaph is overwhelmed by flood waters in northern Wales (Nov. 27, 2012).

PHOTOS: MATT CARDY/ (ABOVE); PAUL ELLIS/AFP/ (BELOW) GETTY IMAGES



Should You Celebrate New Year's?

Millions keep New Year's without knowing why—or where it originated. Have you ever considered WHY you believe and practice what you do?

To find out the answers, read the article “Why Christians Don't Celebrate New Year's” at rcg.org/wcdcnycny.

**FREE
Subscription**

The screenshot shows the website for 'THE REAL TRUTH', a magazine restoring plain understanding. The navigation bar includes links for Home, About Us, Contact Us, and Help, along with a search box. Below the navigation are tabs for ARTICLES, WORLD NEWS DESK, PERSONALS FROM DAVID C. PACK, BACK ISSUES, and SUBSCRIBE. A secondary navigation bar contains tools for text size, print, email, RSS, and help, as well as social media sharing options for All Options, Follow, Tweet, and Like. The main content area features an article titled 'New Year's "Resolutions"' with the sub-headline 'What do they mean—and will they be kept?'. The article text begins with: 'Most have made a number of New Year's resolutions throughout their lives. Yet, practically every resolution is broken a short time after being made. Why is this failure in achieving resolutions so common?'. To the right of the article is a 'LATEST ISSUE' section for November 2012, Vol. 10, No. IX, featuring a cover image of the magazine with the headline 'WINDY AND RAINY'.

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