

JANUARY-FEBRUARY 2006

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REAL TRUTH

A MAGAZINE RESTORING PLAIN UNDERSTANDING



**AVIAN FLU
PANDEMIC...**
Is It Only a Matter of Time?

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VOL. IV | NO. 1 | JANUARY-FEBRUARY 2006

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ABOUT OUR COVER:

Dr. Terrence Tumpey, a microbiologist for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and a member of the National Center for Infectious Diseases (NCID), examines the 1918 Pandemic Influenza Virus, which he recreated in order to identify the characteristics that made the organism such a deadly pathogen. Research efforts such as this are implemented to develop new vaccines and treatments for future pandemic influenza viruses.

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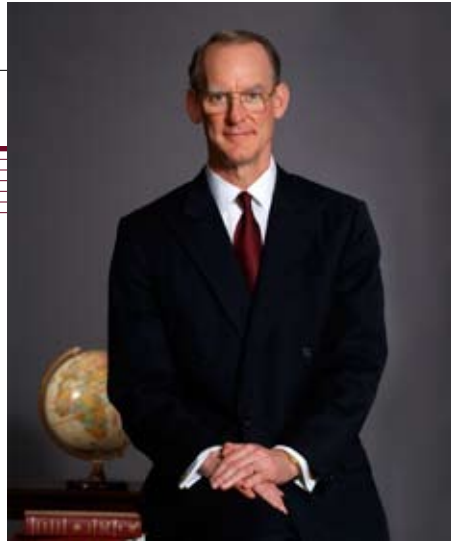
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PERSONAL FROM

David C. Fack



Are These the Last Days?

HOW LONG UNTIL Christ returns? Before this greatest of all events occurs, the Bible speaks of a period called “the last days”—“the time of the end”—“the end of the world [age]”—“the end of these things”—“the end of the days”—and of a time when the course of human history, as we know it, “shall be finished.”

Of course, many professing Christians do not believe in a literal Return to earth by Jesus Christ. Of those who do, most believe that it could be hundreds of years away. Some believe it could be “a thousand years in the future.” Others are somewhat concerned about “Armageddon.” They feel that time may be short but have no sense of how to KNOW.

What do you believe?

The Original Apostles Misunderstood

The original apostles thought that Christ would return in their lifetimes. Paul, in I Corinthians 15:51 and I Thessalonians 4:15, when speaking of the resurrection of the dead to occur at Christ’s Second Coming, using the word “we,” expected to be among those who were “alive and remain[ing] unto the coming of the Lord.”

In his second epistle to the Thessalonians, Paul had come to realize that he had previously misunderstood the timing of specific events that must *precede*

Christ’s Return. He even warned of those who would deceive others about the issue of *when* this would occur. He wrote about the “coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” and that the brethren should be careful to “Let no man *deceive* you by *any* means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition” (II Thes. 2:1, 3).

Could you be deceived?

Christ’s Second Coming

Are we in the last days? If so, can you know for *sure* that this is true? Jesus said to His disciples, “I will *come again*” (John 14:3). Further, forty days after His Resurrection, two men (angels) told His disciples as He was rising to heaven, “this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so *come* in like manner as you have seen Him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11). Matthew records the words of Christ: “For as the lightning comes...so shall also the *coming* of the Son of man be” (Matt. 24:27, 30, 37, 39, 42, 44, 46). Will the world soon arrive at this climactic event? Again, can we know?

Make no mistake! The Bible is *plain* about the Return of Jesus Christ. Many more verses could be quoted that speak of His Second Coming to earth. It *will* happen—and it does not hinge on the opinions of men. However, before this climactic event occurs, many *other* things are foretold to happen in the period leading to the final terrible events that precede it!

The idea of the end of the world has been a subject of speculation, ridicule, general discussion, fascination and fancy for 2,000 years. Yet, few realize how much the Bible shows *can* be understood about this time.

“The Day and the Hour”

In the famous Olivet prophecy of Matthew 24, the disciples asked Christ, “Tell us, *when* shall these things be? And what shall be the sign of Your coming, and of the *end of the world?*” (vs. 3). After answering this question in detail, Christ, thirty-three verses later, added, “But of that *day* and *hour* knows no man, no, not the angels of heaven but my Father only” (vs. 36).

Does this mean we cannot know the *general* time of Christ’s Second Coming? Some believe this—and these same people shrug off any need to even be concerned with the timing of Christ’s Return.

What does Matthew 24:50-51 mean when it says, “The lord of that servant shall *come* in a day *when he looks not for him*, and in an hour that he is *not aware of*, And shall cut him asunder, and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites”? It is clear that almost everyone is *not* looking for Christ’s Second Coming at the *right time*. In fact, He will come when most are not looking for Him at all. What will cause so many to not recognize the onset of such an enormous event?

Why are so many unable to recognize the arrival of the *last days*?

In verses 32-33, Christ spoke a parable: “Now learn a parable of the fig tree; When his branch is yet tender, and puts forth leaves, *you know* that summer is near: So likewise *you*, when *you* shall see all these things, *know* that it [margin: *He*] is near, *even at the doors.*” Christ states that we *can know* the “*season*” of His Second Coming.

Do not be willing to settle for anything less than what the Bible tells you!

Years ago, a catchy tune called “A Sign of the Times” became popular. I enjoyed it and you may remember it. The title was actually derived from another verse in Matthew. In chapter 16, the Pharisees and Sadducees confronted Christ, desiring a “sign” from Him. He called them hypocrites, saying, “You can discern the face of the sky; but can you not discern the *signs of the times?*”

While the intent of their question was that they wanted a *sign* that Jesus was the MESSIAH (see Matthew 12:38-40), Christ’s point was that they were unable to properly discern events they were witnessing—the “signs of the times.”

Can YOU discern the signs of OUR times?

Christ told His disciples, “And when *these things* begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draws near” (Luke 21:28). The “things” He referred to include a whole series of events prophesied to occur for the first time in history! *These things* are happening—and intensifying—*now!* A quick study of them will not do. Only a more thorough examination reveals the clear picture. We must look carefully to properly discern the “signs of the times.”

God has allotted man 6,000 years to try his own governments, philosophies, value systems, religions and forms of education. Humanly-devised ideas of men do not and *cannot* work in solving the world’s truly big problems. The 6,000 years is almost up. And, in the last 200 years or so, the world has changed dramatically—and rapidly. Events are speeding up in a way that has never been seen before!

The Twenty-first Century World

Everyone is familiar with the kooks and oddballs who stand on street corners shouting, “Repent! The end is near!” Hollywood has depicted

many of them. Of course, no one takes such people seriously. But times have changed, and many are the voices of reason who now tell us that something *is* wrong—even terribly wrong!

The idea of one world government, designed to save the planet and mankind from itself, is heard more often. However, no one seems to know how to create such a government and then acquire the cooperation of everyone necessary to make it succeed!

Look at the world around you. What do you see?

As a whole, the world was a much more stable place until the early part of the nineteenth century. At that time, the Industrial Revolution gave birth to the Modern Age. It was not until about a century ago that men began to drive cars and fly, and, since then, civilization has gone from the “Nuclear Age” to the “Space Age” and to the “Information Age” in a little more than a half century.

The arrival of new inventions, at the fastest rate in history, is changing life daily. Just think of the impact of the printing press and you can appreciate how dramatically a single invention can change the world. Modern computers have done the same—and there is no turning back from the huge impact of just this one invention. Jet travel has only arrived in the last half century. Although estimates vary, it is now believed that mankind’s total fund of knowledge is doubling every few years. Some think this could soon accelerate to every *six months!*

In the early 1970s, Alvin Toffler wrote a book called *Future Shock*. This large book described a certain “psychological stunning,” or shock effect, due to the high speed of changes in society. Toffler demonstrated that these changes began occurring in the 1970s at such a

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AVIAN FLU PANDEMIC

Is It Only a Matter of Time?

AS WINTER APPROACHES FOR MUCH OF THE NORTHERN HEMISPHERE, IS AN AVIAN FLU PANDEMIC GUARANTEED TO OCCUR?

VIRUSES—they're super-tiny and super-powerful, and they infect virtually all life, from humans and animals to plants, and even fungi and bacteria. Viruses cause the common cold, influenza and even AIDS (resulting from HIV—the human immunodeficiency virus).

Of particular concern in recent months are the outbreaks in Asia of a virulent form of avian (or bird) flu: a version of the influenza virus that (1) primarily affects birds and (2) spreads quickly, with devastating results.

There are many forms of the influenza virus, each of which primarily affects one type of host. There is swine flu, horse flu, and of course, as mentioned, bird flu. In addition, each form constantly changes slightly (mutates).

This is why there is such great concern about the super-virulent form of bird flu. While some people have contracted it and have died, the expectation and greater fear is that it will change slightly so that transmission and infection from human-to-human would occur, thus resulting in a pandemic, causing great loss of human life. Reports of a pandemic coming this winter exist, while some believe that it may not occur yet, but that it is only a matter of time. Drug companies are increasing production of anti-flu medications, and governments are stockpiling these and scrambling to devise pandemic "battle plans."

BY MARK P. DENEÉ

We will consider the basic scientific explanation of how all this is possible; we will take a look at the reasons for current fears and the fallibility of plans and responses; more importantly, we will put the avian flu and a possible influenza pandemic in a realistic, but critical, light.

Understanding Viruses

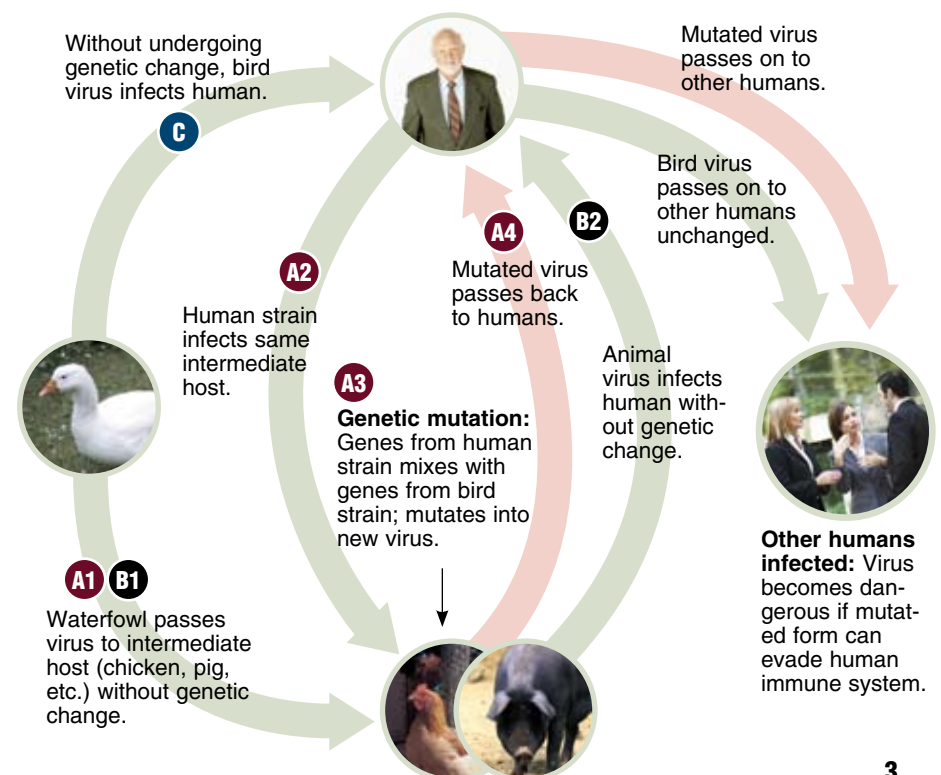
Viruses are extremely simple organisms that consist only of genetic material surrounded by a protein coat,

which is sometimes enclosed in an outer lipid envelope. They are so small (20 to 100 times smaller than the average bacteria) that they cannot be seen by a light microscope. Yet they are not what science considers "free-living," as they are not able to reproduce by themselves. Viruses must infect a host's cells to replicate itself.

Upon entering a host's structure, a virus will "dock" at a specific point on one of the host's cells (usually a specific type of cell, e.g. HIV binds to the CD4 molecule found on certain human white blood cells). After binding to

DIFFERENT PATHS TO VIRUS INFECTION

How "antigenic shift"—the genetic change that enables a flu strain to jump from one animal species to another, and then to human beings—occurs:



an appropriate cell, the virus must then penetrate the cell membrane, or “skin,” to enter the host cell. Once inside, it is now free to replicate, often using the host’s cellular machinery. In the matter of a couple hours for small viruses, or up to several days for larger ones, replication is complete, and several new viruses are ready to exit the host cell to infect other cells and continue the vicious cycle of infection and replication. Quite often, as the new viruses exit, the host cell is either damaged or destroyed. The whole process is somewhat like a spy infiltrating an enemy country and then taking over a factory to secretly produce arms that will eventually be used to attack the “host” country.

The human body has been created with several defense mechanisms against viruses. Infected cells produce substances that warn neighboring cells of the problem, thus enabling them to initiate defensive responses. These same substances will often trigger the body to raise its temperature (i.e. a fever), which inhibits the growth of some viruses. In addition, specific defense cells target both viruses themselves and virus-infected cells for inactivation and/or destruction.

However, with the viruses’ ability to mutate, some have been able to circumvent some of these defense mechanisms. This, combined with the poor environment (food, water, air, etc.) in which we live, results in increased infections and outbreaks—and, ultimately, pandemics.

Flu Outbreaks

The flu, caused by the influenza virus, affects the respiratory tract, typically causing coughing, sore throats, runny nose, aches and pains, fever, etc. In severe cases, it is sometimes accompanied or followed by pneumonia.

There have been at least 31 influenza pandemics (widespread epidemics or outbreaks) since the 1500s, the most destructive of which, at least in modern times, was that of 1918. It is estimated to have killed between 20 and 40 million people worldwide, of which 500,000 to 700,000 were in

the U.S. Most of the deaths involved cases in which the influenza was followed by the complication of bacterial pneumonia.

In November 2005, *The Janesville Gazette* published an article detailing the outbreak of the 1918 flu in Janesville, Wisconsin:

■ By October 24, 1918, the city health official reported more than 600 flu cases across the city, more than double the number of the week before.

■ Victims died painfully, “struggling to clear their airways of a blood-tinged froth that sometimes gushed from their mouth and nose...”

■ Public meetings were banned, theatres closed, store hours curtailed; people wore masks in public and infected homes were marked with a red tag.

■ Two days later, the number infected reached 708; two days later, at least 769 people were sick. Janesville was averaging 46 new cases a day.

■ The citizens read headlines reporting the flu in other places: Merchant Marine sailors stricken in Massachusetts; soldiers dying in East Coast camps; 50,000 sailors quarantined at Great Lakes Naval Base outside Chicago.

■ In the end, the official record of deaths in Janesville (a town of 18,200) due to influenza was not found, but it is likely that hundreds died.

The above illustrates quite clearly the speed at which an epidemic travels—and, ultimately, how feeble are mankind’s attempts to stop it.

The three types of influenza virus (known as A, B and C) are what scientists call “antigenically unrelated,” which basically means that being immune to one type does not mean you are immune to the others. This has made preventive treatment extremely difficult. In addition, the influenza virus mutates so rapidly that new vaccines must be developed each year (i.e. typically, the vaccine is based on the most virulent form from the previous year). Viruses regularly mutate largely because they lack the repair systems that cells have. Environmental

CHRONOLOGY OF AVIAN INFLUENZA

▶ **1890:** First recorded recent influenza pandemic.

▶ **1918:** The “Spanish flu” pandemic, caused by H1N1 influenza virus, kills more than 40 million worldwide.

▶ **1957:** The Asian flu pandemic, caused by H2N2 influenza virus, kills 100,000 people.

▶ **1968:** Hong Kong flu pandemic, caused by H3N2 influenza virus, kills 700,000.

▶ **May 21, 1997:** For the first time, Avian flu H5N1 is isolated, from an infected human patient in Hong Kong.

▶ **1999:** Tamiflu licensed in U.S., Europe.

▶ **Feb. 2003:** Avian flu H5N1 infects two people in Hong Kong, one fatally. On the 28th, outbreaks of the chicken flu, caused by H7N7 avian influenza virus, occur in The Netherlands. By April, 11 million chickens are culled and 83 people are infected, one fatally.

▶ **Dec. 2003:** South Korea has its first outbreak of H5N1 avian flu in chickens. Two tigers and two leopards, fed on fresh chicken carcasses, die unexpectedly at a Thailand zoo; subsequent investigation identifies H5N1 in tissue samples.

▶ **Jan. 2004:** Japan has its first outbreak of H5N1 avian influenza since 1925; China confirms incidence of H5N1; the World Health Organization (WHO) confirms H5N1 infection in 11 people, eight fatal, in Thailand and Vietnam.

▶ **March 2004:** Avian H5N1 influenza virus becomes widespread among Asian bird flocks, including 34 human cases, with 23 deaths.

▶ **April 6, 2004:** Avian H7N3 influenza virus confirmed in two poultry workers in British Columbia, Canada.

▶ **July 2004:** Despite control efforts, several countries in Asia report new outbreaks in poultry with H5N1.

▶ **Aug. 2004:** H5N1 kills another three people in Vietnam; Chinese scientists report H5N1 avian influenza infection in pigs; H5N1 has spread throughout most of SE Asia, resulting in the culling of over 100 million chickens; in Vietnam and Thailand, H5N1 has infected at least 37 people, killing 26.

› **Dec. 2004:** Since the start of 2004, H5N1 has caused the death of 32 people in Vietnam and Thailand.

› **Feb. 2005:** 13 new cases (since December) of H5N1 human infection in Vietnam, 12 fatal; a report of probable human-to-human transmission of H5N1 is published in *New England Journal of Medicine*.

› **March 2005:** 15 additional cases of H5N1 human infection in Vietnam, and one additional case in Cambodia, are reported.

› **April 2005:** Vietnam confirms 60 human cases of H5N1 infection, with 35 deaths; Thailand confirms 17 cases, of which 12 have died; Cambodia confirms two fatal cases; wild birds at a lake in central China, where hundreds of thousands of migratory birds congregate, begin to die—in the following weeks, the count reaches over 6,000.

› **May 19, 2005:** WHO reports 97 cases and 53 deaths from H5N1 avian influenza in Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand since January 2004.

› **June 2005:** Avian flu becomes resistant to the low-cost amantadine family of antiviral drugs.

› **July 2005:** The Philippines and Indonesia report cases of human infection with H5N1.

› **Aug. 2005:** WHO confirms three new cases of H5N1 in Vietnam; since December 2004, 20 of 63 Vietnamese cases of H5N1 have been fatal; both Russia and Kazakhstan report outbreaks of avian flu, later confirmed as H5N1.

› **Oct. 2005:** Greece becomes the first EU country with an avian flu infection, confirmed to be of the H5 strain, but not yet identified as H5N1; fifth case in Indonesia brings the total number of human infections with influenza A (H5N1) since December 2003 to 117; H5N1 confirmed in poultry in Turkey and Romania; Croatia confirms H5N1 in wild birds.

› **Nov. 2005:** H5 confirmed on poultry farm in British Columbia, Canada; Chinese officials say they will vaccinate the country's entire stock of 14 billion poultry against avian flu.

› **Dec. 2005:** Ukraine confirms H5N1 in birds on Crimean peninsula; five-year-old Thai boy becomes 70th Asian to die from H5N1.

Source: *www.nature.com*; the World Health Organization; the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

variables may also play a part in the increased rate of mutations.

Some scientists believe the evidence indicates that the various types of the influenza virus appear in cycles. For example, the variant appearing in the 1978-79 season was identical to the virus that was widespread during the early 1950s. This is one reason why mass inoculation was carried out in the U.S. in the late 1970s. A *BBC* report indicates that there is an approximate 30-year cycle, which means that we are due for another outbreak.

The Current Avian Flu Crisis

The super-virulent form of avian flu that is currently in the news has been identified as a strain of H5N1 (a form of influenza A); it originally emerged in 1997. Outbreaks of this flu have caused the death or culling of tens of millions of birds. More than 100 people have been infected by this flu, with a mortality rate of 50%. This form has been the focus of much concern amid warnings that the H5N1 could mutate into a form that causes a global pandemic with a high mortality rate.

In early 2005, *The New Yorker* reported that the vicious avian flu was on the verge of becoming an epidemic. Scott Dowell, the director of the International Emerging Infection's Program in Thailand, commented, "The world just has no idea what it's going to see if this thing comes. When really. It's when [sic]. I don't think we can afford the luxury of the word 'if' anymore...The clock is ticking. We just don't know what time it is."

Robert Webster, a virologist who has been studying avian influenza for decades, is even starker: "This is the worst flu virus I have ever seen or worked with or read about." He also said, "We have to prepare as if we were going to war...the virus is a very promiscuous and effective killer."

By late summer 2005, a report in *The Times* (London) of avian flu on the eastern side of the Ural Mountains (separating Europe from Asia) had raised concern, although the outbreak was not yet confirmed to be the deadly H5N1 strain. Roads were cordoned

off in parts of Siberia, as hundreds of chickens were slaughtered in an attempt to control the spread of the virus.

Gennadi Onishchenko, Russia's top state epidemiologist, predicted that the virus would soon spread to Russia's agriculture regions of Krasnodar, Stavropol and Rostov in the south, and then on to the Middle East and the Mediterranean: "An analysis of bird migration routes has shown that in autumn 2005 the H5N1 virus may be spread from Western Siberia to the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea. Apart from Russia's south, migrating birds may spread the virus to nearby countries (Azerbaijan, Iran, Iraq, Georgia, Ukraine, and Mediterranean countries) because bird migration routes from Siberia also go through those regions in autumn."

Dr. David Nabarro, of the World Health Organization, said, "We expect the next influenza pandemic to come at any time now..." and could result in as many as 150 million deaths worldwide. Even the lowest expected death toll is 5 million, said Dr. Nabarro, as he called upon governments to take immediate steps: "The work we're doing over the next few months on prevention and preparedness will make the difference between, for example, whether the next pandemic leads us in the direction of 150 [million] or in the direction of 5 [million]" (*Associated Press*).

Chilling words!

In addition to the loss of human lives, there is also the toll that a pandemic would take on the world economy. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) released a report last week projecting that an avian flu outbreak in Asia could kill approximately three million people, cost \$300 billion and push the world into a recession. However, the report assumed a 0.5% mortality rate, whereas current cases of H5N1 are at 50%!

Man's Attempts to Protect Himself

Historically, mankind's attempts to protect himself have revolved, rightfully so, around cleanliness and sani-

THE AVIAN INFLUENZA A VIRUS

Avian influenza A H5 and H7 viruses can be distinguished as “low pathogenic” and “high pathogenic” forms on the basis of genetic features of the virus and the severity of the illness they cause in poultry; influenza H9 virus has been identified only in a “low pathogenicity” form. Each of these three avian influenza A viruses (H5, H7, and H9) theoretically can be partnered with any one of nine neuraminidase surface proteins; thus, there are potentially nine different forms of each

subtype (e.g., H5N1, H5N2, H5N3, H5N9).

Summary information about these three prominent subtypes of avian influenza A viruses follows:

■ **Influenza A H5** – Potentially nine different subtypes; can be highly pathogenic or low pathogenic; H5 infections have been documented among humans, sometimes causing severe illness and death.

■ **Influenza A H7** – Potentially nine different subtypes; can be highly

pathogenic or low pathogenic; H7 infection in humans is rare, but can occur among persons who have direct contact with infected birds; symptoms may include conjunctivitis and/or upper respiratory symptoms.

■ **Influenza A H9** – Potentially nine different subtypes; documented only in low pathogenic form; at least three H9 infections in humans have been confirmed.

Source: *U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*

tation. Rodent control, food processing and storage, sewage systems and clean water have accomplished much in the last century to control disease. And yet, in general, these luxurious advances are commonplace only in the Western world. Outbreaks of SARS and avian flu are originating in parts of the world where sanitation is minimal.

In 1796, British physician Edward Jenner observed that milkmaids in England who contracted the mild cowpox virus infection from their cows were protected from smallpox. Similar viruses cause both cowpox and smallpox. By 1798, Jenner formally demonstrated that previous cowpox infections protected that person from smallpox. This was the beginning of the vaccine, which is simply a concoction prepared from killed or weakened viruses, or sometimes even just pieces of a virus. Each of these, upon injection, will elicit the immune response, while causing little or no disease. Of course, the modern application of vaccines, considering mass production with questionable, oftentimes harmful, ingredients, is of some concern.

The primary difficulty in developing antiviral medicines is that, as we have seen in regard to influenza, a large number of variant viruses can cause the same disease. In addition, it is extremely difficult to create a drug that attacks a virus-infected host cell without disabling healthy cells.

Vaccines are increasingly popular and recommended by health officials, governments, etc. At one time, only

those at risk of contracting pneumonia were administered annual flu shots. But in 1984, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control recommended that medical personnel, as well as anyone who desired it, be added to that list.

At the moment, the world is investing a lot of money in a drug called Tamiflu, produced by Swiss drug giant Roche. Pharmaceutical companies make a lot of money from drugs that are in high demand; with demand for Tamiflu outstripping supply, Roche has been hesitant to sign sublicensing agreements. In fact, in December 2005, the *International Herald Tribune* reported that Roche had signed its first sublicense contract with China’s state-owned Shanghai Pharmaceutical Group. Talks with 12 other companies continue. According to the article, Tamiflu has been found in clinical trials to work against the symptoms of the H5N1 strain of influenza. Note, however, that working against the symptoms has little to do with controlling the spread of the virus.

Ultimately, if we take the 1918 epidemic as an example, or almost any disaster for that matter, man’s ability to protect himself has been largely unsuccessful. There are reasons for this.

What God Says

Man is nearing the end of a 6,000-year period during which his Creator, God, allowed him to live life his own way. Though this has brought some relatively minor accomplishments, it has also produced widespread heart-

ache, misery, suffering and destruction.

There was a time when modern medicine thought it could control disease. Bold initiatives were formulated and implemented to eradicate smallpox and polio, yet only with limited success. In addition, old diseases such as tuberculosis are once again rearing their ugly heads, but this time in antibiotic-resistant forms.

There is a law of cause and effect. When laws are broken, penalties must be paid, either immediately or after a long period of time. God has warned mankind—who has cut himself off from his Creator (Isa. 59:2)—that diseases would come to those who do not obey Him. In addition, several scriptures (Matt. 24:7, Rev. 6:7-8) point to a time near the end of that 6,000-year period when “pestilences” would increase. Ezekiel 5:12 reveals that, during end-time events, one-third of the population of the modern-day descendants of Israel will die by diseases.

With wild birds migrating across the world, spreading the H5N1 virus amongst themselves, and then to domestic flocks, the number of infections will increase globally. And with this will come a greater chance for a mutation that will render the virus transmissible from human to human.

We do know that disease outbreaks are certain to increase. For more information, read our Prophetic Trends and Conditions report *And there shall be PESTILENCES*. □

THE RISE OF THE “MEGACHURCH”

A NEW PHENOMENON IS TAKING SHAPE IN AMERICA—ONE THAT IS RADICALLY REDEFINING THE “CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE.” WHAT IS THIS TREND, AND WHY IS IT GAINING POPULARITY?

AFTER A STIRRING live performance of “Jesus is Better Than Life,” a woman takes center stage before a roaring, enthusiastic crowd of 16,000 people. She declares, “We’re going to rock today. This place has been rocked a lot of times, but it’s never been rocked for Jesus” (*The Christian Science Monitor*).

Every weekend, similar scenes play out across the United States, as millions of people flock to the latest craze in religious experience—gigantic, multi-million-dollar worship complexes called “megachurches.” Resembling concert halls or shopping malls, these churches are stirring up frenzy among those seeking a more modern approach to religion.

During a time in which congregations of nearly every faith and denomination are experiencing a decline in membership, megachurches are experiencing explosive growth.

Why?

Perhaps Alan Wolfe, a professor of political science at Boston College, describes the megachurch phenomenon best in his book *The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Live Our Faith*. In it, he writes, “American faith has met

BY GABRIEL N. LISCHAK

American culture—and American culture has triumphed.”

“Big is Beautiful”

A megachurch is defined as a non-Catholic congregation with at least 2,000 attendees. Nearly all were established after 1955. On a typical weekend, the largest megachurch hosts roughly 30,000 people, with a 300-member choir and a 10-piece band. Many others boast similar numbers.

Mega church memberships generally explode within a two- to five-year period, becoming overnight successes. This can serve as a powerful attraction to one who is contemplating which local church to attend. As one member commented, “You hit a certain size and you can become self-generating. You attract people by your sheer size. People know that you are on TV and that this is that big place...There is a sense of something going on here...and size itself begets [sic] more growth” (*Hartford Institute for Religion Research*).

For those who are wary of a congregation being too big, one megachurch produces a pamphlet to ease such concerns, stating, “Big is Beautiful... Any church in a large, growing community that is practicing the ‘Great Commission’ cannot keep from growing. To criticize a church for being big

is to imply disbelief in Christ’s commission...A church gets big because its spirit is big...Nobody ever started a business without hoping that someday, if he or she worked hard enough, it would be a big success. That is the American dream, isn’t it?” (ibid).

Massive attendance is not the only defining characteristic of a megachurch. These giant social complexes have other distinctive trademarks such as gymnasiums, schools, divorce centers, aerobics studios, computer centers, arcades, banquet halls, etc.—one even has a McDonald’s restaurant! Virtually all aspects of life are catered to at megachurches; they are not just Sunday experiences.

Giving People What They Want

In an *ABC News* report, a megachurch attendee commented, “You know, the culture is giving our kids a lot of fast-paced media and all different things that are moving along. Why can’t the church keep up and do the same thing for our kids and for us?”

In other words, why can’t churches tailor themselves to give people what they want—a church that is more “user friendly,” more up-to-date with the times?

This is precisely what megachurches do. Their goal is to promote an atmosphere that makes the statement, “This is not an ordinary church.” One megachurch pastor said, “We’re trying to create an environment here so the



The idea is to be as inclusive and inoffensive as possible. After all, if these churches were to promote dogmatic stances on contentious subjects, they would lose members.



unchurched person can come in and say, ‘This is church like I have never known church.’”

This approach appears to be working. Notice a few statements from attendees:

“It’s not like, ‘...I have to go to church and be bored and have them spit scripture in my face.’ It’s like it’s fun and they make it great to learn.”

“In our family we almost kid, because we spend so much time up here [at the megachurch], just because we love it. There’s just a lot of fun things up here.”

“We love it. We don’t miss a Sunday. The message is always very positive and the music is great” (*The Christian Science Monitor*).

Before starting their organizations, some leaders of these giant congregations have taken polls in the community to see exactly what people desire in a church. For example, one entrepreneur went door-to-door throughout his community and asked two questions: “What’s your favorite radio station?” and “Why do you think people don’t go to church?”

The responses? First, they listened to rock music. Second, they did not attend church because they did not have fancy clothes, they did not like being asked for money, and the sermons did not relate to their lives.

In reaction to this poll, the leader sent out flyers stating, “You think church is boring and judgmental, and that all they want is your money? At [blank] you’ll hear a rockin’ band and a positive, relevant message. Come as you are. We won’t beg for your money. Your kids will love it!” (*The New York Times*).

Upon entering this particular church, you would see why it is so attractive to the average person. In the foyer, you are immediately greeted

by five 50-inch plasma-screen televisions, a bookstore and a café with a Starbucks trained staff. Those who enjoy Krispy Kreme doughnuts will be happy to know that these are served at every service. For the children, there are numerous Xboxes available to hold their attention (ten for fifth- and sixth-graders alone).

“That’s what they’re into,” the church leader said. “You can either fight it or say they’re a tool for God.”

As for the dress code, it is “anything goes.” Depending upon the season, most wear jeans, sweats or shorts.

As the 55,000-square-foot church complex was being constructed, some asked if it was going to have stained glass windows or a steeple. The leader answered, “No! We want the church to look like a mall. We want you to come in here and say, ‘Dude, where’s the cinema?’”

The Message

All megachurch services share one thing in common: They are entertaining. Most use varying degrees of video, contemporary music and drama in their services. One megachurch stated that its goal is to have its services “feel like a concert”—to whip people into an emotional frenzy. Music is certainly an effective device for accomplishing this goal.

Mega churches strive to reconstruct traditional religious ideas and traditions to be more in line with the “modern person” who is turned off by traditional religion.

Bibles are generally optional, as biblical quotations are often flashed on gigantic video screens. Much of the service is comprised of Christian rock music with shallow, repetitive lyrics such as “Jesus, you are my best friend, and you will always be. Nothing will ever change that.” It is

as though Christ is reduced to a high school crush!

At one megachurch, committing one’s life to Christ is simple: All he or she has to do is check a box on a card located on the back of every chair. Amazing!

Often resembling motivational speeches, the sermons are generally about how to live a successful life—or, “Jesus meets the power of positive thinking.” They are encouraging, upbeat and usually follow on the heels of a music and video presentation. (After this, the last thing those in attendance want to hear is a sermon about “doom and gloom.”) One will often hear phrases such as “Keep a good attitude,” “Don’t get negative or bitter,” “Be determined” and “Shake it off and step up.” Of course, the word “love” (as *man*—not God—defines it) is mentioned extensively.

Controversial subjects such as abortion and homosexuality are generally avoided, as megachurches attract a wide range of people with an equally wide range of beliefs. The idea is to be as inclusive and inoffensive as possible. After all, if these churches were to promote dogmatic stances on contentious subjects, they would lose members.

Preaching in a spirit of “love” is the name of the game.

What Really Matters

One must ask, “Is the megachurch phenomenon the result of *God* leading them?” To find the answer, the Bible must be consulted. Regardless of what certain churches may say, the Bible is the inspired Word of God—ALL of it. As such, it contains definitive answers as to how you can determine whether a particular church is of God.

In Matthew 16:18, Jesus Christ declared, “I will build My church; and the gates of hell [the grave] shall not prevail against it.” Notice three important points in this scripture: (1) Christ said, “My church”—not “someone else’s.” (2) He said “church”—not “churches.” Christ does not—cannot—lead thousands of different, competing

Please see “MEGACHURCH”, page 24



ONE NATION INDIVISIBLE?

THE GOVERNMENT OF THE UNITED STATES HAS BEEN STYMIED BY DIVISION, OBSTRUCTION AND CRITICISM, WITH MUCH OF THE RANCOR FOCUSED ON THE WAR IN IRAQ. HOW LONG CAN THE SYSTEM WITHSTAND THE STRAIN?

BY JEFFREY R. AMBROSE

BITTER PARTISAN wrangling is not new to American politics—there are plenty of examples to be found in the nation’s history. This has been especially true in Presidential elections. The mudslinging, insults and general nastiness of the elections of 1828 (Andrew Jackson vs. John Quincy Adams), 1860 (Abraham Lincoln vs. Stephen A. Douglas) and 1884 (Grover Cleveland vs. James Blaine) rival recent campaigns.

However, with few exceptions, when the contests were over, the government and the nation attempted to move forward, and there was at least some semblance of respect for the offices of those who were in power.

Despite the diverse melting pot of different types of people among the population, Americans had some sense of a cohesive national identity. This was especially true when the nation was at war. The following proverb was applied: “A friend loves at all times, and a brother is *born for adversity*” (Prov. 17:17). When faced with adversity, Americans thought and behaved like brothers.

But how does this compare to the present?

The Anti-War Drumbeat

In every war that the U.S. has entered, there has been some domestic opposition—citizens and politicians who believed it was unwise for the country to involve itself in the conflict. However, in generations past, once a Commander-in-Chief had made the decision to send troops into battle, there was a sense of wartime protocol. Open criticism of a war effort was largely withheld, out of consideration for the soldiers who were in the line of fire—and in the interest of troop morale,

which has a profound impact on the eventual outcome of a conflict. Most recognized that once an enemy was engaged, victory was in the long-term best interest of the country as a whole.

This concept and the etiquette that once accompanied it seem to have been forgotten.

Congressmen and other political figures now openly second-guess and denigrate the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, even as the military fights on two fronts—Iraq and

His statements quickly resulted in sharp criticism from others in his party. He assessed the controversy over his viewpoint in the following terms: “The positive and negative reactions... [reflect] the terribly divisive state of our politics” (ibid.).

A former U.S. attorney general, now known as maverick defense lawyer and a radical political activist, has written formal Articles of Impeachment against the president, which consists of accusations largely involving the Iraq war,

of his party—from advisors and aides to senators and representatives.

In addition, the opposition party has also pushed for investigations into nearly everything that the administration has done, from the response to Hurricane Katrina to the treatment of detainees from Afghanistan.

The Media’s Role

Much of the media keeps close watch over and publicizes every round of casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan. This unprecedented coverage is quickly wearing down public tolerance for the war effort. At this writing, the Iraq war has been in progress for just over 1,000 days, and U.S. military deaths number just over 2,100. Compare this to the Vietnam conflict, which after 1,000 days had resulted in nearly 12,000 deaths. Yet, according to polls, more than half of Americans believe that the Iraq war is a mistake—a threshold of disapproval that, in the Vietnam era, was only reached after the loss of 20,000 soldiers (*Associated Press*).

Pundits are sure to tie every perceived roadblock or setback in Iraq to the president himself, and to his party, attempting to define his presidency by the war and to gain leverage for a power shift in upcoming elections.

Media outlets also pounce on any minor gaffe involving the president, or any negative development affecting a member of his party. Also, the results of opinion polls and approval ratings that reflect poorly on the White House are given top billing in print and on television, with headlines quick to portray the entire administration as being back on its heels, ineffectual, reeling from misfortunes, out of touch with the country, and adrift.

Is America Indestructible?

A guiding principle of American democracy has been “The majority rules, the minority restricts.” In actual practice, the approach seems to have deteriorated into “The majority proposes, the minority opposes.”

Jesus Christ stated, “If a house be divided against itself, that house *cannot* stand” (Mark 3:25). Many in America,

“ Vigorous attempts have also been made to link the president to scandals (real or imagined) involving members of his party—from advisors and aides to senators and representatives. ”

Afghanistan. One representative, in a Capitol Hill news conference, called for an immediate withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq. Two weeks later, the same man predicted that most troops will have to leave Iraq because the Army is “broken,” “worn out” and “living hand to mouth” (*Associated Press*).

The national chairman of the opposition party has gone so far as to assert that the very *idea* of victory in Iraq is “just plain wrong.” He compared the Iraq war to the Vietnam war, and likened the controversy surrounding the White House’s justification for attacking Iraq to the Watergate scandal.

Criticism of a sitting president by former presidents was once virtually unheard of. However, former presidents now publicly criticize the current administration and its leader. Through news media, members of the opposition party voice criticism of President George W. Bush on a broad range of issues—even while he is visiting other nations, officially representing the country abroad!

Understanding the poisonous atmosphere in Washington, and breaking rank from his peers, Democratic Senator Joe Lieberman, who supports the Iraq war effort, stated, “We undermine the president’s credibility at our nation’s peril” (*The New York Times*).

and to a lesser degree Afghanistan. It is posted on a website that advocates impeachment—again, mostly focused on America’s war on terror.

Another senator summed up the situation this way: “There is no political consensus in this country. Democrats [and] Republicans are struggling. We’ve lost our national unity when it comes to Iraq” (*Agence France-Presse*).

Other Areas of Contention

The war has not been the only sticking point between democrats and republicans. There has also been unprecedented obstruction of Mr. Bush’s judicial nominees. Although these nominations are a constitutional mandate, Congress confirmed only 53% of the President’s circuit-court nominees during his first term in office, compared to an average of 85.5% for the previous *nine* four-year presidential first terms since World War II. To look at this process from another angle, since World War II, there was an average of five circuit-court nominations that were returned (turned down) by Congress during a president’s first term. From January 2001 to January 2005, 30 nominations were returned (*Washington Times*)!

Vigorous attempts have also been made to link the president to scandals (real or imagined) involving members

and even many politicians, seem to believe that this verse does not apply to the country—that the political system can sustain severe and widespread internal strife.

It is as though the opposition party has no comprehension that they can bring their country to a close—to a complete end—if the adversarial nature of partisan politics continues its course. No matter what the party in power—whether Republican or Democrat—does or says, the opposition party undercuts it, and usually does so with fierce denunciation of the motives, competency and purposes of the current leadership. If the leaders say up, the opposition says down—if the leaders say go, the opposition says stop—if the leaders say left, the opposition says right—if the leaders say backward, the opposition says forward, and so forth. And this extreme adversarial state of affairs has spread to state, regional and local levels.

Consider. Could a once-strong marriage continue if the wife went through the neighborhood publicly undercutting every decision that her husband made, even fiercely attacking him? Could even the most powerful company survive if the president or chief executive officer was continually lampooned, ridiculed and accused of corruption by other senior officers—no matter what he did? Could a winning professional football or soccer team remain in existence if the coach continually challenged and opposed the decisions, policies and judgment of the corporate leadership and management of the team? Could a school survive if every decision made by the principal was attacked and repudiated by senior teachers on the faculty?

Certainly not!

Why, then, do the leaders of the world's superpower not understand that they can bring their country to complete collapse and ultimate destruction—putting themselves at the mercy of foreign powers—if they do not cease the open hatred and hostility so powerfully and almost routinely evident today? It is as though they have no comprehension of the tremendous destructive capability of adversarial politics—that it can

ultimately lead to anarchy, from which, after a certain point has been reached, there can be no return.

We are left to ask: How long can a country get away with what members of a family, a company, a sports team or a school could not begin to endure—and would not even be foolish enough to *think* that they could?

End of the Road

We need not wonder whether the United States can somehow defy logic and snatch victory from the jaws of defeat.

Bible prophecy clearly shows that America will *not* continue to exist for much longer. As one of the nations descended from the biblical patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Israel (Jacob), the U.S. (along with Britain, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and certain nations of Northwest Europe) has inherited tremendous birthright blessings. However, these blessings are accompanied by an ongoing obligation to obey God, which these peoples have long ignored.

In a simpler time in American history, Abraham Lincoln stated, “At what point shall we expect the approach of danger? By what means shall we fortify against it? Shall we expect some transatlantic military giant, to step the Ocean, and crush us at a blow? Never! All the armies of Europe, Asia and Africa combined, with all the treasure of the earth (our own excepted) in their military chest; with a Buonaparte for a commander, could not by force, take a drink from the Ohio, or make a track on the Blue Ridge, in a trial of a thousand years. At what point, then, is the approach of danger to be expected? I answer, if it ever reach us it must spring up amongst us. It cannot come from abroad. If destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of freemen, we must live through all time, or die by suicide” (*The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, Volume I, Roy P. Basler [ed.], p. 109).

In hindsight, Lincoln was partially correct—the downfall of the United States *has* started from within.

However, he could not foresee the current decline of American power, and rising competitors in Europe and Asia.

A passage from the Old Testament indicts the modern-day descendants of Israel and cuts to the heart of the basic reason for division between human beings: “Hear this word that the LORD has spoken against you, O children of Israel, against the whole family which I brought up from the land of Egypt, saying, “You only have I known of all the families of the earth: therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities. *Can two walk together, except they be agreed?*” (Amos 3:1-3).

The obvious answer to this rhetorical question is a resounding NO!

The disagreement among America's leaders is preventing them from walking together. This is crippling the nation as a whole, and slowing the pace of national progress from a walk to a crawl!

And, as the passage above shows, the more serious problem is that Americans, like all the other Israelite nations—and the rest of mankind—are not “agreed” with their Creator. They are not walking together with Him in harmony with His immutable Law.

The purpose of *The REAL TRUTH* magazine is not to take sides in politics, since neither the political left, nor the right, nor the center can bring lasting solutions to the table. And the tactics used by those on each side of the aisle are often identical—the key difference being who has the upper hand (the majority) and who is on the ropes (the minority).

However, there is GOOD NEWS! Eventually, the government of the United States—along with the flawed, corruptible systems of governance found around the world—will soon be replaced by perfect, just, everlasting and *unified* government. It will rest on the shoulder of the glorified Jesus Christ at His Second Coming, and will be shared with His resurrected saints (Isa 9:6; Dan. 2:44; 7:18). Mankind will learn that God's Way is the only way that works, and will finally come to walk together in agreement with Him—and with one another! □

Does Purgatory Exist?

MANY BELIEVE A PLACE EXISTS FOR THOSE WHO ARE NEITHER CONDEMNED NOR YET SAVED. WHAT ARE **THE FACTS** REGARDING THIS POPULAR IDEA?

BY JEFFREY D. DAVIS

WITHIN THE world of professing Christianity, there is disagreement as to what happens to people after death. The vast majority believes that “the good” go to some form of paradise, called heaven, and that “the wicked” go to a place of never-ending torture, called hell.

Some churches (and many non-Christian religions) teach that, after death, there is a third category of people, somewhere in-between good and evil, who go to another place: Purgatory. Those of this status are to go to heaven eventually, but they must first suffer intense punishment.

This reasoning comes from the belief that for sins and evils committed, a sinner must experience a certain degree of suffering as punishment, in this life or the next. The process of intense suffering is said to cleanse one of corruption, making him worthy of being in God’s presence.

However, since many fail to suffer enough in this lifetime (through acts of self-inflicted punishment—penance), after they die, they are allowed to finish their torment in Purgatory. In this place,

the souls of repentant sinners are supposedly purged by literally burning them in fire. The fire tortures the person as punishment for his sins, without killing him. In this manner, those who have “accepted Christ,” and are at least marginally “good,” are still able to go to heaven.

Those who have not suffered sufficiently, through penance, are considered to have a lesser status than the more “faithful” who regularly do so. Therefore, those in this third category must pay their “suffering debt” by being sentenced to Purgatory.

The intent behind this teaching is to unify two ideas: the belief that, by Christ’s sacrifice, a person is “saved” and able to go to heaven; and the doctrine that a person must “do penance” in order to be free from sin and be worthy to see God.

In a sense, Purgatory is a temporary hell.

How Long?

The time necessary in this “place of purifying” can vary widely, based upon “how clean the soul is,” and how many people pray that one’s soul should spend less time there. A person who has just a few sins for which he forgot to do penance—or who was not zealous enough in his self-punishing—will spend only

a few years writhing in agony. However, those who have “more guilty souls,” or are members not in good standing within the church, are likely to spend at least a few centuries being tortured by fire.

And then there are the souls who just barely qualify for Purgatory; they are to reside there “until the end of time,” when God supposedly plans to destroy Purgatory. According to this belief, God, in the final judgment, will determine whether they have suffered enough. If they “pass,” and God decides to send them to heaven, they are first thrown into a much more intense “final” purification of whatever sins they have left, so that He can immediately destroy Purgatory without waiting around for all those souls to finish suffering.

Of course, some souls, if they are so popular that people regularly pray for them, need not spend all this time suffering for their sins. Faithful church members may offer “prayers for the dead” for those stuck in Purgatory. Although these souls are not permitted to pray for themselves, prayers from faithful members can significantly shorten their allotted suffering time.

In addition, if “pious” members utter the correct prayers on specific days in November, indulgences are granted. These indulgences allow souls to escape from Purgatory. For example, if a faithful member visits a cemetery and utters a prayer for a soul on each of the first eight days of that month, the soul will be released from Purgatory. Alternatively, if one “Our Father” and “the Creed” are recited for the soul at either a church or public

oratory on November 2nd, the soul is freed.

In case a church member forgets to release his friends on the correct dates, or he is unable to visit a cemetery during all eight days, the person in purgatory can still get a partial indulgence (which shortens the time in Purgatory) by other means. At any time, a member may recite the “Eternal Rest” prayer. Or, a member may “fast” (abstain from certain meats) for the soul. Either method of obtaining a partial indulgence is supposedly more effective in November.

Such utter confusion!

Wages of Sin

The primary reason for the doctrine of Purgatory is the belief that the wages—what one earns—for sin is *suffering*.

However, notice what the Bible states regarding the wages of sin: “the wages of sin is DEATH” (Rom. 6:23). Simply put, the actual penalty for sinning is death, not suffering permanently in hell or even temporarily in Purgatory. The reason Jesus Christ had to die was to pay the penalty—death in our stead—for our sins. Purgatory actu-

ally *denies* Christ’s role as Savior, in that human beings can atone for their own sins!

Keep in mind that sin *does* result in suffering in this life. For every EFFECT, there is a CAUSE. When the law of gravity is ignored, the effects can be painful, even deadly. Likewise, when one sins—violates God’s Law (I John 3:4)—it automatically results in pain, misery and suffering in this temporary, physical existence. Though one may repent of sin, be forgiven and be freed from the death penalty, certain consequences may remain. For example, when King David repented of committing adultery and murder, God forgave his sins; however, the life of his illegitimate son was still taken (II Sam. 12:7-14, 18).

While sin brings untold suffering to millions of lives *now*, its true wages—its ultimate penalty—is much more costly: eternal death!

The second idea that leads many to think a place of purifying is necessary is the doctrine that a soul is immortal. This concept also contradicts the Bible. Man does not *have* a soul—he *is* a soul: “And the LORD God formed man of the dust

of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man *became* a living soul” (Gen. 2:7). God’s Word plainly shows that souls are mortal—that they can die: “The soul that sins, *it shall die*” (Eze. 18:4; 18:20) Thus, a soul does not go *anywhere* after death—it ceases to exist. (Our booklet *The truth about HELL* explains this in more detail.)

The belief that pain and suffering is necessary to cleanse one of sin is a common misunderstanding. God does correct human beings (Heb. 12:6) and allows suffering for His purposes. He uses these as tools to teach humanity how to obtain a life full of joy, peace and prosperity. However, once one’s physical life ends, so does his suffering. (To learn more, read our article “Why Does God Allow Suffering?”)

Would a God who “is full of compassion...and of great mercy” (Psa. 145:8) torment and afflict men in a supposed place of purifying?

Of course not! Instead, all who have not known God’s truth will be given an opportunity to enjoy wonderful, joyous, eternal life in the soon-coming kingdom of God! □

NEVER HAD A CHANCE?

The doctrine of Purgatory addresses the fate of those considered Christian who are indirectly headed to heaven, but says nothing about “good” people who never had a chance to obtain salvation.

In order to solve this problem, some churches teach the concept of “Limbo.” Limbo is reserved for those who are not evil enough to be sent to hell or Purgatory, but have not obtained salvation, and are therefore not allowed to enter heaven. Those sent to Limbo are babies who

died without being baptized, aborted children and those considered righteous who lived before the time of Christ.

Originally, Limbo was considered a place of mild suffering. However, many felt this was too harsh, so the doctrine was changed to state that those in Limbo feel neither pain nor joy.

Because the concept of innocent babies not being allowed to know joy was unpopular, the doctrine was again changed to reflect that babies are now considered to be “in a state

of natural happiness.”

The Limbo doctrine has existed in two forms. One is known as *Limbus Patrum*, which was for all who, though they lived before the time of Christ, were considered good enough to go to heaven. Supporters of the doctrine of Limbo believe that Christ released all those placed in this condition when He ascended to heaven.

The other form is *Limbus Infantium*, reserved for children, as described above. Since they are now considered to be in a state

of natural happiness, there is no need for them to be removed from Limbo.

The Catholic Church, which has many adherents who believe in Limbo, has considered abolishing the doctrine. Unbaptized children would then be sent to heaven instead of Limbo.

Because there is some disagreement within the church as to whether the pope has authority to alter the long-held tradition, such a decision would likely be unpopular among much of the church’s membership. □



MARDI GRAS

Just Harmless Fun?

BILLED AS THE “GREATEST FREE PARTY ON EARTH,” MARDI GRAS IS CELEBRATED BY MILLIONS AROUND THE WORLD. BUT WHAT IS THE ORIGIN OF THIS EVENT—AND SHOULD IT BE CELEBRATED?

BY ROBERT R. FARRELL

COLORFUL COSTUMES. Spectacular parades. Elegant pageants. Masked balls. People dancing in the streets to rhythmic, intoxicating music. All with an air of carefree abandon. As the music reverberates, alcohol flows. Wildly elaborate floats glide down the street, with frenzied masqueraders onboard. Crowds of onlookers shout encouragement.

It’s that time of the year—Mardi Gras! Time for one of the biggest parties on the planet to begin.

A Popular Festival

Mardi Gras (also called “Carnival” in many countries) is a time of unrestrained merrymaking, in which participants passionately indulge every fleshly desire. Celebrated predominantly in Roman Catholic communities in Europe and Latin America, pre-Lenten carnivals are spreading in the U.S. Some of the more famous celebrations occur in New Orleans, Louisiana; Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago; Nice, France; and Cologne, Germany.

Although the term Mardi Gras refers to a specific day, it is not a single-day celebration. Every year, beginning in January, Carnival festivities occur daily, culminating in the final climatic Mardi Gras celebration the day before the observance of Lent, a 40-day period of self-denial. Mardi Gras is considered to be the last day for indulging in the pleasures of the flesh before Lent begins. In fact, the word

Carnival means “farewell to the flesh,” and comes from the Latin words *carnis* (“flesh”) and *vale* (“farewell”).

This festival is so popular that millions celebrate it. For example, three million people flock to New Orleans annually to participate in what is often billed as “the greatest free show on earth.” It adds an estimated \$1 billion to the city’s economy, and its population more than doubles during the week leading up to Fat Tuesday.

While this festival is highly popular, is it merely harmless fun?

Even though Carnival is observed around the world, let’s consider more closely how Mardi Gras is celebrated in America.

From Ancient Times

This may come as a surprise, but Mardi Gras long predates Christianity. The earliest record comes from ancient times, when tribes celebrated a fertility festival that welcomed the arrival of spring, a time of renewal of life. The Romans called this pagan festival Lupercalia in honor of “Lupercus,” the Roman god of fertility. Lupercalia was a drunken orgy of merrymaking held each February in Rome, after which participants fasted for 40 days.

Interestingly, similar to modern celebrations, the Romans donned masks, dressed in costumes and indulged all of their fleshly desires as they gave themselves to the gods “Bacchus” (god of wine) and “Venus” (goddess of love). The masks and costumes were used as disguises to allow sexual liberties not normally permitted as individuals engaged in “bacchanal,” the drunken and riotous occasion in honor of

Bacchus. (The word “bacchanal” is still associated with Carnival celebrations to this day.)

As pagans converted to Catholicism, they did not want to give up this popular celebration. Church leaders, seeing that it was impossible to divorce the new converts from their pagan customs, decided to “Christianize” this festival. Thus, Carnival was created as a time of merrymaking immediately preceding their pagan 40-day fast, which the church renamed “Lent.” During Carnival, participants indulged in madness and all aspects of pleasure allowable, including gluttony, drunkenness and fornication.

The festival then spread to Europe, where it was celebrated in England, Spain, Germany, France and other countries. During the Middle Ages, a festival similar to the present-day Mardi Gras was given by monarchs and lords prior to Lent. To conscript new knights into service, the nobles would hold feasts in their honor, and they would ride through the countryside rewarding peasants with cakes (thought by some to be the origin of the “King Cake,” to be explained later), coins (probably the origin of present day Mardi gifts of “doubloons”) and other trinkets.

In Germany, there is a Carnival similar to Mardi Gras known as “Fasching,” held during the same period. To a lesser extent, this festivity is also celebrated in Spain and France.

In France, the festival was called Mardi Gras, meaning “Fat Tuesday.” This name comes from the ancient pagan practice of killing and eating a fattened calf on the last day of Carnival; it dates from the pre-Christian era when the Druids sacrificed offerings to pagan gods, seeking more fertile women and livestock. This day was also known as “Shrove Tuesday” (from the old English word “shrive,” which means to confess all sins) and “Pancake Tuesday.” The custom of making pancakes came from the need to use up all the fat, eggs and dairy products before the fasting period of Lent began.

From Europe, it spread around the world, particularly in communities of Catholic heritage. It reached America

in the 17th century, brought by French settlers to the southern states—particularly Louisiana, where the earliest record of the holiday being held was 1699. On March 3rd of that year, the French explorer Pierre Le Moyne d’Iberville set up camp on the west bank of the Mississippi River, about 60 miles south of New Orleans. He named his camp “Pointe du Mardi Gras” in honor of the festival. From that time onward, Louisiana citizens of French ancestry have observed Mardi Gras with masked balls and parties.

According to other sources, Mardi Gras started in New Orleans when a group of students who had recently returned from Paris donned masks and costumes and danced their way through the streets of the city. The inhabitants were swiftly captured by their enthusiasm, and followed suit.

Under French rule, the celebrations flourished, but were later banned by the Spanish governors as the revelry had become out of control. This prohibition continued even after Louisiana became an American state in 1803. However, the French “Creole” population persuaded the U.S. government to reinstate Mardi Gras. After the ban was lifted, the festival became so popular in the city that the Carnival season’s duration was limited several times to prevent yearlong celebrations.

Growth and Development

Mardi Gras developed into the elaborate affair it is today during the 19th and 20th centuries. In the early 1800s, the celebration was a simple affair consisting of masked revelers on foot, in carriages and on horseback. In 1837, there was the first parade, but the violent behavior of participants led to calls for ending the festival. Yet Mardi Gras was saved by six men who formed the “Comus,” which sought to beautify the celebration and to prove that it could be enjoyed in a safe manner. The Comus organization first coined the name “krewe” (an organization that puts on a carnival parade and ball for Mardi Gras in New Orleans) and established many of the

festival’s present traditions, such as secret Carnival organizations, themed parades with costumed masqueraders and beautiful floats, and holding balls after the parades.

The festival was disrupted by the Civil War, but afterward quickly resumed. In 1871, an American tradition was established when a cake with a bean in it was presented to a young woman. This signified her selection as Mardi Gras queen, and started the “King Cake” tradition. In 1872, the famous “Rex” appeared, the King of Carnival that became the international symbol of Mardi Gras. Rex presented the festival’s signature colors (green, gold and purple), produced its flag and introduced its anthem, “If Ever I Cease to Love.” Other significant developments included the appearance of the first black krewe in 1894 and the first female krewe in 1896.

Though the First World War also disrupted it, the festival still survived and prospered, later surviving the Prohibition years and the Great Depression.

After World War II, it gained new life, reaching a high point when one of New Orleans’ native sons, world-famous jazz musician Louis Armstrong, returned home to ride as king of the Zulu parade of 1949. This brought the festival greater media attention worldwide as it made the cover of *Time* magazine.

Mardi Gras’ fame increased further in the 1950s, when Britain’s Duke and Duchess of Windsor visited the New Orleans festival and honored the participants by bowing to the monarchs of the Rex and Comus krewes at the Comus ball. The decade also saw the formation of other krewes.

The 1960s saw larger, more elaborate floats introduced. And for the first time, Hollywood celebrities took a leading role when comedian and film star Danny Kaye rode as king of the Bacchus krewe.

Mardi Gras’ growth has continued from the 1970s to the present day. Parades have increased in number and in size. Perhaps the biggest change is that there has been a huge increase in

tourism during the Carnival season. The festival has become world famous, with media from many countries coming every year to cover the celebration. Another change is that it has become a year-round event, as off-season conventions are frequently treated to mini-parades and repeat balls in the city's convention center. The festival continues to grow. In 2000, the economic growth it brought to the city surpassed the \$1 billion mark.

Modern Mardi Gras

Again, Mardi Gras is a massive festival. As Carnival season approaches, residents decorate the city in the traditional colors of green (symbolizing faith), gold (power) and purple (justice).

The Carnival season actually begins the 12th night after Christmas, on January 6th, the religious holiday called Epiphany, on which Catholics celebrate the three kings (or wise men) presenting gifts to the Christ child. At this time, King Cakes are served, marking the beginning of the balls and smaller parades.

Then, beginning 12 days before Fat Tuesday, nightly parades are held, which get bigger and more elaborate as the big festival day approaches. These parades are a mix of royal ceremony, teasing giveaways, fantasy and excitement—celebrating the “pleasures” of life. In the final week, festivities intensify in New Orleans and surrounding communities, culminating in the biggest parades. Mardi Gras is so popular that it is accepted as a holiday in some parts of the South.

Each krewe's parade usually has its own theme, such as subjects of history, legends, geography, children's stories, famous people, entertainment, Greek and Roman mythology and literature, and satirical references to current events.

During these parades, crowds dance behind the floats and watch from the sidelines. Many krewes hold private balls after their parades. The public is invited to the street parades, but most balls are private affairs attended only by members of the krewes.

Celebrations begin early in the morning on Fat Tuesday and continue well into the night, ending promptly at midnight with the start of Ash Wednesday, which marks the beginning of Lent.

Festival Traditions

Mardi Gras has many traditions designed to keep the spirit of the festival alive from year to year.

One tradition that distinguishes Mardi Gras from other Carnivals is the distribution of “throws” to the crowds. Throws are trinkets that are tossed from the floats by masked and costumed krewe members. The most popular throws consist of strings of beads and items showing the krewe's logo or parade theme, such as decorated plastic cups, medallion necklaces and colorful, aluminum coins called “doubloons.” The popularity of throws is so great that crowd participation is as much a part of the parades as the krewes that put them on. All along the parade routes, the cry “throw me something mister” can be heard as the crowd tries to persuade krewe members to throw something their way.

Another tradition is the serving of circular cakes called “King Cake.” This custom began in ancient times, when tribes celebrated the arrival of spring by making a cake and putting a bean in it. After the tradition was adopted by Catholicism, legend has it that the cakes were made in a circle to represent the circular route that the wise men supposedly took to find the baby Jesus in order to confuse King Herod and disrupt his plans to kill the Christ child.

Today, King Cakes contain beans or baby figurines (supposedly representing “the Christ child”), and are traditionally served to unmarried women attending a Mardi Gras banquet. King cakes are also popular with office workers; the employee who finds the hidden treasure is obliged to buy the next day's cake.

Beginning shortly after Christmas, the krewes hold gala balls every night of the Carnival season. Each krewe chooses a king, queen and court from its most prominent families. The dis-

inction of being chosen as “royalty” is highly prized among krewe members. Royalty includes a king, queen, maids, lieutenants, ladies-in-waiting and pages. Each krewe carefully guards the identity of its royalty until Mardi Gras or the day the krewe parades and stages its ball. In recent times, Hollywood actors and other famous celebrities have been chosen as royalty.

There are two types of balls: the “tableau ball” and the “supper dance.” The tableau ball includes royalty, whose names are called out as they make their entrance. Only krewe members and their guests can attend. On the other hand, anyone can buy a ticket to the supper dance. Though royalty does not attend, there is a celebrity monarch, who is king or queen of the parade and entertains guests at the ball.

Endless Partying

Worldwide, Mardi Gras (or Carnival) is known as a time for a “no-holds barred” celebration in the spirit of utter abandonment. It is seen as a time to have fun, to cut loose, to “throw down,” to “party till you drop,” to “let the good times roll.”

On Fat Tuesday, revelers in New Orleans jam the streets with non-stop partying. The atmosphere is charged with drunkenness and unbridled sexual activity and perversion. In the French Quarter, homosexuals have costume contests before audiences of thousands. Women lean over balconies and openly expose themselves to anyone who will give beads to them. The practice of revelers engaging in sex with strangers is common. Bourbon Street is the focus of activity because of the numerous music clubs, strip clubs and bars found there. After the festival ends, city streets are so filthy that the following day is jokingly referred to as “Trash Wednesday,” instead of Ash Wednesday.

Despite Hurricane Katrina's devastating effects, plans were underway for another celebration. As one resident said, “We've got to have this party” (*USAToday*).

*Please see **MARDI GRAS**, page 24*

ARE FINANCIAL WORRIES ON THE HORIZON FOR 2006?



MANY STRUGGLE WITH FINANCIAL DIFFICULTIES, SPURRED ON BY CREDIT CARD DEBT AND RISING OIL PRICES. HOWEVER, THERE IS A WAY TO COMBAT THESE PROBLEMS.

THE NATIONS of the West possess more developed resources and national wealth than at any other time in history. Ironically, most have experienced at least one difficult time making ends meet.

Financial pressures seem to bear down upon us, robbing us of peace of mind. But should this be?

Though not every detail and cause of every financial burden can be addressed in just one article, we can

focus on two major concerns. One is a financial trend that has been around for decades. The other is looming on the immediate horizon—a national concern that all homeowners and families will need to address in 2006.

A Modern-Day Financial Pitfall

There is reason to believe that millions may be forced to “tighten their belts” financially. Millions are living far beyond their means! Most do not save anything from their earnings. Is it possible that your personal debt bubble will burst?

Two generations ago, it was common practice to spend only what one had left over after all obligations were met, including a weekly savings deposit. Most people practiced the habit of using cash instead of any form of credit.

But today, millions of consumers in the Western world have no doubt spent above and beyond their means this past Christmas and New Years’ season. The temptation to use one’s credit card is highest then. Many put off the thought of how they will pay off the debt.

The Christmas shopping season is, of course, an economic boom time for the retail, restaurant and hotel industries. During the months of September through January, consumer spending escalates. Prior to these months, many consumers live beyond their means. When heading into the holiday season, these same people cannot bear the thought of missing out or appearing to be broke, as they feel that buying gifts is more important than having their finances in order.

The common solution? Most of this spending is done on credit—pull out the credit card or home equity checkbook, and let out a big sigh of relief. It is estimated that nearly half of U.S. households carry an average of two to three credit cards, with a combined balance of approximately \$10,000. Often, credit card debt incurred during this time can take months—sometimes years!—to pay off.

With all this debt, many make New Year’s resolutions to stop spending so much money.

Credit Overflow!

It can be exciting to receive a letter or greeting card from someone special, or to receive the proverbial “check in the

mail.” However, a trip to the mailbox usually results in being bombarded by many forms of junk mail.

But beware. Within this massive amount of junk mail lies a subtle assault, one that can bring you and your family financial instability. This incursion comes in the form of credit card offers from banking institutions, on average three to four times per week. They are packaged as though free money is being given away. Sometimes, they are packaged with hard-sell pitches such as “You have been approved for up to \$15,000!” This leaves the unsuspecting recipient with a false sense of sudden financial power.

Others target those who have already fallen victim to the pitfalls that undisciplined credit card use can bring. They sometimes arrive with pre-printed promotional offers of 0% to 5% balance transfers, reward programs, etc.

These offers can be used wisely by the disciplined card user; but for the undisciplined, it can lead to a short-lived feeling of financial freedom—only to be trapped in a vicious cycle of debt accumulation.

Is all credit card use wrong?

No. Credit cards can be a good tool for the individual who understands how to live within his means. But where does one start?

The first step is to be honest with yourself and determine *why* and *how* you would use a credit card.

In the 21st century, it seems natural for everyone to own a credit card. For many, there is a real need to use credit cards. For instance, some people travel often. Having a credit card on hand is almost a necessity for hotel stays and car rentals. Also, many use their credit cards for the convenience of Internet shopping, online auctions, etc.

But for those who lack financial discipline, having credit cards can be the beginning of being enslaved to that same convenience—leading to high interest rates and mounting debt.

Many use their credit cards to purchase lunch at McDonalds! Is it wise to pay interest on a quick lunch?

Remember this principle: All debt incurred on credit cards can turn into a mortgage on your future paychecks. Wise King Solomon was inspired to write, “...the borrower is servant to the lender” (Prov. 22:7). How true!

One must use common sense when borrowing. Carefully consider why you would need a card. If you cannot find a solid reason for needing one, then why not make all business transactions by cash, debit card or personal check? This will leave you with the best opportunity to stay out of financial enslavement and will give you personal power over your financial future. Getting into the habit of using cash more often is wise.

If you find yourself already in credit card debt, STOP CHARGING! You may need to find a source of additional income. Working hard (Ecc. 9:10) and applying the “cash only” principle is a sure way out of debt.

The next step is to find the right card and apply wisdom in your transactions. Here are some important basic points:

- Look for a credit card with a fixed interest rate rather than a variable rate. A fixed rate is secure, while a variable rate will rise as short term interest rates rise.

- Seek out low interest rates with minimal fees.

- Look for offers with the longest grace periods and cards that have no annual fees.

- Be careful with 0% to 2.9% offers that hook you in, and then kick in a high interest rate after the 6- to 12-month offer. Interest rates of 18% to 24% are common under such offers. The average interest rate is currently around 13% according to *www.bankrate.com*.

- Avoid paying off credit cards with more credit cards.

- Read the fine print before signing up.

(To compare credit card offers, you may find it helpful to visit certain non-profit websites.)

You might ask, “What about reward programs such as airline miles, free gasoline and cash back offers?” These

can be a good deal only if the card user disciplines himself to pay off the full balance monthly. Paying off your monthly balance is the only way to use a credit card wisely, especially with cards that offer rewards. Try to pay off your card before the interest rate kicks in.

For example, those who use a 1% cash back offer and systematically pay off their monthly balance can be 1% ahead financially on every transaction, as long as the above mentioned principles are adhered to.

The simplest way to arrive at financial strength is to develop a disciplined habit of living within your means. Simple, common-sense spending habits, over time, can put you on the right track.

Another Reason to Tighten Our Belts

The long-term effects of the recent hurricane season will have an economic impact on millions. And with ever-increasing personal debt, many are beginning to sense some “bumps in the road” in their financial future.

Patricia Clark, spokesperson for the Citizens Utility Board, a consumer watchdog group, said, “It’s going to be a horrible winter for consumers.” She added, “We are advising people who call us to get on the budget plan and minimize the impact” (*Chicago Sun-Times*).

Peoples Energy has forecasted that natural gas bills will increase anywhere from 39% to 69% for 2006! According to the utility company, this will occur because last summer was hotter than normal throughout the nation, creating greater demand for electricity produced from natural gas, and production is struggling to keep up. This—combined with the unknown long-term effects of Hurricane Katrina on natural gas production in the Gulf of Mexico—creates concern in the market and leads to increased prices.

White House officials said that what occurred in the Gulf coast areas caused shortages, which may not recover for many months ahead.

Please see FINANCIAL, page 29

THE EUROPEAN COUNTERWEIGHT

WITH ITS EXPANSION TO 25 MEMBER STATES, THE EUROPEAN UNION IS POISED TO BECOME A VAST FEDERAL SUPERSTATE. AS IT SEEKS TO BE A “COUNTERWEIGHT” TO U.S. GLOBAL INTERESTS, WILL EUROPE REPLACE AMERICA AS THE WORLD’S LEADING SUPERPOWER?



PART ONE A LEADERLESS SUPERPOWER

BY BRUCE A. RITTER

IT HAS MORE people (454.7 million) than the United States—a larger consumer market—more troops (collectively, almost two million armed forces personnel)—and, with more votes on the United Nations Security Council and every other international body, stronger political muscle.

It has a president, a legislative body, a flag, a national anthem, a

motto (“Unity in Diversity”), open borders between member states, a constitution (yet to be ratified), a Bill of Rights, and a court system that can overrule the highest of any member court.

It also has an emerging common culture that speaks a common language: English.

The decades-old European dream of becoming a kind of “United States of Europe” is becoming a reality. Speaking at the Carnegie Council’s “Books for Breakfast” program, T.R. Reid, bureau chief for *The Washington Post* and author of the book *The*

United States of Europe: The New Superpower and the End of American Supremacy, observed, “I think it’s fair to say that Europe is more united today than at any time since the Roman Empire.”

But what does this mean for America’s future?

“Let Europe Arise!”

Within a 75-year span, the European continent was ravaged by three brutal war campaigns: the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71), World War I (1914-18) and World War II (1939-45). Together, an estimated 60 to 70 million Europeans were killed.

In the aftermath of WWII, the United States became a world-leading superpower, countered by the Soviet Union. As the Iron Curtain came down on Europe, dividing East from West, war-torn nations on both sides raced to rebuild their armed forces. Another continental war seemed to loom on the horizon. And so leaders, thinkers, idealists and religionists set out to fulfill a vision: a reorganized Europe free from nationalist strife, military competition and arms races.

On September 19, 1946, in Zurich, Switzerland, Winston Churchill gave a speech that addressed the state of Europe and its future. “If Europe were once united in the sharing of its common inheritance,” he said, “there would be no limit to the happiness, to the prosperity and the glory which its

three or four hundred million people would enjoy.”

“...all the while there is a remedy which, if it were generally and spontaneously adopted by the great majority of people in many lands, would as if by a miracle transform the whole scene, and would in a few years make all Europe, or the greater part of it, as free and as happy as Switzerland is today. What is this sovereign remedy? It is to re-create the European Family, or as much of it as we can, and to provide it with a structure under which it can dwell in peace, in safety and in freedom. *We must build a kind of United States of Europe.*”

Churchill proposed that this unified European state be spearheaded by a partnership between France and Germany.

Continuing, he said, “The structure of the United States of Europe, if well and truly built, will be such as *to make the material strength of a single state less important*. Small nations will count as much as large ones and gain their honor by their contribution to the common cause.”

“...we must re-create the European Family in a regional structure called, it may be, the United States of Europe. And the first practical step would be to form a Council of Europe. If at first all the States of Europe are not willing or able to join the Union, we must nevertheless proceed to assemble and combine those who will and those who can. The salvation of the common people of every race and of every land from war or servitude must be established on solid foundations and must be guarded by the readiness of all men and women to die rather than submit to tyranny. In all this urgent work, France and Germany must take the lead together. Great Britain, the British Commonwealth of Nations, mighty America and I trust Soviet Russia—for then indeed all would be well—must be the friends and sponsors of the new Europe and must champion its right to live and shine.

“Therefore I say to you: let Europe arise!”

Churchill’s speech laid the groundwork for today’s European Union—and marked the prophetic path it will take.

The Power of Subtle Diplomacy

For centuries, Italy, Spain, France, Germany, Britain and other Western European countries ran global empires that steered or influenced the course of world events. These nations operated from a position of strength: They possessed the military might to force their will upon weaker countries—and were not afraid to use it.

But by 1945, this had changed; the age of European empires came to an end.

The conclusion of WWII ushered in the Cold War, which left Europe caught between the competing interests and politics of America and the USSR. With their economies and infrastructures in shambles—and no longer possessing the military means to impose their national will—European leaders were relegated to being minor players on the world stage. Under the far-reaching shadows of U.S. leadership and the looming threat of Soviet aggression, Europe operated from a position of weakness, and had to master the art of subtle diplomacy, using charm, stealth, guile, compromise and appeasement to secure their political interests.

Alone, no European nation had the resources to challenge the political, financial and military muscle of the two superpowers—yet Britain, Italy, Germany, France and others realized that *together* they could hold their own. This became a key motivator for the Europeans to unify. From the 1950s onward, the nations learned to pool their resources together, entering into treaties and setting up commissions that ultimately led to the formation of the European Union.

With the dismantling of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and the subsequent collapse of the USSR, America was left as the lone superpower. Despite all that the United States had done to rebuild, fortify and protect Western

Europe, European leaders dreaded the prospect of the U.S. pursuing its global interests unchallenged. This fear motivated the EU’s transformation into a political and economic counterweight to American power.

The European Counterweight

Today, the EU has the economic clout necessary to make many of the rules that shape and govern world commerce.

In a July 2001 decision, the European Commission voted unanimously—without even a debate—to veto a proposed merger between American aircraft giants General Electric and Honeywell. This \$45 billion deal—which had been approved by the U.S. Justice Department—would have been the biggest industrial merger in history.

Four years later, the European Court of First Instance acknowledged that “the Commission’s reasoning was marred by legal errors,” and that “in the words of the court, the decision was ‘vitiated [invalidated] by illegalities.’” However, the court upheld the 2001 decision.

Honeywell and GE did not merge.

Why? Because if the merger had taken place, the new aircraft giant would have been shut out of the largest market in the world—the 25 member nations of the European Union.

Even software titan Microsoft has had to bow to Europe’s demands. For years, U.S. authorities have tried to restrain Microsoft Corporation’s domination of the computer industry, but with little success. In a March 2004 antitrust ruling, the European Commission ordered the company to pay 497 million euros (\$613 million), share its software code with competitors, and offer an unbundled version of the Windows operating system.

The Seattle, Washington-based company complied—but apparently not to the EU’s satisfaction. In December 2005, taking further legal steps to ensure better compliance to the previous ruling, the commission threatened fines of up to \$2.37 million

per day if Microsoft did not provide its rivals with better documentation on its software programs.

If American corporations want access to the EU market, then they must be prepared to follow Europe's rules. And this is why, as T.R. Reid explains in his book *The United States of Europe*, American whiskey (for example) is sold in bottles that use the metric system, which is used universally in Europe.

In March 2005, the European Commission announced it would impose a 15% increase in duty on U.S. imports of paper, agricultural, textile and machinery products. This was in retaliation for Washington failing to comply with the World Trade Organization ruling that America's anti-dumping law (the Byrd Amendment) was illegal. The amendment was killed in the U.S. Senate nine months later.

These are just a handful of examples of the EU imposing its economic will upon American companies and blocking U.S. global interests.

One must ask: Will Europe some day summon the political will to do so by force?

A Widening Transatlantic Rift

Political commentator Robert Kagan, a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, observed this about Europe's current position in exercising its political will: "In an anarchic world, small powers always fear they will be victims. Great powers, on the other hand, often fear rules that may constrain them more than they fear the anarchy in which their power brings security and prosperity....[Europe's] tactics, like their goal, are the tactics of the weak. They hope to constrain American power without wielding power themselves. In what may be the ultimate feat of subtlety and indirection, they want to control the behemoth [the U.S.] by appealing to its conscience" (*Policy Review*, No. 113, "Power and Weakness").

But what if the EU began to view America as unreasonable—without a

"conscience"? How would it react? Would Europe, perhaps feeling justified, again embrace its former, centuries-old tactics of *machtspolitik* ("power politics") and flex its military muscle?

Most Europeans resent the current White House administration. Nonetheless, they do largely favor the American people. They may see them as brash and unsophisticated, but Europeans also recognize that their American cousins are resourceful and kind-hearted, quick to help countries and peoples in dire straits, especially in the wake of sudden disasters. Europeans do not see Americans as malevolent people bent on world domination.

Nevertheless, America's reputed "cowboy mentality," an approach that addresses international problems with political bluntness and force, clashes with the European preference to employ diplomatic finesse and subtlety in place of military solutions. This is among the many issues and differences that are driving a wedge—a growing transatlantic rift—between Europe and America.

Other points of contention are...

■ **Diplomacy and bureaucracy:** Americans are known for their resourcefulness and "can-do" spirit; when unanticipated problems arise, they have a reputation for solving them with unconventional thinking. This reinforces the perception of an American cowboy mentality, in which U.S. statesmen are considered impatient and seek fast results from complex international situations.

In contrast, Europe is mired in bureaucracy; out-of-the-ordinary requests usually involve a great deal of bureaucratic red tape and form-filling. This is a product of the European mindset of patient diplomacy—the opposite of U.S. methods.

There is another related issue: While most U.S. citizens tend to want government involved in its affairs as little as possible, Europeans embrace government regulation. EU citizens gladly live under a "womb to tomb" welfare state that pays for virtually

everything—health care, child care, education, etc.

But with such a far-reaching system comes bureaucracy, high taxes and heavy-handed regulation. Most Americans believe that these disadvantages far outweigh the benefits.

■ **Capital Punishment:** Perhaps due to the continent's centuries-long history of barbarism, capital punishment is both illegal and unpopular across Europe. From the average citizen, to government officials, to the pope, Europeans are vehemently against the death penalty—even for the most brutal of criminals. Any nation that desires to join the ever-expanding EU must abolish capital punishment from its land.

Whenever executions take place in the U.S. (which occur less often than Europeans might think), America is seen as barbaric.

A case-in-point: When convicted murderer Stanley "Tookie" Williams was executed, the European nations were outraged, especially Austria. Its native son, California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, refused to block the execution. To show their indignation, local activists of Graz, Austria, Mr. Schwarzenegger's hometown, threatened to remove the governor's name from a 15,300-seat sports stadium. (Turning the tables on his critics, Mr. Schwarzenegger demanded that his name be removed, and returned a ring of honor that Graz officials had given him six years earlier.)

■ **Controlling the Internet:** From emails to web pages, Internet-based communications are enabling even the smallest of businesses to participate in the global market.

The Internet is a U.S. invention, and the vast majority of websites are still American-created and operated. Additionally, 62% of Americans have Internet access, while only 14% of the rest of the world possess this capability.

ICANN (the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers), a private, nonprofit U.S.-based organization, is responsible for assigning domain names and internet suffixes,

such as “.com” and “.org.” The EU, along with China, Brazil and other critics, fear that ICANN (which has close ties to the U.S. Department of Commerce) wields far too much control over the World Wide Web.

“Though ICANN is a private organization with international board members, the Commerce Department can still veto what goes on government-approved lists of the 260 or so internet suffixes, like ‘.com.’ Theoretically, the US could simply disconnect the domains of countries, like Iran or North Korea, with which they are feuding” (“EU and US at Loggerheads Over Internet Control,” *Deutsche Welle*).

Also, of the 13 root servers that direct traffic and serve as the Internet’s master directories, only one is located outside the United States (in Tokyo, Japan).

Citing growing security threats, increased usage of Internet-based global communications and commerce, and its historic role in developing and expanding the World Wide Web, the U.S. says it has the right to retain control.

Europe has proposed replacing American government oversight with a technical intergovernmental body: “The 25 EU countries are unanimously demanding a new cooperation model for the Internet, where all interested countries sit at one table to discuss the core questions of the network together,” the EU Commissioner for Information Society and Media told *Der Spiegel* magazine.

“Such a body stokes fears of the kind of stifling bureaucracy the United States regularly criticizes the EU of” (*ibid.*).

To offer an alternative—a counterweight—to U.S. Internet dominance, the EU is launching its own domain-name extension: “.eu”.

Yet, perhaps the deepest issue separating Europe from America is religion.

Bonds of an Emerging Identity

A common European culture is emerging among the generation ranging from ages 15 to 40. Known as “Generation

E” (or “the Nineties Generation”), it consists of college-educated young professionals who grew up in one part of Europe—Edinburgh, Madrid or Florence, for example—studied at universities in other parts of the continent—such as Oxford, Paris or Frankfurt—and are pursuing professional careers in still another section of Europe, as in Rome, Brussels or Dublin (called “the Silicon Valley of Europe”).

Increasingly, those in Generation E view themselves as Europeans first—secondarily Scots, Spaniards, Germans, Italians or otherwise. In their eyes, Europe is more than just a continent—it’s their national homeland. And English is emerging as the common language.

A prevalent bond among these and other Europeans is their belief that religion in the public forum is archaic—and at best, explosive. Their common history, which is filled with mass brutality and bloodshed, has taught them that religion in the public sphere, mixed with fervent nationalism and national self-interests, inevitably leads to war.

According to a survey by the *Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life*, 59% of Americans called their faith “very important.” But only 21% of Europeans said that religion is “very important” to them; only 11% of the French, 21% of Germans and 33% of Britons feel this way (*European Values Study*, which tracks attitudes in 32 European countries).

The history of Europe has seen war, torture and death—all in the name of religion. Little wonder Europeans are now deeply skeptical of patriotism mixed with religious sentiment.

This is most true of Germany. Karsten Voigt, German Foreign Ministry’s coordinator on German-U.S. cooperation, explained, “The mixture of patriotism and religion is anathema and heresy in German religious life because it was misused and went too far in the past. Remember, German soldiers in World War I wore belt buckles reading ‘Gott Mitt Uns’

[God With Us]” (*Christian Science Monitor*).

This firm mistrust is heightened when the American president invokes religious rhetoric into his speeches, such as his 2005 inaugural address, in which he said, “America’s vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one. From the day of our Founding, we have proclaimed that every man and woman on this earth has rights, and dignity, and matchless value, *because they bear the image of the Maker of Heaven and earth*” (emphasis ours).

Mr. Bush’s convictions clash with the European belief that human rights arise from the secular humanist idea that man is the ultimate norm by which values are to be determined. It is a form of naturalistic religion that places man—his human reasoning, feelings, scientific inquiry, ethical conduct—above God.

Dominique Moisi, one of France’s most respected political analysts, said that “the combination of religion and nationalism in America is frightening. We feel betrayed by God and by nationalism, which is why we are building the European Union as a barrier to religious warfare” (*ibid.*).

Many call this Europe-wide aggressive attitude toward religion, particularly traditional Christianity, “secular fundamentalism”—a mindset that views religion as “lifeless.” Europe’s current climate of “Christianophobia” explains why churches that once held hundreds of attendees at a time are rapidly losing adherents.

Rocco Buttiglione, whom the European Parliament blocked from becoming the European commissioner for justice because he had described homosexuality as a sin, observed the following: “The new soft totalitarianism that is advancing on the left wants to have a state religion,” adding, “It is an atheist, nihilistic religion—but it is a religion that is obligatory for all” (*ibid.*).

A 2004 Gallup poll revealed that 44% of Americans said they attended a place of worship once a week.



■ **SIGNING CEREMONY CONSTITUTIONAL TREATY:** On Oct. 29, 2004, representatives of the EU member states signed the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe. With French and Dutch voters rejecting the treaty in referenda in 2005, other EU countries postponed their ratification procedures, leaving the Constitution with an uncertain future.

In contrast, only 15% of Europeans claimed this about their religion (on average; this number varied widely among the member states).

A California man's attempt to remove the phrase "One Nation, Under God" from the Pledge of Allegiance brought cries of foul; a poll revealed that 90% of Americans wanted to keep the phrase. Meanwhile, in Brussels, the EU capital, officials have agreed on the final text of the EU's new Constitution, which makes no direct mention of God, despite calls from the Vatican and other voices to recognize Europe's "Christian roots."

Religious convictions and practices among Europeans are fading from people's lives, only to be replaced with increasing materialism and permissiveness. Mainstream churches—especially the Catholic Church—continue to suffer dwindling membership, church attendance and influence.

Cardinal Renato Raffaele Martino, president of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, fought

a hard, but unsuccessful, battle for Christianity to be mentioned in the EU Constitution. Still troubled by Mr. Buttiglione's treatment, and by the Spanish parliament's moves toward legalizing homosexual marriage, he asked, "Those Roman emperors who wanted to get rid of us, where are they today? And Napoleon, he didn't like us either. And where is Napoleon today?" ("European, Not Christian," *U.S. News & World Report*).

Many recognize that there is a spiritual void—a gnawing hunger—that secularism cannot satisfy. Some are looking past today's secular landscape and are envisioning a future when a new spiritual reawakening will arise. But how will this come to pass?

From "Military Pygmy" to "Flabby Giant"

Before the EU's expansion to 25 members, the commander of NATO called Europe a "military pygmy." Since then, the EU's combined military man-

power has grown to almost two million armed forces personnel—more than the United States.

Yet the same commander upgraded Europe to being only a "flabby giant," because its troops are not united into a large, single military force. There still remains a technological gap between European forces and the U.S. military, especially in transportation, intelligence and modern weapons technology.

But the EU would rather spend funds on its burgeoning welfare programs and let the U.S. protect it from external threats. Indeed, one of the key reasons for forming the EU was to find an alternative to war. Today, European politicians and academics tend to view the use of military force as a relic held over from the era of colonialism and world-spanning empires. In their secular thinking, war is judged as a waste of time and money, and is immoral.

Yet this thinking is bound to change as the European Union grows into an economic, political and, potentially, military juggernaut. It already possesses virtually every component necessary to be a counterweight to American supremacy. Could men, when given access to such power, deny human nature and pass up the opportunity to become the global leader in all arenas?

With 25 democratic nations each having a say in EU affairs, the government is too large and unwieldy to govern efficiently and effectively. Only when the member states concentrate on countering U.S. interests are they unified and unanimous.

Just as a corporation, school system or church cannot be successfully governed by committee, neither can a government. Someone must be in charge—someone must take responsibility for when things go wrong—someone must captain the ship.

To become a federal superstate with supranational governance, capable of executing decisions with speed and precision, Europe must have a strong leader guiding the way.

Plans are already in the works.

(To be continued.) □

“MEGACHURCH”

Continued from page 8

churches. (3) He said that His church will never be destroyed, meaning that somewhere on earth is the Church that Jesus is leading—and there is only one.

But understand. Just as Jesus Christ has built *His* Church, various men have built *their* churches—some big and some small. One cannot use membership size and speed of growth to determine if God is present at a particular church. As in the business world, men are fully capable of establishing, cultivating and leading large churches on their own. But this is not proof that God is behind such organizations.

The true Church of God can be identified by its teachings, which are *vastly* different from any other church. Unlike professing Christianity, God’s true Church teaches obedience to *all*

of God’s laws, beginning with the Ten Commandments. It does not “sugar coat” or water down God’s Word to avoid offending people. It does not sidestep teaching sobering aspects of God’s Word (commonly criticized as “doomsaying”). After all, if God thought such topics were important enough to include in His Word, should His servants not preach them? And the Church that Christ is leading does not teach that a false version of love overrides God’s laws. Notice how the Bible defines love: “Love works no ill to his neighbor: therefore *love is the fulfilling of the law*” (Rom. 13:10). Obeying God’s laws results in *TRUE* love—outgoing concern for others.

On the other hand, churches of men teach that all or some of God’s Commandments are done away, and that all one needs is *man’s* definition of love. In place of God’s Commandments, these churches teach “commandments of men.” Jesus point-

ed this out to the supposed religious authorities of His day, the Pharisees, who can be likened to today’s “spiritual leaders.” Notice: “But in vain they do worship Me, teaching for doctrines the *commandments of men*” (Matt. 15:9). Mark 7:9 adds further, “Full well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep *your own* tradition.”

Yes, one can worship God to no avail—and countless millions are doing so! Incredibly, they do not seem to care. Most are only concerned with what *they* want—not what God wants.

The various megachurches are keeping abreast with modern American culture—and because of this, they will surely continue to attract large audiences. Nevertheless, they are *not* the result of God’s leadership. Read our booklet *Where is God’s TRUE CHURCH?* to learn more about how to discern where God is working. □

MARDI GRAS

Continued from page 16

Another said, “We owe it to our ancestors and our children to keep this celebration going. We just can’t stop. This is so important for us” (*Reuters*).

Is This Real Fun?

In light of its sordid origin, should Mardi Gras still be viewed as harmless fun? Does God allow Christians to cast off all restraint and participate in its festivities—drunkenness, lewdness, public nudity, homosexuality, illicit sex, revelry and brawling—which He calls “the works of the flesh” (Gal. 5:19-21)?

Mardi Gras represents a blend of religion and immorality, steeped in ancient pagan fertility rites. Many of the parades celebrate and honor false gods such as Bacchus and Venus; others promote fornication and drunkenness—conduct that ends marriages, breaks up families and destroys lives! Professing Christians should take heed: Drunkenness, fornication and such reveling are among the kinds of conduct

that exclude one from inheriting the kingdom of God (I Cor. 6:9-10).

It is hypocritical for anyone who claims to seek or serve the true God to participate in a festival that originates from paganism and promotes immoral behavior. Not only should Christians not participate in evil, God commands them to avoid even the *appearance* of evil (I Thes. 5:22). This certainly applies to Mardi Gras.

What about Lent? As noted earlier, the Catholic Church incorporated the 40-day fast that the pagans had been observing and renamed it Lent. This, too, is an unscriptural custom, and should be avoided by anyone striving to obey God. (Read our article “The True Meaning of Lent” to learn more.)

Any festival or religious observance of pagan origin is unacceptable to God, the “LORD” of the Old Testament (Deut. 12:29-32)—the same Being who later became Jesus Christ (I Cor. 10:1-4).

Live the Abundant Life!

Are those who participate in the wanton revelry of Mardi Gras *truly* happy? After the partying is over, they must return home and face their

problems. Mardi Gras is simply a temporary diversion; it does not take away their troubles. And then there are the additional problems that result from foolish and immoral behavior. Remember: For every *CAUSE*, there is an *EFFECT*.

True happiness does not come from unrestrained partying, but from focusing on the interests, cares and concerns of others (Phil. 2:4). True love is showing sincere outgoing concern for others, which is accomplished by serving others. Serving other people brings true and lasting happiness.

At Mardi Gras, people focus on fulfilling their own desires, their own fleshly gratification—*LUSTS*. They are concerned with their own pleasure—not the needs of others. That is why so many live such miserable lives—because they are focused on themselves, *their* needs, *their* wants.

God shows us the true way to abundant living (John 10:10). His Way produces real joy, peace of mind, prosperity, and all the good things of life. That life can be yours! To learn how, read our article “You Can Live the Abundant Life!” □

PERSONAL

Continued from page 2

rate that people could no longer properly process them. Society as a whole began to go into what Toffler described as overload—or “shock.” He explained that the “future” was becoming the “present” so fast that people were beginning to “short-circuit” in a way that civilization had never seen before. Some years later, he wrote a sequel called *The Third Wave*. This second book described the advancing of this condition.

The picture he described was not good, and it has only gotten worse!

While all this “advancement” is occurring, mankind’s problems have never seemed greater or more *insoluble*!

The scope of the HIV/AIDS epidemic projections are being constantly revised to reflect an outlook that is far more alarming than previously thought. Entire sections of Africa’s population are projected to be virtually wiped out in a few years by the presence of this single terrible disease.

Earth’s population of almost 6.4 billion people (early 2004) is rising consistently at 1.2% each year. This means that it will reach almost 11.1 billion by 2050! This projection comes despite the fact that disease and starvation are expected to be worse in the *fastest growing* parts of the world! High fertility rates in the less-developed parts of the world have already brought these expected population increases right on schedule.

End-Time Prophecies

Let’s consider some Bible passages that describe certain crucial, end-time prophecies!

We explained that Paul came to realize that he did *not* live in the age when Christ would return. However, God *did* use him to record what conditions would be like when that time would finally come. Consider his prophecy of the widespread degeneration of attitudes and character, just

prior to Christ’s Second Coming. He wrote, “This know also, that in the *last days perilous times shall come*. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; having a form of godliness but denying the power thereof: from such turn away” (II Tim. 3:1-6).

This is a powerful prophecy describing the complete breakdown of character in “the last days.” This time has come!—and these widespread conditions grow worse daily! Look around. People’s conduct is rapidly changing—seemingly always for the worse. More educators and others in authority are sounding the alarm that conditions have exploded out of control!

Who can doubt this trend?

Recognize that this “personal” is not intended to be written in an in-depth fashion. Otherwise, many pages would be required just to describe the conditions that Paul refers to in this single prophecy!

But the degeneration of people’s attitudes and behavior is stark when compared to a generation ago. There have always been acts of terrible violence but now they occur more often. There have always been liars but now the problem of deceit is more pervasive. There has always been adultery but the percentage of people who commit it is now epidemic. There has always been divorce but today it is much more common. There have always been disrespectful young people. Soon an entire generation will have forgotten the Fifth Commandment, “Honor your father and mother.” While there has always been thievery, statistics show that it has never been worse—even in the most affluent countries, where people already have many more physical possessions simply because of where they were born!

So much more could be said of each term or phrase used in Paul’s prophecy. And we have not talked about pornography, child abuse, crime and trends in perverted sex, drug abuse, hatred and war! All of these conditions have combined to create an age correctly described as “perilous”—or very *dangerous*! Collectively, this becomes an indicator that *these are the last days*!

Christ’s Great Olivet Prophecy

Taken together, Matthew 24, Luke 21 and Mark 13 comprise Christ’s Olivet Prophecy. The account begins with His disciples (Matt. 24:3) asking Him about the events that would precede the “end of the world.” This time, what was being sought was a “sign” of when the *end of the age*—end of civilized society as we know it—would come. As mentioned, His disciples originally believed this would occur in their own lifetime, because they saw it in conjunction with the destruction of the physical temple in Jerusalem. This is because Christ had just explained this coming destruction moments before they had asked Him their question. While this temple *was destroyed* by the Romans in A.D. 70, Christ understood that His Second Coming would be over nineteen centuries later. He prophesied that certain *other* events would precede it.

Christ described the breakdown of character similar to the way Paul did. In verses 36-39, Christ warned that conditions would mirror “the days of Noah,” which Genesis 6:11-12 describes: “The earth also was *corrupt* before God, and the earth was *filled with violence*. And God looked upon the earth, and, behold, it was *corrupt*; for all flesh had *corrupted his way upon the earth*.”

Corruption is mentioned *three* times in this one short description. Yet, this passage is highly specific and speaks of men as having individually *and* collectively degenerated to a condition of *absolute* corruption—with civilization “filled with violence.” Notice God’s use of both the singular word “his” and the collective word “all” to drive this point home!

Consider how often acts of *mass* violence now occur in schools, restaurants or other places in ways that were virtually unheard of until recently! Who ever heard of serial snipers—or suicide bombers—before recently? The relatively new phenomenon of terrorism is also now becoming more global in nature. This is prophesied to spread worldwide!

In Luke 17:26-30, Christ also compared the conditions at the time of His Return to those found in Sodom and Gomorrah. Genesis 18 and 19 show that these two cities were so rotten and evil that, just before God rained fire and brimstone upon them, only *three* people (Lot and his two daughters—his wife later turned to salt) were deemed worthy to escape. Also, only *eight* people were allowed to enter the Ark before God flooded and destroyed the world.

Ask yourself: How much longer before conditions cannot grow worse?

What about religious confusion? Matthew 24:4-5 records Jesus' warning about a coming great *deception*. He said, "Take heed that no man *deceive* you. For *many* shall come in My name saying I [Jesus] am Christ; and *shall deceive many*." In other words, *many* would *claim* to represent Jesus, and acknowledge that Christ was indeed the Christ, while bringing a message that *deceives* their listeners. The many divided, confused, disagreeing and competing groups within professing Christianity *today* surely prove the accuracy of Christ's prophecy.

It is critical to note one other aspect of Jesus' warning about those who would say, "Christ was Christ." Almost all modern preachers stress the *Person* of Jesus Christ Himself, instead of the *message* that He brought! They focus on the *Messenger* instead of His *message*! Saying that Christ was, in fact, the Christ—the Messiah—is a true statement! The deception of "*many*" starts when His message of a coming world-ruling kingdom, with all that this soon-coming colossal event means, is ignored—and even suppressed. *Herein lies the greatest deception!* Understand this!

Let's be more specific.

False Gospel Proclaimed

Jesus proclaimed the gospel of the kingdom of God. Mark 1:14-15 records this as the very first words He spoke: "Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the *gospel of the kingdom of God*, and saying...the *kingdom of God* is at hand: repent you, and believe *the gospel*." Many New Testament verses show that Christ consistently preached *this* message. (To learn more, read our booklets *Which is the REAL GOSPEL?* and *What is the KINGDOM OF GOD?*)

Within thirty years of Christ's crucifixion, Paul warned of those who were already perverting the true gospel into a different, false, *counterfeit* gospel (Gal. 1:6-7). This understanding was so important that a double curse was pronounced on any who did this (vs. 8-9). He also warned, "But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. For if he that comes preaches *another Jesus*, whom we have not preached, or if you receive *another spirit*, which you have not received, or *another gospel*, which you have not accepted, you might well bear with him" (II Cor. 11:3-4).

Paul indicted the many false ministers who bring such deception when he said, "For such are *false* apostles, *deceitful* workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ. And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if *his ministers* [Satan's] also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their works" (vs. 13-15). This verse demonstrates the power of deception held by the "*many*" (which Christ referenced in Matthew 24)—the many ministers of this world's brand of Christianity. It plainly speaks of preachers who misrepresent Christ by preaching "another Jesus" and bringing "another gospel," different than that of the kingdom of God.

Paul himself is often described as having brought another gospel. Yet, he is recorded as also preaching the kingdom of God (Acts 20:25; 28:23-31).

The ministers of this world's churches do not preach this message! They talk incessantly about "baby Jesus," "Christ on the cross," "the virgin birth" and various social gospels. But how often have you heard that Christ is coming to *rule* earth as a King—bringing a great SUPERGOVERNMENT that will supplant and replace *all* of the governments of man? Probably never.

The 1,900-Year Gap

Until Herbert W. Armstrong began to proclaim this same gospel to the world in 1934, the gospel of the kingdom of God had not been taken into all nations for nearly 1,900 years. From the time of the apostles, until the beginning of the 52-year ministry of this one man, the true gospel did not go out in any real power to the world as a whole!

Matthew 24:14, also part of the Olivet Prophecy, states, "And this *gospel of the kingdom* shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the *end come*." Mr. Armstrong reached an unprecedented hundreds of millions during his ministry. This included a readership of approximately 25 million people (over 8 million subscribing households) of the *Plain Truth* magazine just at the time of his death, in early 1986. This magazine was published in seven languages! Mr. Armstrong personally visited one-third of all the heads of state on earth during the last two decades of his life. He always brought this *same* message of the coming kingdom of God.

There were *few* places on earth where this message was not heard on either radio or television. This message was broadcast over many hundreds of stations. At one time, his *World Tomorrow* telecast topped the Arbitron ratings as the most listened-to religious telecast on earth. The gospel of the kingdom went out in great power—like no other time in history!

Christ's prophecy was, and still is, true!

(Read our booklet *Are these the LAST DAYS?* to learn more.) □

WORLD NEWS DESK

AN EDITORIAL ANALYSIS OF WORLD NEWS, TRENDS AND CONDITIONS



GEOPOLITICS, STRATEGIES & ECONOMICS

IRAN ONLY MONTHS AWAY FROM MAKING NUCLEAR BOMBS

In an interview with *The Independent*, the chairman of the International Atomic Energy Agency confirmed what some have stated for some time: that Iran, if it indeed will resume its uranium enrichment, will be able to produce a nuclear bomb in only “a few months.”

Of course, his opinion is that resolving the crisis by any other means than diplomatic would result in the disastrous opening of a “Pandora’s box.” Some nations, for example Israel, may have no other choice. But indeed such a crisis would trigger the quick progression of events, most of which will not bode well for Israel and her allies.

Source: *The Jerusalem Post*

SYRIAN-IRANIAN DEAL TO HIDE WEAPONS

The London-based *Jane’s Defence Weekly* reported that Iran and Syria have signed a strategic accord designed to protect each other’s weapons programs. That is, in the event that the United Nations Security Council would recommend inspections and/or sanctions on Iran for its nuclear program, Syria would assist to hide material and weapons when necessary. Iran would do the same for Syria, in addition to offering protection for any Syrian intelligence officer indicted by the United Nations or a neighboring country such as Lebanon (e.g. in the case of the Hariri assassination).

The accord also requires Syria to continue to supply the Iranian-sponsored Hizbullah group with weapons, ammunition and communication systems.

Finally, the agreement reiterates general cooperation and mutual support between the two nations in military and intelligence matters.

Members of the “axis of evil” and “outposts of tyranny” have aligned, each with significant support from Russia and China. This may pose an interesting challenge for the U.S. and her remaining allies.

Source: *The World Tribune*

IRAN HEADS FOR CONFRONTATION

In response to Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s latest tirade against the history and existence of the Jewish people, one European envoy posted in Tehran stated, “At first, we were tempted



to put it down to inexperience or a simple gaffe. But there is now a clear pattern of confrontational, extremist rhetoric apparently designed to upset the international community.

And he’s succeeding.” Germany, as did many countries, called in their Iranian diplomat for a dressing down. The German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier called the comments “shocking and totally unacceptable.” The United Nations Security Council also issued a rebuke.

In October, Mr. Ahmadinejad referred to Israel as a “tumor” that must be “wiped off the map.”

Later, referencing the Holocaust, he said the following during a broadcast on state television: “They have fabricated a legend under the name ‘Massacre of the Jews’, and they hold it higher than God himself, religion itself and the prophets themselves.”

He then reiterated his previous suggestion that Israel be moved to Europe, the U.S. or Canada.

The European diplomat said, “The very radical change of tone in Iran has to be seen in the context of the nuclear issue.”

Is the Iranian President begging the U.S. and/or Israel for some sort of military response? If so, what will be the outcome?

Source: *The Drudge Report*

GEOPOLITICS, STRATEGIES & ECONOMICS

CHINA REVISES SIZE OF GDP...UPWARD

The Chinese government announced that its economy, the fastest growing in the world, is larger than it had previously reported. China announced that its GDP was nearly \$2 trillion in 2004, not \$1.6 trillion.

The numbers, based on a nationwide survey, suggest that China's economy is less reliant on investment and more driven by national consumption than previously thought.

China is now set to leapfrog over both the UK and France to become the world's fourth largest economy (even at its current, undervalued exchange rate). The revision itself is the size of an economy such as Indonesia or Turkey.

In addition, China's central bank's research bureau raised its gross domestic product growth estimate for 2005 from 9.2% to 9.4%.

Source: *The Financial Times*; *The New York Times*

EU BUDGET COMPROMISE

Amid pressure from all sides, the EU budget for 2007-2013 was finally agreed upon, with the majority of accolades going to new German Chancellor Angela Merkel, as she won the hearts of the continent by offering to pay more and play mediator between London, Paris and Warsaw over the contentious UK-rebate.

All along, UK Prime Minister Tony Blair had tied any concession of his country's rebate to an overhaul of the common agricultural policy (CAP). In the end, however, there was no firm commitment to re-discussing the CAP, and the British gave up €10.5 billion (approximately 20%) of their annual rebate.

It is expected that Mr. Blair will face harsh criticism at home for such a compromise. In fact, *Reuters* is reporting that the UK financial minister Gordon Brown is furious with the result.

The *Financial Times* is predicting that the cut will eventually wreak havoc on Britain's own budget.

Source: *EU Observer*

WEATHER

AMERICA'S ONGOING DROUGHT PROBLEM

The following points summarize the current drought status across the United States:

- It is estimated that more than 500,000 people in central North Carolina are still under mandatory water restrictions.

- Despite considerable snow in the usual lake-effect areas surrounding the Great Lakes, the snow-to-water ratios have been higher than normal, thereby bringing little relief to the existing drought areas. The Great Lakes continue to remain at levels well below normal.

- Texas and adjacent areas of Oklahoma, Arkansas and Louisiana continue to experience a major drought, with significant areas in severe, extreme and exceptional intensity classifications. Michael Hayes, of the National Drought Mitigation Center, wrote, "Burn bans continue to exist across all of Oklahoma and a large part of Texas, lake levels continue to fall, hay supplies for livestock are very low, and many stock ponds are completely dry." Many districts in these areas are expected to break records for low precipitation.

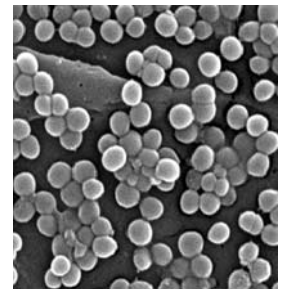
The report indicated that, in some areas, more farmers were investing in drought-resistant crops, with the expectation that the current drought will continue into 2006.

Source: *U.S. Drought Monitor*

HEALTH, SCIENCE & SOCIETY

DEADLY BACTERIA STRIKES NORTH AMERICAN HOSPITALS

Two studies published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* confirm that a deadly bacteria that affects people being treated with antibiotics has become resistant to drugs, and is spreading through hospitals across North America.



One of the studies stated that the new virulent and resistant strain (of the bacteria *Clostridium difficile*) broke out in eight U.S. hospital centers between 2000 and 2003. Under provocation by antibiotics, the bacterium has shown the ability to mutate quickly and become drug-resistant.

In addition, the bacterium has begun to show up in patients who have not taken antibiotics or visited hospitals.

The other study, involving 12 Quebec hospitals, showed that the incidence of infection has grown fourfold in the Canadian province; in 2004, it caused the deaths of 117 people in the first month after they were diagnosed.

Epidemiologist Clifford McDonald, of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, said, "Hospitals need to be conducting surveillance and implementing control measures. And all of us need to realize the risk of antibiotic use may be increasing."

Source: *CNN*

SOCIETY AND LIFESTYLES

UNITED KINGDOM LEGALIZES SAME-SEX WEDDINGS

The United Kingdom became the latest (after the Netherlands, Belgium, Canada and Spain) to legally permit homosexual marriages. After decades of political campaigning, as many as 1,200 ceremonies were scheduled to take place once the law was changed.

The first ceremonies under the new Civil Partnerships Act took place December 19th, in Northern Ireland, followed by Scotland the next day and England and Wales on the 21st. Retailers were already on the bandwagon with new "Mr. & Mr." and "Mrs. & Mrs." invitation cards.

Meg Munn, Minister for Women and Equality, said, "The legislation requires that every authority must offer a civil partnership. The basic level of that is a simple signing of a register—some couples may just want that alone. But if any councils are saying they won't allow [public] ceremonies, for couples who want that kind of celebration, then it's time they came into the 21st century."

Source: *BBC News*

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

TURMOIL “DOWN UNDER”: SYDNEY MIRED IN RIOTS

Riots broke out in Sydney, Australia, with cars being smashed and gunshots reported. Racial tensions continue to run high in the “land down under” ever since the Australian government broke up an Islamic terrorist cell, arresting 18 men.

More than 5,000 people gathered at Cronulla beach after email and text messages called on locals to assault those of Lebanese and Middle Eastern descent. About 30 people were injured and 16 arrested. This came after it was reported that two white volunteer lifeguards were injured in an attack at

the beach, a popular destination for Muslims from inner-city suburbs.

A witness reported that, apparently in response to the beach fight, about 50 cars showed up in a neighborhood, dropping off men who appeared to be of Middle Eastern descent, who immediately began to trash every car in sight with bats.

“People are standing around in shock, just watching,” said a reporter for a local radio station. “Every window in some cars has been smashed. Roads have been blocked” by police.

In another incident, 500 young men

blocked the roads near a local mosque after evening prayers, in anticipation of another attack.

Australian Prime Minister John Howard appealed for calm, saying, “Attacking people on the basis of their race, their appearance, their ethnicity, is totally unacceptable and should be repudiated by all Australians irrespective of their own background and their politics.”

Australia, with a population of 20 million, has a Muslim community of about 300,000.

Source: *AFP*

FINANCIAL

Continued from page 18

According to an *Associated Press* report, Interior Secretary Gail Norton said that 58% of Gulf oil production was shut down, as was 38% of the region’s natural gas production.

Recent headlines and reports indicate that 2006 may be the year that many American households will be forced to revise their budgets.

One way to combat the problem of skyrocketing natural gas prices is to weatherize your home. This can be done in a variety of ways. Many utility companies recommend the following:

- Caulk and seal around plumbing pipes, frames of windows and doors.
- Consider getting a tune-up for your furnace.
- Close fireplace flues when not in use.
- Lower your thermostat temperature—each degree can save up to 3% on heating costs!
- If you can afford it, purchase thermal pane replacement windows. This can save you up to 30% of your energy bills.

Rid Yourself of Financial Worry

Most are unaware of a great financial law that has to do with one’s income. Many think to themselves, “What I

earn is my personal business. I have the freedom to do whatever I want with it—after all, it’s mine!”

But is the money you earn really yours? Don’t be too sure.

The fact is, everything that is produced and all that money can buy comes from this planet. We had nothing to do with creating the earth. God created that! All we provide is our physical energy and thoughts to work and extract the resources from a planet that God created. Even the energy and thought processes that we utilize come from the Creator. Not only did He create all physical matter, force and energy, but He also created the human mind. God supplies the energy used in thinking, planning, designing, etc.

God claims ownership over all! Notice: “The earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein” (Psa. 24:1)—“Whatsoever is under the whole heaven is Mine” (Job 41:11)—“The silver...and gold is Mine, says the LORD of hosts” (Hag. 2:8).

Your income belongs to God—it is His to do with as He pleases. But God does not need our money. He wants to share the great resources He has created, and teach us His way of GIVE.

Although God holds claim to everything, He has provided for us a system that yields abundant blessings. All that He requires is that we put aside 10% of our income and invest it with Him. By

doing this, God becomes our financial partner. God allows us to use the 90%, blessing it so that it will go even farther than the 100%.

God asks, “Will a man rob God? Yet you have robbed Me. But you say, wherein have we robbed You?” He answers, “In tithes and offerings. You are cursed with a curse: for you have robbed Me, even this whole nation” (Mal. 3:8-9).

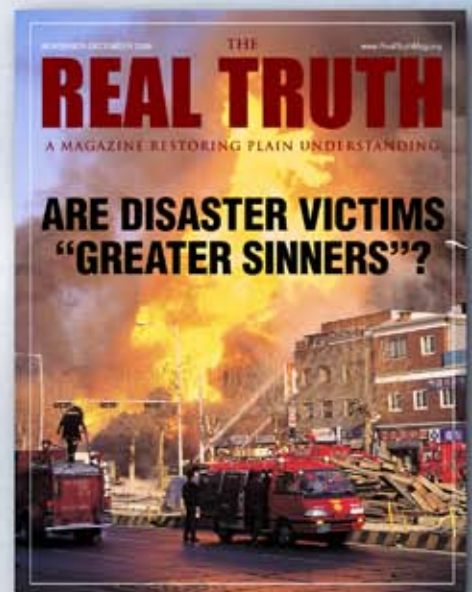
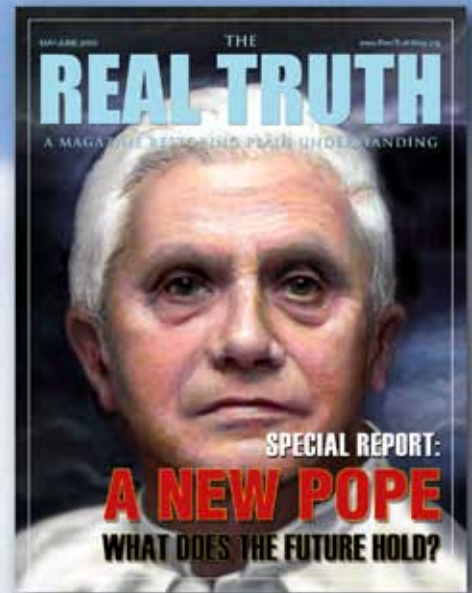
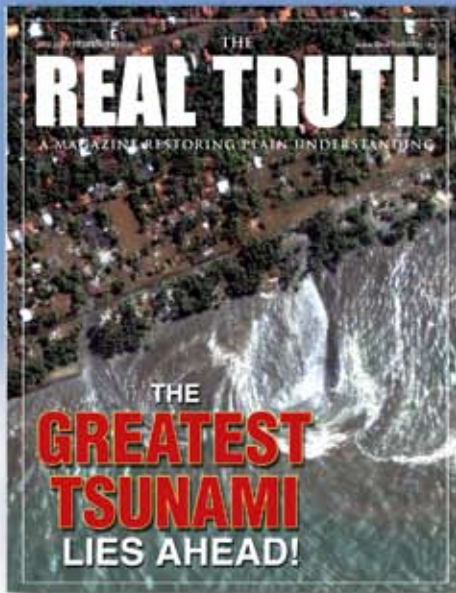
But God offers us an opportunity to receive great blessings: “Bring you all the tithes into the store house, that there may be meat in My house, and PROVE ME now herewith, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open up for you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it” (vs. 10).

This is God’s promise—and it is the way to ultimately prosper and get out of debt.

In Matthew 6, Christ explained that human beings need not be overburdened with life’s ever-increasing pressures and worries (vs. 25-32) as long as they focus their lives on this: “But seek you first the kingdom of God and His righteousness; and all these things [food, clothing, shelter and other necessities] shall be added unto you” (vs. 33).

The way to truly eliminate financial worries is to make God our personal financial partner and advisor for 2006—and for the rest of our lives! □

Have you missed out on previous issues?



You can read them online at your convenience!