

The Gift

What is it about Christmas that draws us every year to celebrations of this holiday? What is so special about Christmas?

Christmas is a special time because of the happiness it brings. It's a time of giving and receiving, a family time, a time when we feel especially close to friends and loved ones. It is a time of happy reminiscing; remembering the carefree happy days of our childhood. We hear an old favorite carol, we catch the scent of balsam, we see the bright lights; and then, if we're lucky, we get that blanket of white, and we are transported back to lighter days. Yes, Christmas is a happy time.

Yet, if we were to talk to counselors, we would find the picture is not all rosy at Christmas. Suicide is up and depression is rampant ... Does this mean Christmas is not a very special time after all? No ... the opposite is true. Aren't people sad because they *know* it is a special time, and the holiday they are experiencing just doesn't live up to the expectations of the day that they hold in their hearts? Some folks are grieving over a recent loss. Perhaps this is the first Christmas without mom, or dad, a beloved spouse, or a child. Christmas heartache is the worst heartache of all. The bright gaiety of the season might even seem to mock their pain.

Some are sad because they are pining for the ideal childhood Christmases of hazy memory. What current Christmas could compare with the Christmases of innocence? For some people, it may be the years when their children were small that they miss most of all. It is such a joy to see Christmas magic reflected in the eyes of a child.

Or, maybe the opposite is true ... Many people are pining for the ideal Christmas or the ideal childhood they never had. Not all families are happy; not all childhoods are ideal.

Maybe it's a simpler thing ... Do we miss the carefree days when someone else was making the day special for *us*? I think women especially feel this keenly because women, as a rule, are the ones who feel the greatest responsibility to make the holidays special for their

families.

"God Rest You

Merry Gentlemen," the

carol says. And what are the

merry ladies doing while the merry gen-

tlemen are resting? They are out there *killing themselves at the mall!!!* Then today, as never before, women are caught in a vicious time squeeze. Much more likely than their mothers to be working full time, they still try to do it all. And what often happens? Work and entertaining overload meets energy and appreciation deficit.

But there is something even more special about Christmas, isn't there, that produces a longing in us, a yearning for something. What is it?

We mourn the passing of the innocent faith of childhood. We long to believe in someone or something again ... long to see goodness in the world, to believe in peace on earth, to experience sharing and caring, giving, and loving. We want to believe there really is a good God in heaven and to feel His presence in our lives.

What happens to us in our lives that robs us of this childlike joy, this childlike love of goodness and peace? Life happens, doesn't it? We tend to develop a layer of cynicism as we grow up.

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The Merry Gentlemen Are Resting. . .

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We've seen more fighting and strife than peace on earth. We've witnessed selfishness and greed and, if we're honest, we have to admit we've participated in it as well. We've seen televangelists fall into disgrace, and priests and ministers stand accused of sexual escapades and child molestation. Yes, even those we classify as "good people" have a bad side, don't they? So we have become disillusioned, and it has made us wary believing in anything or anyone again. And our faith in a good God has been shaken by the evil we see in the world around us. We keenly feel the disappointment of seeing the world as it is, not as we once believed it was.

The Christmas carol, "I Heard The Bells On Christmas Day," really sums up what I am trying to say.

**I heard the bells on Christmas day,
their old familiar carols play.
And wild and sweet, the words repeat,
Of peace on earth goodwill to men.
And in despair I bowed my head,
there is no peace on earth, I said.
For hate is strong and mocks the song,
Of peace on earth, goodwill to men.**

We want so bad to experience the holiness and the peace deep down in our souls, but it eludes us. Yes, Christmas can be a sad time, but is sadness and disillusionment the final word on Christmas? No, I don't think so. The last verse of the song conveys to us what I believe is the final word on Christmas ...

**Then pealed the bells both loud and deep,
God is not dead, nor does He sleep,
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail,
with peace on earth, goodwill to men.**

Much of the appeal of Christmas is the renewal of hope and faith. At Christmas time our cynical "adult self" is reminded through carol, candle, and whatever else it is about Christmas, of our childhood hopefulness, our childlike trust in the ultimate triumph of God and His goodness. Peace on earth; goodwill toward men!

The notion calls us, strikes a longing chord within us, and reawakens our need to believe in something greater than ourselves. We want to experience God's presence in our lives. I think that often, even very secular people do really feel some of the presence of God at Christmas time. People may impersonalize His felt presence by calling it "Christmas spirit," but I feel it is no less than the tug of the Almighty that warms our hearts.

But then, after Christmas, God is often put away, up in the attic, with the lights and the trimmings and the little nativity scene. Why do we do that? Why do we distance ourselves from the love and goodness, indeed the God, that we all need?

Most people tend to see God as way up there, while they are way down here. The gulf between our sinfulness and God's holiness seems too large to bridge ... Human beings really do not understand the love God has for them, and they often view God in almost an antagonistic light. They don't know what it is He wants from them.

What does God want from us? If you took a survey among the people you know, asking them what God requires from them in order to gain His acceptance, what do you think they might answer? I think most people would say God wants us to be good; to keep the ten commandments, to follow the golden rule. God wants us to go to church. God wants us to give to the poor, be kind to strangers, be nice to our family members. Some people might stress the "don'ts" over the "do's." Don't get drunk, don't cuss or swear, don't smoke cigarettes.

And how well do people succeed in living up to the expectations they think God has of them? Not very well, do they? So I believe the reason most people put God away with the trimmings is that trying to be good, when you're human, is like trying to get over an impossibly high wall without a ladder! People do make the effort to run up against that wall, to try to scramble over, but grow weary of the game when they fall back every time. So I think it is with some sadness, some sense of loss that we go our way, and try not to think of the ways we fall short.

But it doesn't have to be this way! The good news of Christmas is that God does not want us to give Him something. God wants us to receive something from Him! It's a FREE GIFT, with no strings attached! No matter how many Christmases you have lived, whether 20 or 50, you may have missed the best gift of all!

John 3:16 "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

Ephesians 2:8-9 "For it is by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no man can boast."

Here's God's Christmas gift to us; He wants us to *receive* something ... the gift of His Son and gift of salvation.

What does this gift cost us? That's a silly question, isn't it? Gifts, if they are truly gifts, don't cost the receiver, do they? If it has a price tag, it's not a gift, is it? Have you ever been offered a "gift" to hostess a Tupperware party, or to open an account at a bank? We know they are not truly gifts at all; they're rewards. We have to *earn* them.

Why would we want God's Christmas gift anyway? What do we gain by the "salvation" offered to us by God? It means the forgiveness of our sins, the release of a debt we have no hope of paying. We all owe a debt to God. We've done things wrong: we've violated God's rules, broken his commandments. We have all failed to love as we should, failed to forgive the failures of others. We have done unto others what we certainly would *not* want done to ourselves! Isn't this the reason we put God away?

How do we react when we owe someone an impossible debt? We avoid them ... We see the person coming, and we cross the street to the other side of the road. Fear, guilt, and pride are relationship killers.

So the release of this debt that allows for our reconciliation to God is the best gift anyone could receive. Jesus died to pay for our sins, so that the Father can declare our debt has been paid in full. Colossians 2:14 tells us our IOU was nailed to the cross.

It's as if God is now saying to you and me, "Hey, don't avoid me. I covered your debt. I love you; put your pride away and come to me."

The question is, will we accept his love and forgiveness or spurn His precious gift? It's up to us. I could stand here all day holding out to you a gift of great value, but until you take it, it is of no value to you!

People have been making this choice since the gift was first offered in the first century.

John 1:11-12 "He came unto His own, but His own did NOT receive Him. Yet to all who received Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God."

There are two things to notice in this passage. First of all, many people did not receive God's gift. And secondly, *only* those who *do* receive it become children of God! Many people today believe everyone is a child of God. And many do not understand what it means to "believe in Jesus," confusing that concept with believing things *about* God or Jesus. It's the difference between knowing facts about a person and actually *knowing* the person.

John 17:3 "This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."

We gain eternal life by knowing God the Father and Jesus

personally. But what does it mean to receive Christ, to believe in Him, to know Him? Let's use the example of Bill Clinton. Since he was elected, I have learned a great deal *about* him, but do I *know* him? No. Chelsea does, Hillary does, but I do not. And if I continue to learn things *about* Bill Clinton from now until doomsday, will I actually know him any more than I do now? Of course not! Many people make this very mistake about Jesus, though.

Jesus, in speaking about the judgment day, talked about this common mistake people obviously have made down through the centuries.

Matthew 7:22 "Many will say to me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name cast out demons, and in your name perform many miracles?'"

Note that these were religious people. They called Jesus "Lord," obviously considering themselves to be Christians. They had done many good things, even performed miracles in the name of Christ. But how did Jesus respond to these folks?

Matthew 7:23 "And I will declare to them, I never knew you!"

You see, in Christianity, it's not what you do, but who you know that matters. And to know someone involves personal contact.

Romans 10:9-10 "If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved."

This is the believing part. These are the specific things we must believe and confess *about* Jesus in order to be saved ... that He is God Almighty, the Lord, and that He was raised from the dead. Yet, many people do believe these things without *knowing* Jesus any more than I know President Clinton by *possessing* knowledge of him. The problem is they have never received Him!

In order to actually get to know President Clinton, what must I do? I must *meet* him! Perhaps I could call him up on the phone ... "Hi Bill, this is Joy here ... I've been wanting to get to really know you!"

Well, okay, realistically that

probably won't work with President Clinton. I probably wouldn't get past his secretary if I could get that far, even if I was a Democrat! But with Jesus, you can get right through. He will personally answer your call!

Romans 10:13 "For whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved."

How do we call Jesus? Is there a communications system that connects heaven and earth? Yes, it's called prayer. Pray to Jesus. Acknowledge your debt and ask Him personally for His

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... While The Merry Ladies Are Out
Killing Themselves At The Mall.

And Along Came A Spider . . . PAGAN ROOTS

by Michael Ervolina

Thanksgiving, decorations from the when you hear the something about how you're busy. Arriving two smiling faces. You I ran all this way just to hear

It's the day after you're pulling out the attic and setting up the tree doorbell. You mumble this always happens when at the door, you are met by think to yourself, "Great. from some Jehovah's Wit-

When asked: 'Why is it your dis- the men is it you of God ciples overstep the tradition of of former times?' he replied: 'Why also overstep the commandment because of your tradition?' And he added: 'You have made the word of God invalid because of your tradition.' -Matthew 15:2, 3, 6.

"True Christians today manifest unity with Jesus by practicing 'the form of worship that is clean and undefiled,' untarnished by the pagan traditions of men.-James 1:27." ("Why Christmas Is Not for Christians." *Awake!*, 12/8/91: 12-13)

You begin to wonder if they're right about this issue. *Are* they right? Must we reject any and all customs or practices with "pagan roots"? In the interest of fairness, we thought we would let the Watchtower Society answer the questions for us (really!).

Question #1: Is a custom, holiday, etc., to be rejected if it was first practiced by pagans?

"Some customs that were once religious in nature no longer are in many places. For example, the wedding ring once had religious significance, but in most places today, it no longer does. Hence, many true Christians accept the local custom of wearing a wedding ring to give evidence that a person is married. In such matters, what generally is influential is whether a practice is *now* linked to false religion." (Italics in original.) (*Watchtower***, 9/1/92: 30)

So, even though wedding rings are of pagan origin, they are "OK" because their origin is not important. What is important, says the Watchtower, is how wedding rings (or other customs) are viewed now.

Question #2: Does a religious practice that has false religious meaning in another contemporary culture mean that Christians have nothing to do with it?

"The fact that the bull was an object of worship in the Northern Kingdom of Israel did not make the bulls at Solomon's temple idols. Similarly, the fact that various creatures, plants and heavenly bodies—all part of God's creative works—have been and still are being given veneration would not *in itself* make them unacceptable for decorative or ornamental purposes. Many things that were at one time worshipped by the ancients have lost their idolatrous significance and are generally regarded as being merely ornamental." (Italics in original.) (*Watchtower*, 5/15 72: 295)

This *Watchtower* brings out an interesting point on the similarities/differences of religious customs. In the Northern King-

"Hi," they begin, "We're a couple of ministers in your neighborhood and we're asking people about the real meaning of Christmas ... " They proceed to give you the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society's spiel about the pagan roots of Christmas; how it came from Roman sun worship and therefore it is wrong for Christians to celebrate it:

"You might be surprised to learn that Christmas was not instituted by Jesus Christ nor was it celebrated by him or his first-century disciples. In fact, there is no record of a Christmas celebration until 300 years after Christ died.

"Many people living in those days worshipped the sun, as they felt a strong dependence on its yearly cycle. Elaborate ceremonies accompanied sun worship in Europe, Egypt, and Persia. The central theme in these festivals was the return of light. The sun, because of its seeming weakness during winter, was implored to return from 'distant wanderings.' Festivals included merrymaking, feasting, dancing, decorating homes with lights and ornaments, and gift-giving. Do these activities sound familiar?

"Sun worshipers believed that the unburned wood of a Yule log had magic powers, that bonfires could give the sun-god strength and bring him back to life, that houses decorated with evergreens would scare away demons, that holly was to be worshipped as a promise of the sun's return, and that sprigs of mistletoe could bring good luck if worn as charms. What celebration are these items associated with today?

"December was a major festival month in pagan Rome long before Christmas was introduced there. The week-long Saturnalia (dedicated to Saturn, the god of agriculture) and the Dies Natalis Solis Invicti (Birthday of the Unconquered Sun) took place at this time. Also, December 25 was regarded as the birthday of Mithras, the Persian god of light.

"Therefore, true Christians today do not celebrate Christmas. While their position may seem strange to others, they view traditions as did Jesus.

dom, bulls were an object of false religious worship and in the Southern Kingdom they were a part of true worship. Here the *Watchtower* presents us with a case of contemporary similarity; the same symbol, the bull, being used in similar ways by both true and false worshippers within the same historical time frame. Historical similarity, as in the case of Christmas, wedding rings, etc., is when a present-day custom has some commonality with a past culture.

"It is thus seen that the precise origin of the wedding ring is uncertain. Even if it were a fact that pagans first used wedding rings, would that rule such out for Christians? Not necessarily. Many of today's articles of clothing and aspects of life originated in pagan lands. The present time divisions of hours, minutes, and seconds are based on an early Babylonian system. Yet, there is no objection to a Christian's using these time divisions, for one's doing so does not involve carrying on false religious practices.

"Really, the question is not so much whether wedding rings were first used by pagans but whether they were originally used as part of false religious practices and *still retain such religious significance.*" (Italics in original.) (*Watchtower*, 1/15/72: 63)

Here the *Watchtower* brings out that many things had their origins in paganism. However, pagan origination does "[n]ot necessarily" rule out its use. What is important is whether such a practice "still retain[s] such religious significance." This, of course, directly contradicts the *Watchtower* of 5/15/72, as quoted above, which based evaluation of a practice on each culture's view of the practice and *not* if it had "religious significance."

Question #3: What about other practices with pagan origins? Are Christians duty bound to reject them?

On other "pagan" practices, such as flowers at funerals, the *Watchtower* reasons as follows:

"When someone dies, is it proper for Christians to give flowers to the family or to send flowers to the funeral home? In some lands it is customary to do so. But using flowers at funerals has at times had a religious meaning. So let us examine the matter in some detail, especially since there are other customs that may seem to have similar links to false religion. Note comments from *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (1987):

"Flowers are connected to the sacred realm through their association with gods and goddesses. Flora, the Roman goddess of springtime and flowers, brings beauty and fragrance to blossoms ... Deities may be appeased and worshipped ... through the offering of food and flowers. The association of flowers with rituals of death occurs all over the world. The Greeks and Romans covered the dead and their graves with flowers. The souls of dying Buddhists in Japan are carried upward on a lotus, and the gravestones in cemeteries may rest on carved lotuses ... Tahitians leave bouquets wrapped in ferns by the body after death and then pour floral perfume over the corpse to ease its passage into the sacred afterlife ... Flowers may also be present at sacred times in the form of incense or perfume ..."

"Flowers are part of God's good gifts for the living to enjoy. (Acts 14:15-17; James 1:17) His created floral beauty has been used in true worship. The lampstand in the tabernacle was decorated with 'flowers of almond ... and blossoms.' (Exodus 25:31-34) Engravings in the temple in-

cluded garlands and palm trees. (1 Kings 6:18, 29, 32) Clearly, pagan use of flowers or garlands did not mean that true worship[ers] always had to avoid using them.-Acts 14:13

"It is similar with some funeral customs. Egyptians customarily embalmed the dead. The faithful patriarch Joseph did not automatically reject, 'This is a pagan custom, so we Hebrews must avoid it.' Rather, he 'commanded his servants, the physicians, to embalm his father,' evidently so that Jacob could be buried in the Promised Land. (Genesis 49:29-50:3)

"Recall from the encyclopedia that some 'leave bouquets wrapped in ferns by the body after death and then pour floral perfume over the corpse to ease its passage into the sacred afterlife.' That there might be such a custom does not mean that God's servants must shun anything similar.

"Still, all kinds of objects, designs, and practices have, at some time or place, been given a false interpretation or have been linked with unscriptural teachings. Trees have been worshipped, the heart shape has been viewed as sacred, and incense has been used in pagan ceremonies. Does this mean that a Christian must never use incense, have trees in any decoration, or wear heart-shaped jewelry? That is not a valid conclusion.

"Would following a custom indicate to others that I have adopted unscriptural beliefs or practices? The time period and location could influence the answer. A custom (or design) might have had a false religious meaning millenniums ago or might have such today in a distant land. But without going into time-consuming investigation, ask yourself: 'What is the common view where I live?'-Compare 1 Corinthians 10:25-29.

"Pagans have long used floral incense in their ceremonies, but it was not wrong for God's people to employ incense in true worship." (*Watchtower*, 10/15/91: 30-31)

So use of flowers for funerals, though clearly a practice with pagan origins, is not avoided by Jehovah's Witnesses. Likewise, embalming of the dead, another pagan practice, is not avoided. The above *Watchtower's* comments are worth noting again:

"The time period and location could influence the answer. A custom (or design) might have had a false religious meaning millenniums ago or might have such today in a distant land. But without going into time-consuming investigation, ask yourself: 'What is the common view where I live?' " (Ibid.: 31)

So the *Watchtower* argues that it is NOT the *origin* of the practice but its *meaning in the present* culture that should determine its acceptance or rejection by Christians.

To sum up the points:

1) Wedding rings, even though of pagan origin, can be used by Jehovah's Witnesses, because the meaning of them in the present culture is different.

2) Symbols used in pagan worship can be used because their significance has changed over time. In the case of contemporary symbolism (in the case of bulls), it is how the symbol is viewed by the culture, not the symbol itself.

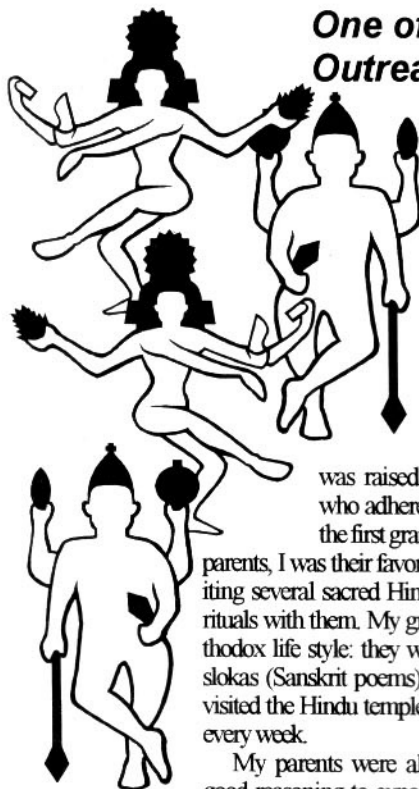
3) Flowers at funerals, again of clear pagan origin, are allowed by Jehovah's Witnesses if the practice is accepted in the culture.

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One of the newest members of Midwest Christian Outreach, Inc., Ravi Narasimhan, tells how he went. . .



From Worshipping Idols to Worshipping The One True God



I was born into a Brahman family 27 years ago, one of the most orthodox castes of Hinduism in India. I was raised by parents and grandparents who adhered to high moral standards. As the first grandson born to my loving grandparents, I was their favorite and had the privilege of visiting several sacred Hindu places and participating in rituals with them. My grandparents followed a very orthodox life style: they worshipped gods, fasted, recited slokas (Sanskrit poems) every day by the family altar, visited the Hindu temple, and performed temple rituals every week.

My parents were also religious and always used good reasoning to expose why rituals were performed before performing them. Because of this, I performed rituals with more zeal. If, for some reason, I had no clue why certain things were done, I justified to myself they were done for good reasons only.

As Hindus, we believed in several gods, and our ultimate objective was to realize the unification with "Para-Brahma," the godhead. Hinduism subscribes to several ways to reach this objective, which fall under four broad categories: Rajah Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Karma Yoga, and Guyana Yoga. Rajah Yoga covers all mental exercises, like meditation, contemplation, chanting, and Hata Yoga (the exercise Yoga). Bhakti is the devotion to either concepts or idols. Karma Yoga teaches one to focus on the duties of one's life. And Guyana Yoga prescribes to knowledge.

None of these methods opposed each other. They simply were the many ways one could choose to reach his final objective. Depending on the way one chooses, his final destination is either Moksha, Samathi, Brahman, Mukti, self-realization, pure consciousness, etc. Thus, Hinduism is both pluralistic and pantheistic.

As I entered my teens, my brother and I had to participate in "Upanayanam," a ceremony that started the second phase of life: bachelorhood. Every Brahman male had to go through this ceremony before marriage. This phase of life was to be dedicated to godly pursuits. We were taught to follow several ritualistic practices to aid us. We performed ritual chanting and special breathing exercises, recited secret mantras hundreds of times, and worshipped the sun god every day in the morning and evening as a part of a worship called "Sandya Vandanam." We performed rituals before and after eating, wore sacred marks on our forehead, and wore a sacred thread. My entire life style changed considerably in order to keep up with the rituals. In spite of the monotony, the life style was fascinating, because I felt I was on the road to self-realization. This continued for about four years.

Slowly, my life leveled out but, still, I had not attained "Brahman." Living in India, I observed others who had experienced Upanayanam several years before I did, such as my father, grandfather, uncles, temple priests, and other Brahmans. To my surprise, they were in no way closer than I was to the state of self-realization which we were all supposed to attain. This discouraged me. But instead of giving up, I decided to become more serious about my pursuit, because I believed Brahman did exist and the mistake was ours for not being steadfast in our methods. For some reason, about two years after my Upanayanam, the rituals, the underlying purposes behind them, and my eagerness to reach self-realization thrust me into a spiritual pilgrimage. I seriously

searched for the answer in achieving Brahman.

For years, I pursued the methods I learned without compromising common sense. But when I finally took a look at myself, I found only deep emptiness. Ending my life, at that point, seemed the greatest suggestion my rational mind could think of. But a terrifying dream about death changed my thinking overnight. I didn't want to die, I wanted to live. I felt if I had to live, I must have a purpose. And if I had a purpose, I wanted to find it. I believed that when I reached the state of complete self-realization, I would live out the answer, and my living would reflect my purpose in life.

Being the sole authority of my life, I granted myself an entire lifetime to discover its purpose. This time, I decided to be as sincere as I could in my efforts and use *all* my common sense in this pursuit. I also decided to be open to other options. I assumed one rule to apply to this quest: I should be willing to put effort into it. After all, it only seemed logical; if I wanted something, I must work for it. If what I wanted was worth a lot, it would require proportional effort.

I did not isolate myself from my family and friends during this process. I helped others when I chose to and often went out of my way. I respected my parents and other elders when they didn't interfere with my, admittedly, childish objectives. I was not a bad person in my own eyes. Even if I did bad things, the good always seemed to more than compensate for the bad. This made me feel good about myself. Several people thought I was a wonderful child, and this mattered to me a lot. I wanted to be liked by everyone to dull the blows of the terrible inner emptiness. But, however noble serving others seemed, it did not fill my loneliness. Nonetheless, for the next few years I spent several dedicated hours each day toward understanding the purpose of my life.

My family was closely knit – my uncles and grandparents played a major role in several family matters. The issue that concerned them most was my education. In order to help me focus on my high school studies in Madras, India, my uncle decided to enroll me in a Transcendental Meditation class. After a few weeks, I experienced several seemingly good effects: I slept for only two to three hours a day and felt fresh throughout the day; my pulse rate went down to the fifties; I seemed to have more energy; and I was able to spend more time studying. While I liked the effects, the emptiness I felt inside remained the same. I was hoping the emptiness would disappear after some time but, instead, the meditation started unraveling its side effects: vibrations in my body and restlessness.

I was aware that some people who practiced Transcendental Meditation wound up losing their sanity. I knew I had to stop right away. There were other ways to self-realization, so I switched to Simplified Kundalini Yoga (SKY) which, seemingly, had the answers. I also took up martial arts class after being impressed by the peaceful looking masters in the movies. It seemed they knew the purpose of life. I was serious about both SKY and martial arts and received my black belt and also took a course to teach SKY.

Being rooted in Indian methods, trying to look for the solution in Christianity was totally out of the question. I thought many Christians were hypocrites who conveniently changed their belief system to accommodate anything they wanted to do. In fact, a lot of my friends perceived Christians in India as people without conscience, mostly because of the British rule in India for 200 years, from which we did not hear a single good story about the Christian faith.

In 1991, I moved to Chicago to pursue my Master's Degree in Computer Science at Northern Illinois University (NIU). I was 21, and I brought my emptiness along. By this time, I was accustomed to failures in my pilgrim-

age and was *almost* convinced I could spend a few more years in my spiritual quest and it would have got me nowhere. But not quite ... I decided to turn to the Vedas, the ancient Hindu scriptures for answers. I remember my mother having said to me that our family was to follow the Rig Veda, so I found some books in a library that explained the Rig Vedas. They made no sense to me. One particular book, however, was deep and fascinating and supposedly simplified the Vedas. The author elaborated the fundamental concepts of Hinduism, yet, he never answered my deepest question.

So, I turned to science for my answer. I became interested in some of the best sellers on Quantum Theory, written by an Indian doctor. The author elaborated the seeming truths of the universe from a Hindu perspective. His books caught my attention, and I spent several months reading them. He even used his experience from Transcendental Meditation to explain several concepts. I thought I had missed out on these teachings during my meditation days. Nevertheless, I was terrified by the recollection of the side effects of Transcendental Meditation and never wanted to try it again. The author claimed he enabled cancer patients to respond well to chemotherapy by removing their guilt from their minds. He established the connection between mind, body, and the presence of intelligence in every cell of the body. There were many more things he claimed to be true.

The only thing I really learned from his books was that guilt would catch up with us someday, somehow before we died. This is simply the law of Karma. I knew I had done at least a few things wrong in my life. But, whenever they bothered me, I just shut them out. On the other hand, I thought, What if there are no absolute standards for right and wrong? Or, what if I could rationalize my guilt by blaming my wrongdoings on my circumstances, my childhood, peer pressure, or on something else? Then I need not be guilty of anything. It seemed like a great idea but never seemed to work. I believed there must be some absolute standard somewhere. But, even so, guilt was not the major issue in my life then: self-realization was.

Since I could not find any answer to convince me of the truth, I sometimes challenged my friends with the question, "What is the purpose of your life?" It struck some like a lightning bolt. Some gave answers but, usually, I quickly discounted them as false. I was surprised no one gave an answer that made me even consider his or her reason. Deep inside I longed to reach the end of my quest.

It was in 1991 when I happened to meet Sophia. She was a Christian from India. We worked together in the computer lab at NIU and became good friends in a short time. Sometimes, during casual conversation, our differences in religious beliefs surfaced. One time I asked her my favorite question, "What is the purpose of your life?" "To glorify God," she replied, sincerely and casually, as if it was so simple. I was astonished. My ego was so big, I ignored her answer and asked more questions to cover up my surprise.

That day, deep inside me, I felt a heavy jolt. What Sophia said seemed plausible. Maybe there really was a God, external to me, who knew everything, including my emptiness and the reason why I exist? But, I was so caught up with self-realization, I had no concept of an external God separate from me. To glorify this God would mean to live a life worthy of the reason I exist. I thought, Is it possible it's so simple I've missed it? I had heard a few noble answers to my question, "What is the purpose of your life?" such as: "To help others," "To serve my family," "To become rich and give to the poor," and a few others. But, I knew deep within me, even when I did such acts of kindness, the motive was to demonstrate to others that I was good, so I could feel good about myself. Thus, my sacrificial services were selfish.

A multitude of questions and thoughts welled up within me. How could a simple religion like Christianity, with one God, so easily explain everything, while Hinduism, the ancient religion with several million gods, several schools of thought, several ways, and several rituals, obscure things??? If Hinduism had the answer, how could I have missed it after so much effort? And what about the millions of other Hindus?

Sophia's answer to my question, "What is the purpose of life?" was not unique, because Hindu temple priests in India would have given the same answer. They would have said their purpose was to glorify god too. But, what they meant was vastly different: their gods were idols. The temple priests cleaned, decorated, and even put their gods to sleep.

I fully understood what Sophia said. She meant her purpose in life was

to glorify *Jesus Christ*. What troubled me now the most was that if there was a God, glorifying this God could very well be the purpose of my life. And this would mean that I should know who this true God was.

I had read some history books and knew Jesus was a man, like any of the thousands of saints in India. In India, there are several gurus who claim they are god, or claim to have contact with god, or can show you the way to self-realization. I assumed that Christ was like one of the gurus. Having been stumped by Sophia's answer, I wanted to prove to myself Christianity was false by proving Jesus Christ was just another good guy whom people had given life to and made their God. So I set out to prove Christ was a gimmick by investigating Christian practices.

I attended a few church services and tried to stump the pastors with tricky philosophical questions. If they couldn't answer me right away, I never bothered to give them another chance. I threw rocks at Christianity. But, in spite of this, I learned a few Christian facts like: Christ was brutally killed on a cross; Christ claimed that He died for the sins of humanity; He supposedly came back to life in three days; and He was kind and loving.

Sophia invited me to a Christian retreat where an Indian pastor took time to explain a major difference between any religion and Christianity. He said that in all religions we make the effort to go to god; while in Christianity, God comes to where we are. I thought to myself, "WOW!!!" This caught my attention. How I wished this was true! After 12 years of search, I now heard that the omnipresent God was right by me. Even before I could start to imagine this possibility, my family, culture, tradition, and heritage flashed before me. How could I even think about believing this? I hated Christianity, and my parents and several others I knew in India had similar opinions. In spite of the fact that I felt his explanation could be true, I chose to deny the possibility. I stopped asking tricky questions. I was afraid I might find the answer in Christianity.

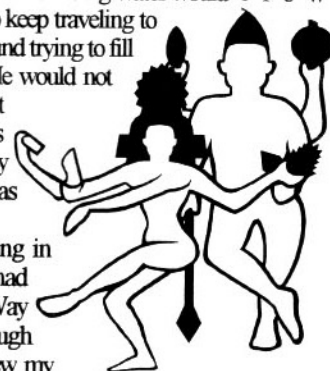
A few weeks passed and I still could not ignore the fact that Christianity might have held the answer for me. The truth is, I was too scared to find out because of the cultural taboo. But, I reasoned, if this God existed, He would resolve all my problems. He could take care of the consequences of my quest. If I ever find this God, the True God, I will never have to worry about the cultural consequences. Even after thinking through this, I did not remove my guard completely. I made a final attempt to find fault with the Bible. Someone had given me a copy of the New Testament.

After reading the first chapter from the book of John, I understood Jesus was the Word of God, God's expression. Chapter two talked about Jesus' miracles, so I figured He was not an ordinary man. In chapter three, Jesus talked about being born again – this was truly fascinating. The concept of reincarnation, as I understood it, was not a physical birth and death but a mental one. When Jesus said we had to be born again, it made a lot of sense to me. I knew He was telling me about a new life – like starting a new resolution on New Year's Day except, this time, for real – with a brand new nature of Jesus.

I began to realize I would have to submit to Christ and forfeit self-realization for Christ-realization. This, I reasoned, was a great exchange. The Bible also mentioned that "God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life." When I read chapter four, where Jesus talked to the woman at the well and told her if she drank His water, streams of living water would flow from within her, so she wouldn't have to keep traveling to the well, it all clicked. I was running around trying to fill my emptiness, and Christ was saying He would not only fill it, but fill it in such a way that it would overflow. So if I accepted Christ's help, I need not seek other things to fill my emptiness. This was the solution I was looking for.

Jesus claimed that by just believing in Him, this was possible. The ransom had been paid in full for all humanity. The Way had been paved for everyone to pass through death. Since God is omniscient, He knew my thought process, He was very near. All I had to do was take one

(Continued on page 11)



The ICC (International Churches of Christ) are orthodox with regard to such doctrines as the deity of Christ, the Tri-unity of the Godhead, inspiration of the Scriptures, etc.. They err primarily in their view of salvation and authoritarian control. As we have pointed out in previous issues, the ICC holds that one must be a disciple with a discipler over him before he can become a Christian. In a series such as this, it is difficult to deal exhaustively with the errors associated with a shepherding group such as the ICC, and we recommend Flavil Yeakley's *The Discipling Dilemma* or Rick Bauer's *Toxic Christianity* for those interested in doing further research on this subject.

CONTEXTUAL READING

As we stated in the last issue, the Bible should be interpreted using the same rules as we would use to interpret other literature. We must ask certain questions in order to understand what the Bible writers intended to convey. The questions are: Who is writing?, Who are they writing to?, When are they writing?, What are they saying?, and How does it apply to me? It is a severe mishandling of any text to try to mix, match, and distort in order to support a particular teaching. We will look at several of the ICC's key texts in context in an effort to bring clarity to the issue of baptism and salvation.

"BAPTISM NOW SAVES YOU"

The ICC partially quotes 1Peter 3:21 and then smugly says, "What could be more clear? Baptism now saves you." We agree that baptism saves us, but does our saving baptism spoken of in this verse involve our getting wet? The text actually teaches the opposite. "...who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water. And corresponding to that, baptism now saves you - not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience - through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (1Peter 3:20-21, NASB). The context leading up to this quote has to do with suffering for righteousness and uses Christ as the supreme example.

In verse 20, we are told that eight souls were saved by water. What does the water represent? God's judgment. Did the eight souls get wet??? NO! They were in the ark and stayed dry, being preserved from God's judgment while the ark got wet. The

ark, representing Christ, took God's punishment in their place while they "were brought safely through the water" or delivered from judgment. Peter further clarifies this in verse 21 by stating, "not the putting away of the filth of the flesh" (KJV). This

baptism is not an outward action which can be performed by mere men, "but the answer of a good conscience toward God" (KJV). It is an inward cleansing, performed by God Himself.

Paul carries this same theme throughout his writings. In 1Corinthians 12:13 he writes, "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body ...". This is an action the Spirit performs when we believe. He

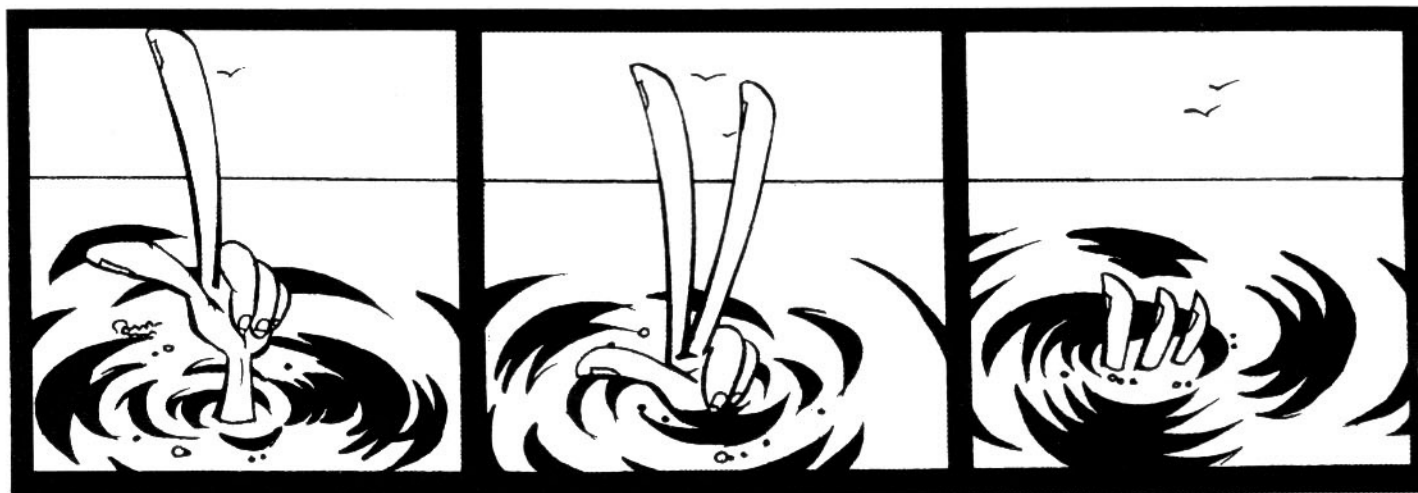
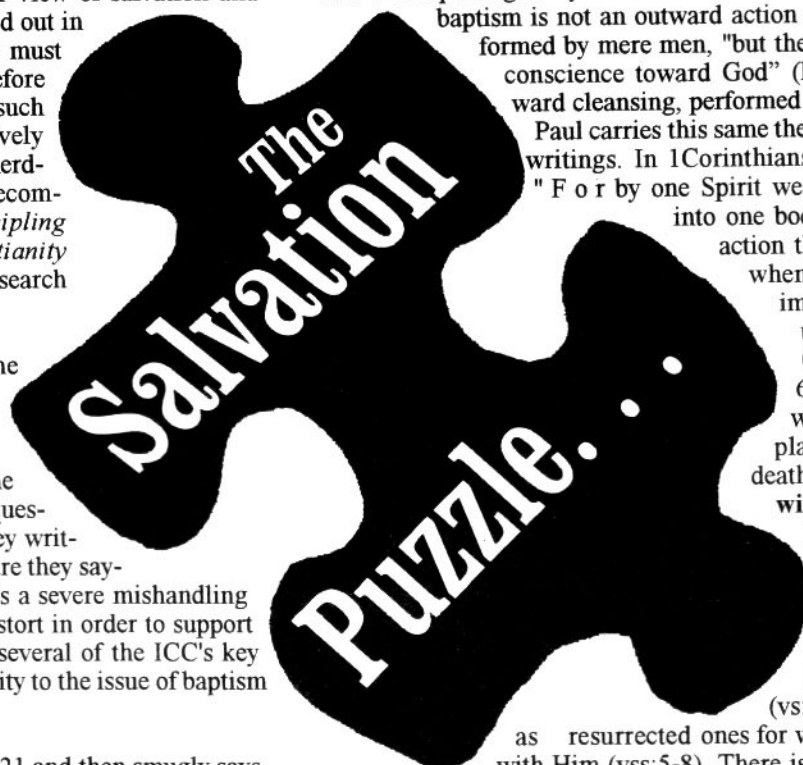
immerses or places us into the body of Christ. In Romans 6:3 Paul writes that we are baptized (or placed) into Jesus' death. We were buried with Him, not like Him, when He was buried, since we were baptized (or placed, or immersed) into His death (vs:4) We should live

as resurrected ones for we were resurrected with Him (vss:5-8). There is not a word in this

passage about water. These works are all performed by God's Holy Spirit, supernaturally, to those who believe. Again, no human minister can superimpose himself into this saving action. Yes, this Spirit baptism is necessary for salvation, and only God saves!!! Man can have no part in saving another man, which is exactly what salvation by water baptism involves.

In Ephesians 4:5, Paul stated that there is one baptism. In 1Corinthians 12:13 he said, "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body...". We must ask ourselves, "Is this 'one baptism' the one that is performed by the Spirit, as Paul teaches, or by water, as the ICC teaches?"

I have had ICC members point out that "God is not the author of confusion." In fact, they have said "Whenever a person is confused about which way to be saved, something is wrong." We agree. The Jehovah's Witnesses say that true Christianity was lost off the face of the earth and that they alone represent



CRP

restored Christianity and are preaching the true gospel today. The Mormon Church makes the same claim. We could continue listing for several pages the groups that have "cleared up" the confusion of salvation. They, like the ICC and Church of Christ, can trace their roots to the Cambellite movement. Most of these groups use the Bible to prooftext their teaching, yet they do not agree on what the Bible teaches. Does mean that God is authoring the confusion in the cults; or is it more likely they are confusing *themselves* by disregarding contextual reading in favor of defending their special doctrine?

WHY WAS PAUL BAPTIZED?

The question is posed based on Acts 9:17-18; 22:16. If baptism doesn't mean salvation here, why was Paul baptized? First of all, we cannot build doctrine from historical narrative passages. Not all of the information is given; it is only a snapshot of the event being described.

For example, where in the text does it say Paul wasn't saved during his encounter with Jesus Christ? Where in the text does it say he was saved later by water baptism?

Why was Paul baptized? What do the Scriptures tell us had been taught up to this point? At the time of Paul's conversion and subsequent baptism, none of the New Testament had been written. The Jewish believers, the sect known as the (Acts 9:2), had not been preaching to Gentiles but only to Jews (Acts 11:19) and these Jews were strict servers of the Mosaic Law (Acts 15:5; 21:20). In Acts 2, we see that the believers were baptized at the hands of the apostles in order to receive the sign gifts. In Acts 8:12-16, we see that it was necessary for the apostles to lay hands on the already-baptized believers in order to bestow the Holy

Spirit on them.

In Acts 9, the account records that Ananias laid hands upon Paul, who then received his sight and the Holy Spirit. In Acts 22:16 Paul's account includes water baptism. As we draw these two accounts together, we see that Paul was baptized at the hands of Ananias and, through that baptism, the Holy Spirit and accompanying sign gifts were bestowed. Paul spoke in tongues (1Corinthians 14:18), he healed the sick (Acts 19:11-12; 28:8-9), raised the dead (Acts 20:9-10), was bitten by deadly serpents and was not hurt (Acts 28:5-6). These sign gifts were in force as a testimony to Israel (1Corinthians 1:22) and Paul points out that they were signs of a true apostle (2Corinthians 12:12). Paul was baptized in order to receive the Apostolic sign gifts. If the ICC were baptizing for the same reason Paul was baptized, they would naturally be exhibiting these same sign gifts, which gifts are part and parcel of that baptism.

A PUZZLING PUZZLE

As pointed out previously, the ICC has several parts to the "puzzle" of salvation. Salvation is not a puzzle we must put together just right, but a gift to be received with joy and gratitude. The ICC is proclaiming a different gospel. Paul expressly warns believers against receiving *any* gospel other than the one he had preached to them (Gal. 1:8). The false gospel would not be some entirely foreign teaching, but would be a *perversion of the true gospel*, thus making it more difficult to spot (Gal. 1:7). It is so serious an offense to pervert the true gospel that Paul says the perverters should be accursed. The perverted and accursed gospel is spelled out in clear detail for us in the third chapter of Galatians. It involved faith, yes, but faith was only the first piece of the puzzle; works were necessary to complete the process. The two different gospels look like this:

**Christian view.....Faith = Salvation + works
Accursed" view.....Faith + Works = Salvation**

As we look at the puzzle, we don't see any substantial difference between the ICC, Jehovah's Witnesses, Islam, Mormonism, and many other "boot strap" religions in regard to their view of salvation. Again, it is true the ICC believes in the deity of Christ, the Tri-unity of God, and other fundamental doctrines of the historic Christian faith. But, if you have the wrong view of salvation, it doesn't matter what else you may have right.

"Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them is for their salvation. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge" (Romans 10:1-2, the Apostle Paul). Ω

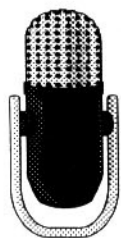
They Say... A Picture is Worth A Thousand Words

That being the case, take a look Chuck's illustration for Don's article on the bottom of the facing page. This strip could and should have a caption that reads: "Midwest Christian Outreach's finances!" Well, I know that was worth a thousand words, but there is need of a few more. We have made every effort to be faithful in providing the highest quality materials to assist people in reaching those who are lost in the cults and/or other false teachings, while at the same time telling of the love of Jesus. However, most of the activity here requires some sort of financial output. We at Midwest Christian Outreach, Inc., desire to remain faithful to the call God has placed on our hearts. Whether it is attending or speaking at seminars, obtaining the latest research, one-on-one training, sending out tapes, mailing materials, conducting Bible studies, producing this *Journal*, hosting our weekly radio show, operating several 24-hour, pre-

recorded message lines, as well as, live help lines; or just teaching and preaching the gospel in every and any way we can, there is a cost. Not only in money, but in time. We are willing to put in the time, would you be willing to assist us with the other part? It is an honor and a privilege to serve God and those of you in need. This is what we desire to continue to do in the most loving and whole-hearted way we can. Currently, there are 2,050 names on our mailing list. Last month, 41 of you contributed financially, others of you contributed your time and/or talents. Thank you for helping us to help others. Please ... first and foremost, pray for this ministry. Second, if this ministry has blessed you in some way, won't you consider a tax-deductible donation to ease our financial burden so that we can concentrate on our primary concern ... reaching the lost for Jesus.

Thank you.

"The Staff"



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NOVEMBER 23:

Janice Lyons, "Current Issues In Alternative Medicine"

NOVEMBER 30:

Richard Fisher, "What About Bill Gothard?"

DECEMBER 7:

Bill Honsberger, "How to Reach a Pagan World"

DECEMBER 14:

Perucci Ferraiuolo, "Disney and the Bible"

DECEMBER 21:

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To Be Announced.

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Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them.

-Ephesians 5:11-

(Gift --Continued from page 3)

gift of forgiveness. Tell Him you want to receive Him.

But isn't that too easy? Many people have said that to me. I like to turn it around on them ... WHY SHOULD IT BE HARD? Does God really want us to receive His gift or not? If I want to give you a gift, would it make sense to offer it to you but then make it nearly impossible for you to actually *receive* it? Receiving a gift should be easy, and it *is*!!!

If there are any reading this who realize that although they have known things *about* God for all their lives, they have never really *known* him, please call on Him today. Receive God's Christmas gift this Christmas. Ω

Love to all,

Joy

O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM

How silently, how silently
The wondrous gift is given
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of His heaven
We hear the Christmas angels
The great glad tidings tell
O come to us, abide with us
Our Lord Immanuel
No ear may hear His coming
But in this world of sin
Where meek souls do receive Him still
The new Christ enters in



(Idols--Continued from page 7)

step of faith. I felt as if Christ was waiting on me just to take this step. In the silence of my heart, with all sincerity, I said, "I believe in You Jesus, as You have revealed."

This happened early in the morning on March 5, 1994. Words cannot express what happened at that moment. My emptiness was gone, just as if it never existed. I felt a deep sense of cleansing, a great peace and satisfaction. I knew this was what I was looking for, for 12 years. Now, after looking into the Bible and who Christ is, I am convinced this is what the many different ways in Hinduism have been trying to achieve.

More than two years have passed since I came to Christ. An additional blessing walked in my life through Sophia, my wife. We got married one year after I came to Christ. Now having known Christ, our hearts go out to all those who have not come to know Him the way He ought to be known. Christ fills our spiritual emptiness by giving the Holy Spirit when we believe in Him. Only the Holy Spirit can satisfy this longing.

My thanks goes to Christ, my Master, for saving a wretch like me. Ω

(Roots--Continued from page 5)

4) Embalming of the dead is allowed. This is a religious practice originating in Babylon and engaged in by Joseph. On this the *Watchtower* comments:

"Egyptians customarily embalmed the dead. The faithful patriarch Joseph did not automatically react, 'This is a pagan custom, so we Hebrews must avoid it.' Rather, he 'commanded his servants, the physicians, to embalm his father,' evidently so that Jacob could be buried in the Promised Land." (*Watchtower*, 10/15/91: 30)

This quotation is one of the more interesting ones, because here the *Watchtower* rightly points out that pagan practices were taken up by God's people, without their having to consider the origins of such practices.

5) Use of practices similar to paganism in worship is okay. Of this the *Watchtower* said:

"Pagans have long used floral incense in their ceremonies, but it was not wrong for God's people to employ incense in true worship." (Ibid.30)

So, if we employ the *Watchtower's* criteria to Christmas, we would say, "A custom (or design) might have had a false religious meaning millenniums ago or might have such today in a distant land. But without going into time-consuming investigation, ask yourself: 'What is the common view where I live?' " And, with regards to the pagan practices associated with Christmas we would say, "The faithful patriarch Joseph did not automatically react, 'This is a pagan custom, so we ... must avoid it.' "

The *Watchtower* presents good and valid arguments regard-

ing wedding rings, flowers, pagan symbols, embalming of the dead, and the use of incense. However, for some reason, they refuse to apply the *exact same arguments* to Christmas and other cultural celebrations. At best, the *Watchtower's* position is inconsistent. At worst, it's a case of hypocritical legalism.

So, when the nice Jehovah's Witnesses interrupt your setting up the Christmas tree, take a break and reason with them. Consider it your "contribution" to their work.

"One man judges one day as above another; another man judges one day as all others; let each man be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes a day observes it to Jehovah." (Romans 14:15,16a, *New World Translation*) Ω

The *Journal* would like to thank Michael Ervolina, a former third-generation Jehovah's Witness, for untangling this issue's "Spider's Web." He and his wife both left the Witnesses in 1987 and accepted Jesus as their personal Savior. Michael is involved in active discussions with Witnesses on the Internet and is involved with a national ex-Jehovah's Witness support group. He and his wife are both active in the Episcopal Church as Sunday School teachers. They often start celebrating Christmas in February, just to make up for lost years.



Joy notes that no discussion of pagan roots would be complete without considering the pagan roots of the WTBS! Pyramidology, phrenology, astrology, numerology, ecology (oops!) ... If Charles Taze Russell was not a pagan, we'll have to apologize to King Tut!

**Awake!* is a bi-weekly publication of the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, a.k.a. Jehovah's Witnesses.

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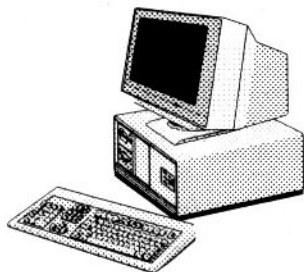
now become your enemy by telling you the truth?"

-Galatians 4:16-

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