

Preaching the Gospel,
Preparing a People



This is
*The United
Church of God*



The mission of the United Church of God is to proclaim to the world the little-understood gospel taught by Jesus Christ—the good news of the coming Kingdom of God—and to prepare a people for that Kingdom. This message not only offers great hope for all of humanity, but encompasses the purpose of human existence—why we are here and where our world is headed.

This Is the United Church of God

Introduction

Nearly 2,000 years ago, at the beginning of His public ministry, Jesus Christ arrived on the world scene with a specific message. Mark 1:14 tells us He came “preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God” (emphasis added throughout).

But what was His message? Christ’s gospel—the word *gospel* meaning “good news”—focused on God’s wonderful promise of world peace that all of humanity will enjoy after Jesus comes to earth a second time. As the Prince of Peace and the King of Kings, Jesus will establish the Kingdom of God on earth and begin instituting lasting peace and universal justice. This Kingdom—the Kingdom of God—is the central theme of all that Jesus preached and taught.

John the Baptist, Jesus’ immediate predecessor, likewise focused his message on the certain coming of this Kingdom. Like Jesus, he emphasized the need for one to repent—to turn away from wrong living—before being able to enjoy an active role in the Kingdom (Matthew 3:1-2). John’s message was the continuation of the Old Testament prophets’ teaching that the end of man’s misrule over himself would come to an end with the permanent reign of the Messiah (or, in the Greek language of the New Testament, the Christ).

After Jesus concluded His earthly ministry, the early Church continued to spread that same *good news*, the gospel of God’s coming Kingdom, throughout the Roman Empire and beyond (Acts 14:22; 28:31; 1 Corinthians 4:20; Colossians 4:11).

Jesus also revealed that the Church He founded would continue to proclaim the same message even to the time of “the end.” He promised that “this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come” (Matthew 24:14).

He also promised to remain ever with His followers who would fulfill that mission. “And remember,” Jesus said, “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20, New Revised Standard Version).

Jesus’ message, the gospel of the Kingdom of God, defines the mission of the United Church of God, an International Association. That same message, unaltered and undiluted, clarifies what we stand for in a world filled with a bewildering variety of religious beliefs, customs and opinions.

Such clarification is sorely needed today. What did Jesus actually teach? Though a third of the world professes Christianity, almost no one seems to know what Christianity really is—for so many

who profess to follow Christ ignore much of what He taught, often without much thought or even realizing they are doing so. Non-Christians are thus left with a rather confused impression of the Christian religion.

To illustrate, over dinner one evening a man from India, of the Hindu faith, turned to an American writer and asked a penetrating question concerning the professed faith and the practice of the Western “Christian” nations. How, he asked, can you reconcile the teachings of Jesus with your massive weaponry and endless wars?

Like many serious thinkers, this man observed that both sides in wars between Christian nations pray to the same God while they slaughter their fellow believers in Christ. Why is this? he asked. How can this be?

These are penetrating and difficult questions, but they are not confined to the Christian world. Many Hindus have also warred against each other, as have those of other faiths, for centuries—even as they taught peaceful coexistence. Yet, while we might expect this from the non-Christian world, many are at a loss to explain the bloodstained history of the Christian West.

Anyone who seriously examines history can conclude only that it’s virtually impossible to reconcile the actual teachings of Jesus of Nazareth with the dismal performance of nations professing to follow Him.

But some ask harder questions still: What is the ultimate purpose for human life? Why does so much evil plague the world? Why doesn’t God put a stop to violence and war? Will He ever bring about long-lasting peace, and how?

The world desperately needs answers to these and other important questions.

Do answers exist? Yes. The message Christ brought—the gospel of the Kingdom of God—provides the answers and solutions that few have heard or understood. And this is the message of the United Church of God—a message desperately needed in a world of wars and disagreements that continue to escalate just as Jesus predicted.

Religion as a whole has failed to provide solutions to mankind’s dilemmas. Part of our mission is to fill that gap, to make available hope and solutions that faithfully and accurately reflect the teachings of the Bible.

In the ensuing pages we outline the mission and key activities of the United Church of God, an International Association, and the beliefs that drive them.

Christ’s gospel—the word gospel meaning “good news”—focused on God’s wonderful promise of world peace that all of humanity will enjoy after Jesus comes to earth a second time.



Chapter One

Preaching the Gospel

The mission Christ has given His Church is twofold. First, it is to preach the gospel throughout the world. Second, it is to make disciples among those who hear and heed when the gospel of the Kingdom of God is preached to them.

The mission of the United Church of God is to follow Christ's footsteps in "preaching the gospel of the kingdom" (Matthew 4:23). Our model is the Church described in the book of Acts. This record provides us with an accurate spiritual compass in a confused and contentious world.

Scripture is clear that, just as Jesus commissioned His apostles to preach the gospel—the good news—of God's coming Kingdom, so has He commissioned His followers today to continue that mission. The conviction to preach the same message Jesus taught focuses the mission of the United Church of God and organizes its priorities.

The main collective task Jesus has required of His Church in all ages is to proclaim to all nations that He will return as King of Kings and Lord of Lords to establish the literal Kingdom of God on earth and to explain how we may have a part in that Kingdom (Revelation 11:15; 17:14; 19:16).

We also take seriously Jesus' command to "go therefore and make disciples [students of Christ's teachings] of all the nations, baptizing them . . . [and] teaching them to observe all things I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20). The Church described in the book of Acts certainly did so, teaching that we must keep the commandments of God. It placed top priority on obeying God's Word from the heart.

"This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come" (Matthew 24:14).

The Good News magazine can be found in thousands of waiting rooms in medical facilities around the world.



From these Scriptures we see that the mission Christ has given His Church is twofold. First, it is to preach the gospel throughout the world. Second, it is to make disciples among those who hear and heed when the gospel of the Kingdom of God is preached to them.

However, we fully realize it is not possible to fulfill this dual mission strictly through our own efforts. Just as Paul recognized that in His efforts "to preach Christ's gospel . . . a door was opened to me *by the Lord*" (2 Corinthians 2:12), so we understand that God must open doors for the same message today. In regard to making new disciples, Jesus likewise explained: "No one can come to Me *unless the Father who sent Me draws him*," and "no one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father" (John 6:44, 65).

We understand that success in fulfilling this mission must come first and foremost from our Creator. Christ's involvement in preaching the gospel message did not stop when His original apostles died. He promised to work with His followers in fulfilling the commission He gave them "even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

We have great confidence in Christ's promises and instructions as revealed in the Bible. The United Church of God takes seriously its role of working within and according to the blessing of God in proclaiming to today's world the same gospel Jesus preached.

Announcing the future

Commissioning the gospel's proclamation throughout the world is only the *beginning* of God



The United Church of God uses many methods to share its message. *The Good News* magazine (left) is published in several languages and covers many current and timeless topics from a sound biblical perspective. The *Good News* radio program (far left) airs in cities across the United States. The Church's Internet-based Bible Reading Program (below), offers a comprehensive study of the Scriptures.

the Father's plan to reconcile humanity to Himself. Many have incorrectly assumed that He is desperately trying to save the whole world now, in today's age. But that simply is not so.

Certainly, Jesus commissioned His Church to *proclaim* repentance and salvation to the nations at this time. Yet *proclaiming* Jesus' teaching about repentance and salvation is vastly different from actually being able to *lead* all people to salvation in this age. The task of fully reconciling and saving the world is to occur only after Christ returns to earth.

The apostle Paul tells us that announcing mankind's future reconciliation to God is part of the Church's mission: "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us *the word of reconciliation*" (2 Corinthians 5:19). Notice, God has committed to His Church "the word"—the *preaching* or *announcement*—of that reconciliation.

Notice Paul's explanation of this enigmatic truth: "For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: 'The Deliverer will come out of Zion, and *He* will turn away ungodliness from Jacob'" (Romans 11:25-26).

This saving action of which Paul wrote has not yet occurred. It *will* occur, however, not only for Israel but for all other nationalities as well—but only after Christ returns as the King of Kings over the Kingdom of God (Ezekiel 37:12-14; Matthew 12:41-42).

The good news of God's coming Kingdom is a



message the world at large has never grasped. But it is one everyone desperately needs to know because it proclaims the awesome future and destiny of mankind and the means to achieve it (be sure to read "God's Great Purpose for All Mankind" on page 8).

Reaching the world with a message

The Church's primary collective commission during our age, the present era, is to *announce*—to inform the world about—the coming of God's Kingdom, not to *establish* it. That is why, when asked what would signal His coming and the end of this age (Matthew 24:3), Jesus emphasized that the



Each week at the Church's home-office facility, Church personnel process thousands of *Good News* subscription requests (above right). Every year the Church prints hundreds of thousands of booklets on biblical topics (above), storing them in and mailing them from its warehouse and mailing facility at the home office (right).



the globe, it goes into almost every nation on earth. Published in four languages—English, Spanish, German and Italian—the magazine contains spiritually uplifting and educational articles written from a biblical perspective on a variety of subjects, including prophecy, human interest, marriage and the family, Christian living, history, archaeology, lives of individuals mentioned in the Bible, scriptural teachings and analysis of societal and world trends. A radio program of the same name airs weekly in cities across the United States. Featuring ministers of the United Church of God, the program covers topics like those the magazine deals with. Television programming produced by United congregations airs on cable-access community television channels in many U.S. cities. (For radio and television schedule information visit us online at www.ucg.org/radio and www.ucg.org/tv.)

The Church publishes many booklets, also free, to supplement these efforts and delve into biblical topics in greater detail. Readers and listeners may request them from any of our regional offices or from our Web site, www.gnmagazine.org.

Each year we print hundreds of thousands of English-language booklets and articles and mail them around the world. In addition, we offer some of our booklets and articles in the Spanish, German, Italian, French, Dutch, Portuguese, Russian, Ukrainian, Lithuanian and Estonian languages.

The United Church of God also publishes a full-color, 12-lesson *Bible Study Course* to help students gain a deeper understanding of the Scriptures. This course is designed to explain the major themes and teachings of the Bible in easy-to-understand language. It addresses many fundamental questions about God and the way He wants us to live.

The first lesson of the course addresses the basic questions of God's existence, the Bible's role in showing why God created men, women and children, and the ultimate purpose of life. Then it guides students through many of the most

“Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation” (Mark 16:15, NIV).

Church is to continue announcing His coming Kingdom, even to the very end of this age. That is why He said that “this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come” (verse 14). The original Greek word here translated “preached” means *to announce or proclaim as a herald*.

The United Church of God takes this responsibility seriously. To comply with Christ's commission to proclaim the gospel message, we utilize many tools.

Most prominent is *The Good News* magazine, published six times a year and mailed to hundreds of thousands of subscribers. The magazine is sent free of charge, anywhere in the world, to anyone who requests it. Drawing on writers from around

intriguing and inspiring portions of the Bible, unlocking the real purpose for our being—and how we may live fulfilling lives while accomplishing God’s great purpose for us. Lesson 4 addresses the challenging question: Why does God allow suffering and evil in the world?

Thousands have been helped to change their lives for the better through this course. As with our other publications, we and our coworkers provide it freely to all who request it. And, as with other publications, we are developing it in languages other than English.

Using electronic tools

Recognizing that people increasingly seek information via the Internet, the Church uses this important tool to reach an even wider audience with the gospel. In addition to making all of our publications available for request or downloading over the Internet, we offer a separate *daily* study aid—our Internet-based *Bible Reading Program*, available at www.ucg.org/brp.

It leads students through the entire Bible over the course of two to three years. Typically covering a chapter a day, this free, in-depth program provides the reader with a systematic reading schedule along with clear, easy-to-follow commentary, maps, charts and graphs to thoroughly explain the Scriptures. These Bible aids are intended to help all those who desire to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18).

We also offer several E-magazines (electronic magazines) and occasionally other publications only on the Internet. *Virtual Christian Magazine*, for example, offers a variety of biblically based articles 10 times a year. You can find it at www.vcmagazine.org.

The main objective of *Virtual Christian Magazine* is to provide instruction in the practical application of Christian principles. *Virtual Christian Magazine* shares stories of God personally interacting with human beings and features living examples of faith, love and hope along with practical solutions to life’s challenges. The magazine is full of encouraging, inspiring and motivational stories about God helping us overcome and live a life centered on Christ and His teachings.

We publish a separate quarterly E-magazine, *Youth United*, at youthmagazine.org. Geared for teens and college-age readers, *Youth United* features articles to help young people deal with the pressures and pitfalls of their world with a God-centered approach. The site includes a question-and-answer section in which young people can receive personal answers by E-mail from ministers and others trained and experienced in working with youth.

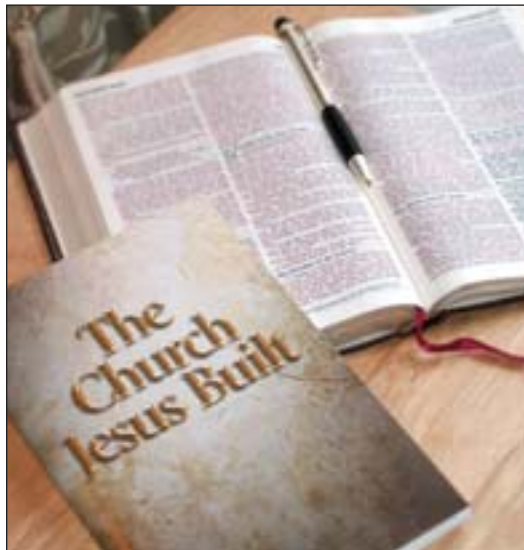
The United Church of God also has a letter-answering staff available to reply to questions from anyone. These can be sent through postal mail to any of our regional offices or by E-mail to info@ucg.org.

A call for repentance

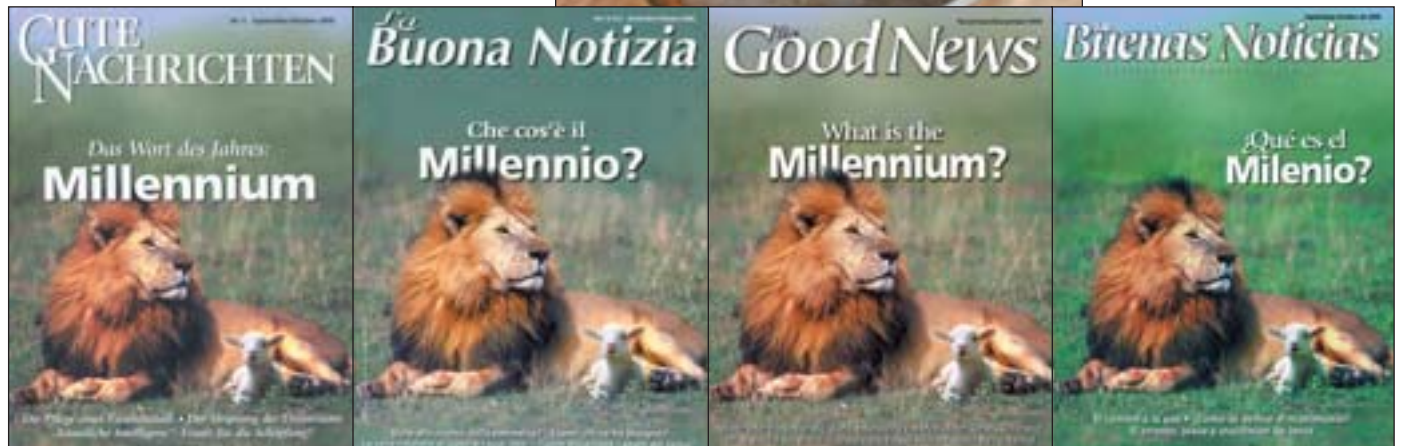
Almost immediately after His resurrection, Jesus appeared to His apostles with further instructions. “And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures. Then He said to them, ‘Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem’” (Luke 24:45-47).

Wherever they went, His apostles continued preaching that everyone “should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance” (Acts 26:20).

In this light, the role of the Church of God with



Booklets published by the Church help readers study and understand the scriptural truth on many topics (left). The United Church of God publishes *The Good News* magazine in four languages (bottom)—from left, German, Italian, English and Spanish.



God's Great Purpose for All Mankind

US *Today* published the results of a poll listing significant questions most on people's minds. At the top of the list was "What is the purpose of life?"

That question has intrigued philosophers and theologians for generations. While the answers proposed are as varied as the world's entire ideological landscape, none is convincing. No one, it seems, has found the answer to life's biggest question.

Yet the answer has been available for centuries. God's Word plainly tells us that *man's destiny is to become the children of God, divine members of His immortal spirit family*. This truth goes to the very heart of the true gospel of the Kingdom of God.

Long ago ancient Israel's King David gazed upon the infinite vastness of the night sky while he pondered the significance of man. Psalm 8:3-4 records his thoughts: "When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained, what is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You visit him?"

David understood that *man is the pinnacle* of God's physical creation. He went on to say: "For You have made him a little lower than the angels, and You have crowned him with glory and honor. You have made him to have dominion over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet . . ." (verses 5-6).

Human beings in God's image

Genesis 1:26 describes man as created in the image of God. This helps us understand what Paul meant when he spoke of us as God's children. "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: and if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that *we may be also glorified together*" (Romans 8:16-17, King James Version).

This passage succinctly summarizes the purpose of human life—the ultimate reason for our existence. God is creating a *family*—His family, in His image and bearing His name, to eventually appear in His glory (see also 1 John 3:2). Every human being will have the

For the vast majority of mankind, this will be the first time their eyes will be truly opened to God's wonderful truth.

opportunity to become a member of that divine, eternal family!

Notice what God intends to do: "In bringing *many sons to glory* ['glory' means divine radiance, power and perfection as members of God's family], it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation [Jesus Christ] perfect through suffering. Both the one who makes men holy [Christ] and those who are made holy [human beings in whom God is working] are *of the same family*. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers" (Hebrews 2:10-11, New International Version).

The unimaginably good news is that every human being will have the chance to enter the family of God, receive divine glory and live forever as the same kind of beings the Father and Christ now are. This, too, is part of the staggering reality of Christ's gospel and the message proclaimed by the United Church of God.

God's plan includes all who have ever lived

But how will all of humanity—every man, woman, boy and girl who has ever lived—have this opportunity?

The Scriptures clearly reveal that God is "not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9), and He has

a master plan to give everyone this opportunity. Yet a great many believe that unless one confesses faith in Jesus as personal Savior in this present lifetime he or she will have no further opportunity for salvation.

While belief in and acceptance of Christ is indeed essential for salvation (John 14:6; Acts 4:12), there remains the disturbing question: What happens to those who have been deceived (Revelation 12:9) and, simply through ignorance, have no understanding of God, His plan or His way of life? And what about those who, in recent years or in centuries past, lived and died without ever so much as hearing the name of Jesus Christ? Are they eternally lost? What is their fate?

The Bible gives the answers to these questions—answers that reconcile all the scriptures about life and death, judgment and mercy, forgiveness and salvation. It reveals that the "first resurrection" of Christ's followers at His return is not the end of the story. Indeed, the Bible teaches that "*the rest of the dead . . . small and great*" also are to be resurrected from the grave. They are to stand before God and, for the first time in their lives, have the full truth of the Scriptures opened to their understanding (Revelation 20:4-6, 11-12).

For the vast majority of mankind, this will be the first time their eyes will be truly opened to God's wonderful truth. Most will then willingly reject their sinful ways, committed mostly in ignorance when they knew little or nothing of God and His ways. If they sincerely acknowledge their errors and repent, then they also may be glorified and receive eternal life. This is not a "second-chance" theology, as some might assume, but truly their *first* real opportunity to *fully comprehend* God's truth and then act on it *with genuine understanding*.

An opportunity for all humanity

In Matthew 11:21-24 Jesus explained that many godless people who lived and died in ages long before His time would have repented if only they had experienced Christ's preaching and miracles the way people of His day had. Moreover, He said that it would be "more tolerable" in the coming last judgment for the men, women and children who lived and died in ignorance than for those of His day who openly rejected Him.

But how could this be if those long-dead people were already condemned without hope of redemption? The fact is *they never had an opportunity, with a full comprehension of repentance, to be saved*. But one day, God promises, He *will* give them that opportunity.

Truly "God does not show favoritism" (Acts 10:34, NIV). He has made provision for *all* people ultimately to have an opportunity to enter a relationship with Him that can lead to glorified, eternal life. This is why Jesus said: "Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs shall hear His voice, and shall come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment" (John 5:28-29, New American Standard Bible).

Judgment in the preceding passage refers to *an opportunity to understand* as opposed to the act of sentencing. This time of judging or *deciding* the future of those who have not yet had an opportunity to understand God's plan and purpose, whether they be small or great, is mentioned in Revelation 20:11-12, cited above. This biblical resurrection to judgment (a time for *sorting out* and *deciding*, not for automatic condemnation) is a time when God's *tolerant mercy* will finally be evident to all who are willing to face up to and repent of their former sinful ways. Though the Bible doesn't reveal many specifics about this resurrection—once more to a temporary physical life—Ezekiel 37 provides a vivid description of it.

In our free publications *What Happens After Death?* and *Heaven and Hell: What Does the Bible Really Teach?* we thoroughly explain this wonderful truth in greater detail. It is a major key to understanding God's plan to rectify all the evil and suffering that mankind has ever experienced.

respect to the world around it parallels that of the watchmen of ancient cities. In ancient Israel, towns positioned watchmen on the city walls or nearby hills. Their responsibility was to warn their fellow citizens of impending danger, such as a hostile army that might be headed their way.

God at times compared His prophets to these watchmen. But an important difference is that His prophets' warning came *from Him*, not from their own observations and perceptions. For example, God told Ezekiel: "Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; therefore hear a word *from My mouth*, and give them warning

dedented time of great tribulation before His second coming (Matthew 24:21). This time of anarchy and upheaval will affect the entire world, including the modern descendants of the 12 tribes of Israel.

Fully aware that much of the Bible is prophetic, the United Church of God publishes several booklets, and regularly features articles in *The Good News* magazine, focusing on world events in the light of Bible prophecy. Additionally, the Church regularly publishes *World News & Prophecy*, a newsletter devoted to understanding current events within the framework of Bible prophecy. Like all material published by the Church, you can receive



from Me" (Ezekiel 3:17; compare 33:7).

Most people today are unaware that a considerable portion of Americans and people of British heredity are descendants of the ancient Israelite tribe of Joseph. Many Bible prophecies make it clear that these people in particular will be greatly affected by ominous events at the end time as a direct consequence of their national sins, so they need to be warned by those who understand the truth. (For a clear and thorough explanation, be sure to request our free booklet *The United States and Britain in Bible Prophecy*.)

Jesus foretold that there would be an unprece-

dent time of great tribulation before His second coming (Matthew 24:21). This time of anarchy and upheaval will affect the entire world, including the modern descendants of the 12 tribes of Israel.

The United Church of God does not push its beliefs on anyone. Matthew 24:14 says the gospel would be preached "as a witness to all the nations." It is up to each individual whether he will hear and accept that message.

The Church's role in this regard is to proclaim the gospel and the need for repentance, go through doors as God opens them and take opportunities as they are presented to us to reach ever more people with the vitally important message of His soon-coming Kingdom.

The United Church of God extends its humanitarian and evangelistic efforts into the far corners of the globe, assisting with a children's camp in Ukraine (above left) and holding services for members in Ghana (above).

What Does Our Name Signify?

The name of the United Church of God, an International Association, signifies that we are united in our commitment to faithfully follow the way of life and mission for the Church revealed and established by God and His Son, Jesus Christ, in the Holy Scriptures.

Jesus prayed that His Church would be unified and preserved in the name of God (John 17:11). Also, the New Testament's most frequent designation for the original body of believers is the "church of God" (Acts 20:28; 1 Corinthians 10:32; 11:22; 15:9; 1 Timothy 3:5). Some New Testament passages also attach the location, such as "the church of God which is at Corinth" (1 Corinthians 1:2; 2 Corinthians 1:1).

Because many divergent groups refer to themselves as the Church



of God, we attach the word *United* to provide us with distinctiveness. It was also chosen to convey the unity in belief, mission and purpose for which Jesus prayed when He asked that the Church be kept in God's name.

Also, instead of attaching a local city name, as in the New Testament, we add the phrase "an International Association" to appropriately reflect the worldwide scope of the Church and its activities.

Chapter Two

Preparing a People

The Church Jesus built is commissioned not only to feed Christ's sheep, as He commanded, but also to prepare these followers for greater works of service to God, their families, their communities and their fellow man.

The two most important aspects of the mission of the United Church of God are preaching the gospel and preparing a people. Both mandated by Jesus Christ, the two go hand in hand.

The Church's overall mission extends well beyond its initial responsibility of preaching the gospel and making new disciples, as Jesus commanded in Matthew 28:19. As verse 20 explains, the Church must also *teach* these disciples—students—“to observe *all things* that [Jesus] commanded . . . even to the end of the age.” Indeed, the Church of God is to be a continuing source of spiritual nurturing for those God calls into His family.

One of the key charges Jesus gave His apostles was “Feed My sheep” (John 21:17). He has given His Church additional shepherds—a human ministry—to guide, feed and encourage the growth

and become mature, *attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ*” (Ephesians 4:11-13, NIV).

The Church Jesus built is commissioned not only to feed His sheep, as He commanded, but to prepare these followers for greater works of service to God, their families, their communities and their fellow man. Jesus placed great emphasis on serving others (Matthew 20:26-28).

For these reasons the United Church of God, though small in numbers, strives to establish congregations around the world in which God's people can assemble and receive guidance in godly living and service. These congregations are served by ordained pastors trained to accurately teach and explain the Scriptures and to counsel those who request personal guidance. These pastors are often assisted by other dedicated men and women in helping congregations reach their full potential in serving others—as opportunity, need and resources permit.

Our congregations meet in various cities around the world. Regional offices in the Americas, Europe, Africa, Asia and the South Pacific serve members and support Church operations in their respective areas. They are also responsible for distributing the Church's publications and handling other requests and inquiries within their particular regions.

A home-office facility near Cincinnati, Ohio, serves as a support hub for operations in the United States and all the associated worldwide operations of the Church. From this location the Church's president and department managers and their staffs support the Church's daily operations.

Our worship services

People often ask us: “What happens at one of your church services? If I choose to attend, what should

“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations . . . teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20).

of those God calls into the Body of Christ. As we see from Paul's instructions to Titus and Timothy, God appoints ministers based on criteria vital to the well-being of the other members of the Church.

Jesus Himself, explained the apostle Paul, “gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God





I expect? Do I need to bring anything? Are there programs that address the needs of my family?"

Members of the United Church of God rest (refrain from normal work and recreation) and meet on the weekly Sabbath in compliance with the Fourth Commandment (see Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15) and with the clear biblical examples of Jesus and early Christians, who came together on that day to worship and give and receive instruction from God's Word (see Luke 4:16; Acts 13:42, 44; 17:2; 18:4).

Some people are surprised when they learn that our congregations meet for regular weekly church services on Saturday. The reason, of course, is that God defines the seventh-day biblical Sabbath as lasting from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset rather than being on Sunday, the first day of the week. Just as Jesus and the earliest Church of God congregations did, we observe the day and time that God has commanded.

The Bible describes the weekly Sabbath in Isaiah 58:13 as "the holy day of the LORD" and in Leviticus 23:2 as one of "the feasts of the LORD." The Hebrew word for "feast" is *moed*, which means "appointment" or "meeting." Verse 3 describes the weekly Sabbath as a "holy convocation" or "sacred assembly" (NIV). It is, therefore, a *commanded* assembly (see also Hebrews 10:24-25).

Putting these verses together, we can see that God commands His people to appear before Him for a meeting, as a regular weekly appointment. (To learn more about the biblical foundation of the seventh-day Sabbath, why Christians should keep it and how to observe it, be sure to request your free copy of our booklet *Sunset to Sunset: God's Sabbath Rest*.)

We encourage everyone attending Sabbath services with us to bring a Bible. Because we believe and teach that the Bible is the inspired Word of God (2 Timothy 3:15-17), our ministers and other

speakers in the course of a service will focus on what the Bible says. Members are encouraged to turn to and read for themselves the scriptures quoted. Many will take notes for later review. Instruction given in our worship services is not based on human philosophy or speculation but on the rich teachings of the Word of God and how we should apply them in all aspects of our lives.

In this we follow the instructions of the apostle Paul, who wrote to the young minister Timothy: "I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: *Preach the word!* Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching" (2 Timothy 4:1-2). Therefore the messages presented in our services are designed to be instructive, helpful, practical and inspiring.

As we assemble before God, we come in an attitude of worship and thankfulness for what He performs in our lives. After opening with congregational hymns, we ask for God's presence and guidance.

After this opening prayer comes the speaking portion of the service, which normally includes two messages. The first, referred to as a sermonette, is short and typically deals with an item of biblical understanding or encouragement.

After another congregational hymn, we usually devote a brief segment of the service to announcements pertaining to local and international church events and activities. Sometimes musicians from the congregation may offer a



The United Church of God encourages its members to continually "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18) and to "seek first the Kingdom of God" (Matthew 6:33). These are major goals of our services, fellowship and study of God's Word.

The Feast of Tabernacles

The highlight of each year for members of the United Church of God is the biblical Feast of Tabernacles. Among the sacred feasts God revealed to ancient Israel, this festival, which falls in autumn in the northern hemisphere, lasts seven days and is immediately followed by a separate but related festival on the eighth day (Leviticus 23:34, 36, 39). This eight-day period remains an occasion for God's servants to come together for spiritual instruction and renewal.

Meeting in regional locations around the world, families gather to picture the "world to come" (see Hebrews 2:5-7), which will begin immediately after the return of Christ to earth. The theme of the Feast of Tabernacles is Jesus' millennial reign.

Members of the Church gather annually to keep this commanded festival as a foretaste of the time spoken of by the prophet Isaiah: "Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow to it. Many people shall come and say, 'Come, and let us go up to the



The eight days of meetings are a time for worship services, special Bible studies and seminars, family activities and encouraging fellowship for young and old. Experience has proven this observance to be a major key to the Church's unity and focus on its mission. As the membership comes together around the world at the same time to hear messages aimed at the positive hope of God's coming Kingdom, their vision is renewed and refocused on the goal of that Kingdom.

United Church of God members celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles in some 40 locations around the world. More than just an annual convention or vacation, the Feast of Tabernacles helps our members focus on God's great plan and the wonderfully positive news Christ proclaimed about His return to establish His rule on earth. It keenly refreshes our awareness of why the coming Kingdom of God is so needed by

mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths.' For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

"He shall judge between the nations, and rebuke many people; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore" (Isaiah 2:2-4). This eternal vision becomes a tangible reality in the minds of our members during this annual autumn event.

Indeed, the biblical prophecies of a time when nations shall beat their swords into plowshares and cease to learn of war all refer to literal future events, and they form an important part of Jesus' gospel—His good news—of God's coming Kingdom.

As Zechariah 14:16 tells us, upon Christ's return "it shall come to pass that everyone who is left of all the nations which came against Jerusalem [in a devastating end-time war] shall go up from year to year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to keep the Feast of Tabernacles."

Since this festival is commanded in the Scriptures, and will be observed by all nations in Christ's Kingdom, it would seem woefully inconsistent for us to not keep it now as we look forward to that wonderful time.

today's world and reminds us why sharing that message must always be the collective priority of the United Church of God.

(To learn more about the Feast of Tabernacles and God's other festivals, please send for our free booklet *God's Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*.)

Left and above: The biblically mandated Feast of Tabernacles is the high point of the year for United Church of God members, with thousands gathering around the world for this celebration.



short and appropriate music presentation.

Next is the main sermon, typically about an hour in length. Sermons deal with a variety of spiritual themes, such as practical Christian living, explanations of biblical doctrines or, occasionally, discussions of current events in the light of Bible prophecy. After the sermon, our services conclude with a hymn and a closing prayer.

Attention to special needs

Recognizing that people's needs vary and many learn more effectively in smaller or more-focused groups, some of our congregations also provide, for those so desiring, Bible studies or classes for adults, teens, younger children, young adults and middle-aged and older adults. Some of these may be conducted before, during or after the weekly service on the Sabbath, and sometimes members may meet for a midweek Bible study. The Church offers these options as opportunities for extra learning, encouragement and fellowship for like-minded Christians.

Church members interact and work together in other ways as well. Congregations often organize special functions to serve various needs. They may include social events, fellowship opportunities at shared meals, sports activities, children's and teens' field trips, men's and women's leadership and speech clubs and occasional work parties to help members and needy people within our communities or even on the other side of the world.

Galatians 6:10 tells us: "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith." The Bible encourages us to give special attention to members within our midst while challenging us to care for all people.

As resources permit, our congregations often look for opportunities to involve themselves in volunteer service or relief programs within their communities or in efforts to help the less fortunate in far-off areas. We recognize that demonstrating love is a way of life, and we are committed to giving to others who may be unable to give in return. Of course, what we individually do for others when no one else sees is what counts most in God's eyes (see Matthew 6:1-4).

Many United Church of God members support volunteer and relief programs such as construction of a health clinic in Malawi (above) and an effort to provide needy farmers with cattle in Zambia (left). Through the Church's United Youth Corps program, young men and women have opportunities to travel and serve people in faraway lands (above left).

"Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Galatians 6:10).

Empowering and developing our youths

Long ago wise King Solomon admonished young people, "Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth" (Ecclesiastes 12:1). With that biblical imperative in mind, we seek to empower our young people for a life of strong character and good works. We provide programs designed to supplement their parents' efforts to mold them into good students in their schools, worthwhile community members in their neighborhoods, upstanding examples in their future jobs and good citizens who will continue responding to the call of God as they mature.

The United Church of God conducts an extensive youth-camp program at more than a dozen sites around the world. During the summer or winter school breaks, our young people can come together to develop deeper relationships with God and be challenged by new experiences. The camp programs are designed to encourage and develop lifelong character traits such as courage, diligence and perseverance. They also build a camaraderie between the campers and a staff of young-adult counselors, ministers and other camp workers—



forming bonds that may last a lifetime.

Young adults who want to go above and beyond in volunteering to help others can apply for service in the United Youth Corps. Here young men and women receive opportunities to travel and serve people in the far reaches of the globe. In the summer months, a young person could find himself or herself far from home in such places as Chile, Jordan, Ghana and South Africa. Such service could include working with area residents in a language program, a computer-instruction seminar or even an archaeological excavation. Such young people not only give of themselves but are rewarded with many once-in-a-lifetime experiences.

Passing on the truth of God from one generation to the next is a high priority of the Church. Therefore, to provide in-depth biblical and spiritual instruction to the next generation, the United Church of God also sponsors and staffs the Ambassador Bible Center,



Recognizing that children are a gift of God (Psalm 127:3-5), the United Church of God has developed youth programs such as its United Youth Camps where children and teens can strengthen their relationship with God, be instructed in His way of life, try new experiences and build lasting friendships.



located in our home-office complex just outside of Cincinnati. It is designed for the college-age or older student who desires an intensive seven-month program of studying the core teachings of the Bible.

In addition to its own resident faculty, the Ambassador Bible Center's staff is supplemented by guest lecturers who bring additional expertise on certain subjects to an eager student body. Many young men and women often choose to enter this program either right before or immediately after their regular college program.

To meet the specific goal of "preparing a people" in regard to our youth, the United Church of God has developed a variety of youth programs. Their purpose is not merely to bring our young people together, but, even more important, they are meant to help them develop and strengthen a loving relationship with God. It is also our desire to educate and equip them for service

the assembly that has come to be known in the English language as the Church.

Christ's apostles describe the Church as those who, having surrendered their lives to God in sincere obedience, have received the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:32; Romans 8:9). Indeed, the Church's members are sometimes compared to the individual parts of a stone building. The apostle Peter wrote, "You also, as living stones, are *being built up a spiritual house*, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5). Called from all nationalities and ethnic backgrounds, all of the Church's members "are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of *the household of God*" (Ephesians 2:19).

Those in God's Church are thus members of God's family, though not yet glorified. Indeed, Church members fully understand that they are still fallible, imperfect human beings. Yet they strive to



to their congregations and the world at large.

Nurturing the household of God

We must keep in mind that the Church Jesus built is not an impressive building with stained-glass windows. It has no steeple or bells tolling out the chimes of an old religious melody.

The word *church* in the New Testament means a group of people, not a building. The Church Jesus built is made up of the people who are its members. *They* are the Church!

Why is this distinction important?

The Greek word *ekklesia*, translated into English as *church*, simply means "those called out" or a "called-out assembly." It originally referred to a city's assembly of citizens—summoned to a meeting to conduct the city's affairs. Because its meaning closely corresponds to that of the Hebrew word for "congregation," it became the standard Greek word for the "congregation" of God in the New Testament,

do their best in serving their heavenly Father. This they do, knowing He has already given His best for them—His only begotten Son as their Savior. And, in His great mercy, He actively prepares them for their role in His coming Kingdom.

In this present age of preparation, God's people draw strength and comfort both from Him and from each other. For that reason Hebrews 10:24-25 states: "Let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day [of Christ's return] approaching" (NIV).

The United Church of God diligently strives to implement the biblical mandate for "equipping the saints"—that is, preparing members of the "body of Christ" to fulfill their calling as God's servants now and as His eternal family in the coming Kingdom of God (Ephesians 4:12).

Chapter Three

Following in the Footsteps

“For fifty years after St. Paul’s life a curtain hangs over the church, through which we strive vainly to look; and when at last it rises . . . we find a church in many aspects very different from that in the days of St. Peter and St. Paul.”

—Historian Jesse Hurlbut, *The Story of the Christian Church*

As noted earlier, it is the small but faithful Church described in the book of Acts that those of us in the United Church of God, an International Association, look to as our model and spiritual ancestor. To fully appreciate why the Church described in Acts serves as the sole model for our beliefs, mission and organization, one must understand at least some of the little-understood history of Christianity.

For that reason we include here a brief overview of what happened to the Church Jesus built and to the religion that bears His name.

Acts 2 records the beginning of that Church. From relatively few people, the Church spread from first-century Judea to the far corners of the Roman Empire and beyond. Yet it remained small in numbers (see Luke 12:32), partly because it resolutely refused to be drawn into the compromising, corrupt mixture of paganism that dominated religious belief in the Roman Empire.

not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18).

Here was a dual promise. Jesus would build a spiritual body of believers that would continue to exist down through the ages, even to the end of the present age and His return to earth. No human force of the physical world, or evil power from the spirit world, would ever be able to destroy His Church.

The book of Acts, written by Luke, tells the story of how the Church, from its beginning in Jerusalem, spread the gospel of the Kingdom of God to the world of the Roman Empire. Luke filled the pages of this history with the work of Peter, Paul, Barnabas and others who figured prominently in the early Church.

In Luke’s brief historical sketch we see the Church faithfully dedicated to proclaiming the coming Kingdom of God, with Christ as its head. Luke’s account describes the overriding goal and purpose that united this early body of believers.

Paul informs us of an important characteristic of the Church that Christ built. With Christ as its foundational cornerstone, the Church’s foundation also rests on the teachings of the apostles and—not to be overlooked—the prophets of the Old Testament (Ephesians 2:19-20).

A breach in beliefs and practices

Yet, only a few decades after Christ’s crucifixion, the Church began to change. Heretical teachers started reinterpreting Scripture to suit their own ideas. In the centuries that followed, greater divisions arose over doctrine.

As a result, the message preached by Christ and His apostles became subtly transformed. As time passed, this altered message came to be almost exclusively about the *person* of Jesus, at the cost of neglecting the vital heart and core of His teachings.

Among a growing number of people, a distorted and in some ways fictionalized account of the *Messenger* of the Kingdom replaced the original *message* He brought. This transformation was well under way even in the days of the apostles, when Paul denounced those who were teaching “another Jesus” and “a different gospel” (2 Corinthians 11:3-4).

The result was a clever masking of the gospel’s most central message—the return of Christ to establish the Kingdom of God on earth and the all-important *nature* of that Kingdom. This abandonment of the gospel’s central message was greatly abetted by events occurring in the Roman Empire at the close of the first and the beginning of the second centuries of the Christian era.

During the early part of the first century the Jewish religion was accorded remarkable deference



“On this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18).

The Church of God began on the biblical Feast of Pentecost. On that day God poured out the power of His Spirit on the disciples who were gathered in Jerusalem in obedience to His law and Christ’s personal instructions (see Acts 1:4-5; 2:1-4).

This fulfilled the promise Jesus had earlier made to His disciples: “On this rock [referring to Himself; see 1 Corinthians 10:4] I will build My church, and the gates of Hades [the grave] shall

of the Apostles



by the Roman government. And, for a short time, Roman officials even regarded Christians as merely another sect of the Jews, meaning Christians received the same deference accorded to those of the Jewish faith.

But in the latter half of the first century a major change occurred. It was inevitable that Roman paganism and idolatry (which had come to include emperor worship) would come into conflict with the strict faithfulness of the Jews and Christians to the true God. It wasn't long before both Christians and Jews fell out of favor with the Romans. In A.D. 66 many of the Jews living in Judea rebelled against Roman rule, and in 70 the Roman legions captured Jerusalem and razed the temple.

For many decades after this event the very word *Jew* became a racial and religious epithet among Roman citizens. (A second Jewish revolt from 132 to 135 made matters even worse; Jerusalem was destroyed and no Jew was allowed to set foot there on pain of death.)

As these events unfolded and anti-Jewish sentiment spread throughout the empire (resulting in the deaths of Peter, Paul and many of the original Christians), many who professed to be Christians began distancing themselves from anything that even appeared to be Jewish. Since the beliefs and practices of the original Church had much in common with the Jews, this rejection of everything Jewish also led to major alterations in—and abandonment of—major aspects of the original teachings of Christ and His apostles.

What followed was a proliferation of groups and teachers calling themselves Christian, but whose traditions and teachings did not originate with Christ and His apostles. Some chose to retain many of the

pagan traditions they had formerly practiced and began blending those beliefs and practices with their newly acquired belief that eternal life was accessible through Jesus Christ. Some simply fell prey to a growing deception that involved “false apostles [and] deceitful workers” who “transform[ed] themselves into apostles of Christ” but in reality were, however unwittingly, ministers of Satan the devil (2 Corinthians 11:13-15).

Gradually, as the apostles died out, these “false brethren” (2 Corinthians 11:26) either abandoned or altered biblical teachings and traditions that they feared would associate them with the Jewish religion. In the process they also gutted critical aspects of the message and way of life taught by Jesus and His apostles.

God's law: Center of controversy

Historians generally recognize that the Church described in the New Testament is considerably different from that which emerged as historical Christianity after the apostles passed from the scene. Edward Gibbon, the 18th-century chronicler of the Roman Empire, wrote of a “dark cloud that hangs over the first age of the church” (*The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 1776, chapter 15, section 1).

Later historian Jesse Hurlbut writes: “We name the last generation of the first century, from 68 to 100 A.D., ‘The Age of Shadows,’ partly because the



United Church of God members enjoy fellowship at church services (top left).

From its home office near Cincinnati, Ohio (top right), the Church supports congregations and operations that span the globe. A 12-man Council of Elders (above), most of whom are longtime pastors, serves as a board of directors for the Church.



Whether in formal classes (like those at Ambassador Bible Center, above) or in worship services, the United Church of God teaches members the value of learning from and following the words and works of Jesus Christ, the apostles, the prophets and other biblical writers.



gloom of persecution was over the church, but more especially because of all the periods in the [church's] history, it is the one about which we know the least . . . For fifty years after St. Paul's life a curtain hangs over the church, through which we strive vainly to look; and when at last it rises, about 120 A.D. with the writings of the earliest church-fathers, we find a church in many aspects very different from that in the days of St. Peter and St. Paul" (*The Story of the Christian Church*, 1970, p. 33).

At the heart of this breach in Christianity was controversy over God's law—how, or whether, it should set the standard for Christian conduct. Those who wanted to avoid any association with the Jews were determined to abandon everything that might identify them with the Jewish religion, including any direct obligation to obey God's law.

They ignored or reasoned around the fact that Jesus had already given a definitive answer to this issue when He said: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the

truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished" (Matthew 5:17-18, NIV).

Accordingly, when one asked Jesus, "What good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?" He answered, "If you want to enter into life, *keep the*



commandments" (Matthew 19:16-17).

Paul expressed the same support of God's law, stating: "Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. *Keeping God's commands is what counts*" (1 Corinthians 7:19, NRSV). Paul also wrote that Christ came not to abandon but "to confirm the promises made to the fathers" (Romans 15:8).

Therefore, we find the Church described in Acts faithfully keeping the Ten Commandments, including the seventh-day Sabbath. The Church of that era also observed the same sacred festivals as the Jews (see Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 16:1-16; Leviticus 23). As the original Church expanded to include gentiles (non-Israelites), we see that they, too, were taught to observe these biblically established festivals (Acts 13:42, 44; 18:4; 1 Corinthians 5:7-8). (Be sure to read "What Did the Early Church Believe and Practice?" on page 20.)

Yet, when we look at the history of the publicly prominent form of Christianity of later centuries, we find that it has abandoned those festivals, celebrating instead an entirely different set of days—Christmas, Easter and Sunday, the first day of the week. Those who faithfully continued keeping the seventh-day Sabbath, Passover and the other scripturally commanded festivals were gradually marginalized as heretics.

As new leaders with different views gained more control over congregations, they progressively expelled those who faithfully held to apostolic beliefs and practices. Late in his life, near the end of the first century, the apostle John tells of one such incident: "I wrote to the church, but Diotrophes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, *does not receive us* . . . And not content with that, he himself does not receive the brethren, and forbids those who wish to, *putting them out of the church*" (3 John 9-10).

Persecuted not only by authorities of the Roman Empire but also by those who had falsely assumed a Christian identity, these ostracized but faithful brethren often had to retreat into hiding. The true

Christianity and Church of Jesus and the apostles began to disappear from public view.

Shortly before the apostle John died, he received a revealing message, in a vision from Christ, to pass on to the beleaguered faithful remaining in Ephesus: "I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those *who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found*

them false" (Revelation 2:2-3, NIV).

But, one might ask, how could this have happened to the Church Christ Himself built?

Warnings from Christ and His apostles

Outside of the New Testament, few sources have survived to convey any details of what happened to the Christian religion during that time. Yet the New Testament record is clear. A major breach had

Responsible Stewardship and Accountability

The Bible repeatedly emphasizes that God's servants are to be wise stewards and managers over the resources He provides. They are to recognize that those resources—financial, physical and human alike—actually belong to *Him* rather than any individual or organization. Accordingly, the United Church of God, an International Association, has put in place systems of checks and balances to avoid the possibility of abuses or financial improprieties.

Recognizing the biblical principle that "in the multitude of counselors there is safety" (Proverbs 11:14; 24:6), a 12-member Council of Elders—made up of experienced ministers—provides overall leadership for the United Church of God. Members of this council are selected on a rotating basis for three-year terms at an annual conference of ordained ministers of the Church.

The Council of Elders, chosen mostly from pastors of local churches, carries out important responsibilities. Since it functions as the board of directors for the United Church of God, its most important role is to provide guidance and establish direction for the Church throughout its worldwide operations. It is also responsible for selecting the Church's president and for monitoring his performance as well as the performance of those on the management team the president appoints to oversee the Church's ministerial, media and financial operations.

Working in a team-based environment, committees of the Council of Elders regularly interface with key staff members in related operations. Other



council committees focus on planning, doctrinal issues, education of ministers and other members, and other matters. Following the biblical example of the ministerial conference recorded in Acts 15, major issues and questions are resolved by collective discussion and decision by all of the ordained elders of the Church.

In areas outside the United States, similar boards, organized accord-

ing to appropriate national laws, oversee activities of the United Church of God as needs require.

Financial integrity of business affairs is a priority of the United Church of God. The Church's work is supported by the voluntary tithes and offerings of members and other donors—following the biblical teaching of honoring God with one's substance as the means of supporting the preaching of the gospel and financing the work of the Church.

We do not solicit the public for donations or take up offerings in our regular weekly worship services. In line with Christ's reminder "Freely you have received, freely give" (Matthew 10:8), our literature is distributed without charge or obligation to all who request it.

All donations in the United States and some other countries are legally tax-deductible, with receipts sent to donors. In the United States the Church sends donors quarterly receipts, with annual receipts issued at the end of the calendar year.

The Church maintains a system of internal auditing controls to ensure the integrity of all accounting systems and avoid any abuses of financial assets. The integrity of financial matters is of major importance. Church officers prepare annual financial statements according to generally accepted accounting methods. A carefully chosen independent accounting firm audits the Church's financial records annually. The resulting audited statements are then published for the Church's membership.

The United Church of God president and treasurer regularly review financial reports (left). Audited reports are published annually for members (above).

The budget of the Church is prepared through a system that begins with each department submitting its requests for the year. The Church's president and treasurer submit a budget to the Council of Elders. A final budget recommendation, along with strategic and operating plans, is then submitted for approval to the General Conference of Elders at its annual meeting.

Regular financial reports are made to the Council of Elders at their quarterly meetings. These reports are then shared with the Church's members via updates on its Web site and a monthly member newsletter.

A finance committee of the Council of Elders works with the Church's treasurer to ensure effective use of funds and monitoring of all the budgets according to approved strategic and operating plans.

Preaching the gospel in today's world is a challenging experience, which keeps us on our knees in prayer, asking God not only for wisdom but for the financial means to continue moving forward. We are totally dependent on our Creator for our success. As He calls additional laborers to join in this work, we gratefully acknowledge their help. Together we move forward in seeking and doing His will.

occurred within Christianity. In fact, Jesus and His apostles had continually warned that this would occur (compare Matthew 7:15; 24:5, 11; Acts 20:29-31; 1 John 4:1).

Jesus gave this warning: “For false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect. Behold, I have told you in advance” (Matthew 24:24-25, NASB).

In the early decades of the Church, the apostles vehemently opposed attempts to corrupt the truth they had personally received from Christ (1 John 2:24-26). Paul warned some of the very elders he had ordained that “from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears” (Acts 20:30-31).

Peter proclaimed: “There will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies . . . And *many* will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed” (2 Peter 2:1-2). John also warned that “*many deceivers*” had already gone out into the world with their heresies masquerading as Christianity (2 John 7).

How could this happen? Jesus explained that, amid the “wheat” (His true people), God would allow “tares” to grow (Matthew 13:37-43). At first they would appear to be indistinguishable from the wheat, but, in the end, they would bear no heads of grain, no fruit to prove them genuine. On the surface they would look like real disciples, but in reality they would be far different. They would have within them no depth of commitment to the true gospel and Christ’s teachings.

What Did the Early Church Believe and Practice?

The book of Acts records eyewitness accounts of the early Church from Christ’s resurrection until about A.D. 60. Chapter 2 records the beginning of the Church.

This special event began when the room in which the apostles and other disciples were gathered suddenly was filled with the sound of a mighty wind and “tongues, as of fire,” that appeared to alight on them. They went out and almost immediately began to speak to the crowds gathered in Jerusalem, for these events occurred on the biblical Feast of Pentecost. Miraculously, the apostles’ preaching was comprehensible to all people from many lands so that all understood their words in their own language.

Often overlooked in this account is the significance of these events occurring on *the Day of Pentecost* (Acts 2:1). This was one of the festivals God commanded for His people many centuries before (Leviticus 23). In revealing these festivals, God exclaimed, “. . . These are *My* feasts . . . the feasts of the LORD, holy convocations . . .” (verses 2, 4). Then God proclaimed them to be “a statute forever” (verses 14, 21, 31, 41).

The Gospels show Jesus keeping the same festivals (Matthew 26:17-19; John 7:10-14, 37-38). Both the book of Acts and Paul’s letters show the apostles observing these festivals long after Christ’s crucifixion (Acts 2:1-4; 18:21; 20:6, 16; 27:9). This is the example they set for us.

Today, however, most churches teach that these festivals were somehow annulled by Christ’s death. Yet the unmistakable record of the Bible is that the early Church continued to observe them long after His death—but with a greater grasp of their spiritual significance.

Speaking of one of these God-given feasts, the apostle Paul urged the Church congregation in Corinth—a mixed group of gentile and Jewish believers—to “keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (1 Corinthians 5:8).

Paul was obviously referring to keeping the biblical Feast of Unleavened Bread (see Leviticus 23:6; Deuteronomy 16:16). Paul similarly explained the Christian significance of the biblical Passover (1 Corinthians 5:7; Leviticus 23:5) and gave instructions on how to properly observe this ceremony in the Church (1 Corinthians 11:23-28).

Such passages prompt an obvious question: Since Jesus, the apostles and the early Church kept these days, why don’t churches teach and observe them today? After all, Paul directly tied the feasts to Jesus, His purpose and His sacrifice for mankind (1 Corinthians 5:7).

The Gospels and Acts are equally clear that Christ, the disciples and the early Church kept the weekly Sabbath on the seventh day of the week as their day of rest and worship (Mark 6:2; Luke 4:16, 31-32; 13:10;

Acts 13:14-44; 18:4). It was Jesus’ custom to go to the synagogue on Sabbath days to worship (Luke 4:16). Contrary to the teaching of those who say that Paul abandoned the Sabbath, it was his custom, too, to go to the synagogue every Sabbath (Acts 17:1-3), using this God-ordained assembly to teach others about Jesus as Savior and Messiah.

Of course, most people and churches ignore the biblical seventh-day Sabbath. But why? Shouldn’t we observe a weekly day of rest and worship as God commands (Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15), and shouldn’t it be the same day that Jesus and His apostles kept?

A closer examination of the Scriptures reveals many other differences between the teachings and practices of Jesus and His apostles and what is commonly taught. For example, the belief that obedience to God’s law is unnecessary is directly contrary to Jesus’ own words (Matthew 4:4; 5:17-19) and the teachings and examples of His apostles (Acts 24:14; 25:8; Romans 7:12, 22; 1 Corinthians 7:19; 2 Timothy 3:15-17).

Jesus and the apostles never taught that the righteous ascend to heaven at death (John 3:13; Acts 2:29, 34), and they understood that man does not possess an immortal soul that would spend eternity in either heaven or hell (Ezekiel 18:4, 20; Matthew 10:28). Rather, they followed earlier Scripture passages in referring to death as like an unconscious sleep in which the dead await a future resurrection (compare Ecclesiastes 9:5, 10; Daniel 12:2-3; John 11:11-14; 1 Corinthians 11:30; 15:6, 51; 1 Thessalonians 4:14-17).

Nowhere in the Bible do we find any mention of or hint of approval for today’s popular religious holidays, such as Christmas and Easter. Though the Greek word *pascha* is once incorrectly translated “Easter” (Acts 12:4, KJV)—and that only in one Bible translation—this is a flagrant *mistranslation*. *Pascha* always means “Passover,” never Easter!

Instead of approving such celebrations rooted in paganism, God condemns them even when they are used in attempts to worship Him (compare Deuteronomy 12:29-32; 1 Corinthians 10:19-21).

These are some of the major differences between the Christianity of Jesus and the apostles and the Christianity commonly practiced today. But don’t simply take our word for it. We encourage you to follow the example of the Bereans (Acts 17:11) and look into your Bible to see whether today’s popular beliefs and practices agree with what Jesus and His apostles practiced and taught.

(To learn more about these subjects, be sure to request our free booklets *God’s Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind; Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Really Matter Which Days We Keep?*, *Sunset to Sunset: God’s Sabbath Rest, Heaven and Hell: What Does the Bible Really Teach?*, *What Happens After Death?* and *The Church Jesus Built*.)

Thus out of the apostolic period of the Church emerged two distinct “Christian” religions. One, small and almost invisible on the world scene, remained faithful to Christ’s message. The other appropriated Christ’s name even as it incorporated ideas and practices from other religions—a process known as *syncretism*—as was common in the Roman Empire of the day. Traditions of men replaced the commands of God and became entrenched in what would become the predominant form of Christianity known to the world.

(To learn more about this corruption of Christ’s gospel and its effect on the Church He established, send for our free booklets *The Church Jesus Built* and *Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Keep?*)

The gospel of the Kingdom today

In spite of such difficulties and the rise of this counterfeit Christianity, Jesus Christ has remained true to His promise that His true Church would never die out. At His return, those Christians faithfully serving Him, steadfastly loyal to God’s commandments, will be ready for their role in the next phase of God’s plan of salvation. They will become kings and priests of God, assisting Christ in teaching the entire world the same obedience to God’s law (Revelation 5:10; 20:6; Micah 4:1-2).

Interestingly, in the apostolic era of the Church the apostle Paul described the manner of life of its members as “the Way” and “this Way” (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22). He plainly identified it as a *way of life*. We must never lose sight of the fact that Christianity isn’t merely a set of beliefs; it is *the way we live*.

The Church that Jesus built never perished. Through the centuries its members held firmly to the truth, and today it is still diligently and faithfully proclaiming Christ’s gospel of the Kingdom of God just as His original disciples did. While times and cultures have changed, the basic eternal truths of God have not changed (compare Malachi 3:6; James 1:17; Hebrews 13:8). Revelation 12:17 clearly describes the end-time Church of God as still “keep[ing] the commandments of God and hav[ing] the testimony of Jesus Christ.”

Today, the United Church of God, an International Association, is striving to practice “the faith which was *once for all* delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). To accomplish this we have committed ourselves to living, as Jesus taught, “by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4).

We strive to live by the same divine instruction that Jesus, His apostles and the early Church followed, very aware that this sharply distinguishes us from most of what is today called Christianity, which no longer follows the Church described in the book of Acts as its model.

Like the members of that early Church, we remain fully committed to proclaiming the message of the coming Kingdom of God and Christ’s pivotal role in it. Likewise, we remain fully committed to preparing a people to serve as Christ’s helpers in that Kingdom.

We sincerely encourage you to examine in much greater detail the message Jesus taught. If you are interested, simply request our free booklet *The Gospel of the Kingdom*. It’s available through our office nearest you or via our online literature library at www.ucg.org.

God’s Law and the New Covenant

Many assume that, because Jesus Christ instituted the New Covenant, God’s laws are thereby made obsolete. They lean on this argument to ignore His commandments. But what does Jesus Himself say?

He answers: “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill [actually ‘fill to the full,’ meaning fully explain or fully express]. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away [and they clearly haven’t passed away], one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled.

“Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever *does and teaches them*, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:17-19).

Notice how Hebrews 10:16-17 summarizes the New Covenant: “This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the LORD: *I will put My laws into their hearts, and in their minds I will write them.*” Then He adds, “Their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more.” This is perfectly consistent with Christ’s words. God’s laws aren’t annulled under the New Covenant; they are *written into our hearts and minds* so we might *obey Him better*.

A new covenant wasn’t needed because the laws included in the Old Covenant were inadequate or faulty. Rather, the New Covenant was needed because, as Hebrews 8:8 tells us, “God found fault *with the people* . . .” (NIV). The fault was in the *nature of the people themselves* (verses

7-9)—the fact that human beings are naturally hostile to God’s laws rather than spiritually minded and willing to obey (see Romans 8:5-8).

What people need to have changed is *their heart*, not the laws that define sin—sin being the violation of God’s law (1 John 3:4). Such change in the heart is possible only when people receive God’s Spirit. That’s why the focus of the New Covenant is on providing the way and the means for sins to be forgiven so people may receive the Holy Spirit.

That is why the sacrifice of Christ is such a central focus. During His last meal with His apostles, on the night before He was crucified, “. . . He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you. For this is [meaning *this represents*] *My blood of the new covenant*, which is shed for many for the remission of sins’” (Matthew 26:27-28).

Further, we are certainly not forgiven for disobeying God just so we can go on freely disobeying Him! Clearly God’s laws remain in force. God intends to indelibly inscribe them into our emotions and thinking, our hearts and minds. The difference now is that these laws are to be written into our very thinking.

This is why the members of the United Church of God follow Christ’s example of applying God’s commandments *according to the fullness of their intent* as explained in Christ’s Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. (For a more thorough explanation of why obeying God’s commandments is so important, be sure to request our free booklet *The Ten Commandments*.)

Chapter Four

Hope for a Troubled World

Ultimately, God desires that all mankind be saved and live eternally in His family and Kingdom. And this is what motivates the members of the United Church of God in our collective responsibility.

Jesus said not to worry and fret over our physical needs but to “seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you” (Matthew 6:33). This, then, is the first priority of every Christian—to pursue God’s Kingdom through living as He commands. This pursuit leads to a life of great meaning and purpose, filled with personal enrichment, one with absolute faith in a future that is wonderful beyond anything we can imagine.

Ultimately, God desires that all mankind be saved and live eternally in His family and Kingdom (1 Timothy 2:3-4; 2 Peter 3:9). This is what motivates us as members of the United Church of God in our collective responsibility. We see our mission as ser-

will yield to Him. We understand that two distinct groups of people will hear the message proclaimed by the Church. Jesus said of those called to be His disciples, “It has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven . . .,” but concerning everyone else He said, “. . . To them it has not been given”—that is, in this present age (Matthew 13:11).

The second group is the world at large—those who, according to God’s time and purpose, He will eventually also call and grant mercy to upon their repentance (Romans 11:25-32). To this group the Church proclaims a message of hope.

Why is this knowledge important? Every individual, regardless of race, national origin or sex, will, in time, have the opportunity to be called by God and to hear and respond to the good news of the Kingdom of God and to the testimony of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. What they learn about God’s ways today may help them come to repentance with less difficulty at that time.

Therefore, the gospel of the Kingdom of God is a message directed to all of mankind. God’s plan explicitly provides for every human being from every nation to eventually have an opportunity for membership in His family—according to His timetable and will. As Peter said, “how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right” (Acts 10:34-35, NIV).

Hope beyond the time of the end

Bible prophecy warns of a coming time of international upheaval unlike any previous period in world history. Jesus describes it as a time of “great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be

“For then there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again” (Matthew 24:21, NIV).

vants of God called to proclaim this message, serving God in the fulfillment of His amazing purpose for humanity. There can be no greater mission in life than to have a part in fulfilling this eternal objective.

Our greatest challenge for this age, then, is to live as God commands, to proclaim the gospel of the Kingdom of God in all the world, to make disciples in all nations and to care for the disciples God adds to His Church today (Matthew 28:19).

We value God’s plan to save every individual who





equaled again” (Matthew 24:21, NIV).

He tells His followers to “watch,” to be personally vigilant concerning their own spiritual condition, with an eye on world events so as to understand the times and not be caught unaware and unprepared (Luke 21:36; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-6). (For better understanding of end-time events, request our free booklets *Are We Living in the Time of the End?*, *You Can Understand Bible Prophecy* and *The Book of Revelation Unveiled*.)

Christians should have a basic understanding of the times and events that may affect their lives and be able to consider them in a proper context. Paul describes Christ’s servants in this present age as “ambassadors” for His coming Kingdom (2 Corinthians 5:20). That Kingdom is not here yet. But many of its citizens are alive today. The story the gospel tells is that of a little flock that, growing like a mustard seed, will eventually fill the whole earth (see Luke 12:32; Matthew 13:31-32).

Christ is now preparing, in His role as our High Priest, a people who will serve in His coming Kingdom (John 14:1-3). He foretold that for His followers’ sake the terrible times ahead will be cut short and humanity will be saved from extinction (Matthew 24:22). Because of their faithfulness now, they will share in Christ’s future rule over the earth (Revelation 3:21).

You, too, can choose to become a part of the work of God, a helper in proclaiming the eternal message of the Kingdom of God. The gospel of the coming Kingdom of God holds forth the only lasting solution to humanity’s problems. The United Church of God remains firm in its commitment to fulfill its part in that proclamation—making known the noble and awe-inspiring purpose for human life.



Today our world is plagued by crime, war, terrorism, pollution, broken families and shattered lives. But God’s Word promises a better world tomorrow in which these ills will be banished—not by human effort, but by Jesus Christ’s righteous rule over the entire earth.

How to Find a United Church of God Congregation Near You

The United Church of God welcomes to its church services anyone who wishes to worship and learn more with us. The Church has hundreds of congregations dedicated to serving God and doing His work throughout the world. If you would like to talk with one of our ministers or just want to know where our nearest congregation meets, please contact the appropriate regional office listed below or visit our Web site at www.ucg.org/churches. If you would like more information or have any additional questions, just let us know.

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